The Meaning of Religious Belief, Practice, and Community for Latter-Day Saint Fathers of Children With Special Needs

Loren Dean Marks
Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd
Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Mormon Studies Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4905

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF, PRACTICE, AND COMMUNITY
FOR LATTER-DAY SAINT FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

by

Loren Dean Marks

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master’s of Science

Program of Marriage, Family, and Human Development

Brigham Young University

August 1999
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Loren Dean Marks

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

6-30-99

David C. Dollahite, Chair

Date

7-6-99

Alan J. Hawkins

Date

7-7-99

Susanne F. Olsen
As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Loren Dean Marks in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

David C. Dollahite
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Program

Craig H. Hart
Program Head
ABSTRACT

THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, PRACTICES, AND COMMUNITY
TO LATTER-DAY SAINT FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Loren Dean Marks
Program of Marriage, Family, and Human Development
Master’s of Science

While the tragedy of American fatherlessness has evoked a growing body of research, religious beliefs, practices, and communities have not been a significant part of the scholarly discussion. This article discusses possible reasons for this and reviews the religion and family literature with a focus on fathers. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 Latter-day Saint (LDS) fathers of children with special needs and analyzed to examine the meaning of religious experience for these fathers and their families. Analysis indicated three dimensions of religious experience; spiritual belief, religious practice, and faith community. The spiritual belief in an eternal perspective,
including the potential for family relationships to endure eternally, was identified by the researcher as central. Religious practice was found to be most meaningful when both sacred and relational. Faith community was found to be most beneficial when the congregation [ward] mentioned helped the fathers meet their families’ needs. Challenges related to the three dimensions of religious experience are also reported. Religious experience is discussed as a support for responsible fathering, and a conceptual model of religious experience and faithful fathering is presented.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude to the Family Studies Center and Religious Studies Center at BYU for funding for this project. I express appreciation to Karen Hahne of Kids on the Move and the fathers for their time and efforts with this study. I thank Don Norton for his editing assistance on short notice. Special thanks to Alan Hawkins and Susanne Olsen whose flexibility, patience, and efforts have been exceptional; and to David Dollahite for his kindness, example, and mentoring efforts. His positive influence will not be forgotten in my future professional or personal life. Finally, I thank my wife, Sandra, and my daughter, Mishonne, for their loving support and for making faith and fathering so real for me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Literature</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of religion and family literature</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers of children with special needs</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Qualitative Approach to Fathering and Religion</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample and procedure</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview schedule</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity, reliability, and objectivity in qualitative terms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dimension of spiritual belief</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dimension of religious practice</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dimension of faith community</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and Conceptual Model</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conceptual model</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections between concepts</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References ................................................................. 37

Appendix A: Father and Child Information ......................... 48

Appendix B: Statement of Purpose Form ............................ 50
Informed Consent Form .............................................. 51
Interview Schedule .................................................. 52
Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers

THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF, PRACTICE, AND COMMUNITY FOR LATTER-DAY SAINT FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In 1977, psychologist Edward Stein declared, "The right kind of fathers in sufficient numbers, during the coming years, may well determine whether our civilization will stand or fall" (p. 11). Over the subsequent two decades, family scholars have become increasingly concerned with fathering in America. In the 1990s, few American social issues have received more concerned attention than fatherlessness (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Popenoe, 1996). The lack of quality fathering and the problem of father absence have been linked with a host of social ills (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996), although nonmarital births and divorce rates have dropped slightly since their peaks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In response to the growing concern of fatherlessness, family scholars have suggested ways in which more responsible fathering might be promoted and encouraged (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Gushee, 1995; Levine & Pitt, 1995). With all of this effort it is noteworthy that almost no research has investigated carefully the relationship between religion and fathering (Marciano, 1991) and the potential for religion to encourage responsible fathering (Dollahite, 1998b).

This article explores (a) the meaning of religious experience in the lives of religious fathers, and (b) possible connections between religious experience and meaning and involved, responsible fathering of a child with special needs. Fathers of children with special needs (i.e., chronic illness or disability) may be especially helpful in exploring the
issue of responsible fathering because they face both typical and extraordinary challenges. These fathers may also be especially helpful in studying the meaning of religious experience because special-needs circumstances abound with questions of meaning.

After a brief discussion of the extant literature on family and religion (with emphasis on fathers), the scant literature on fathers of special-needs children is summarized. Data from in-depth interviews with nineteen fathers of children with special needs are then presented, focusing on the relationship between religious belief, practice, and community and responsible, involved fathering. Finally, a conceptual model that summarizes the findings is presented.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While the literature on religious belief and family over the past two or three decades has been primarily concerned with demographic trends or belief transmission (D'Antonio, 1980; D'Antonio, Newman, & Wright, 1982), current research on the meaning of religious experience in connection with fathers’ lived experience is beginning to emerge (Dollahite, 1998b). Perhaps it is an appropriate time for research that will help to fulfill the hope that Thomas and Cornwall (1990) expressed, to address questions about the meaning of the human condition. Such an approach cannot ignore issues regarding the purpose of life, humankind's relationship to the divine, or the whys of births, deaths, and other intimate and family experiences. Perhaps then we will begin to understand the place of family and religion in our rapidly changing world. (p. 990)
A Brief Overview of the Religion and Family Literature

Based on a review of the literature linking religion and family, seven themes that involved fathering in a context of religion emerged: (a) religious belief and responsible fathering, (b) benefits of religious communities, (c) religiosity as a psychological coping support, (d) marital/family satisfaction and religiosity, (e) transmission of paternal religiosity, and (f) authoritarianism and religiosity.

Religious belief and responsible fathering. In light of increased attention to “responsible fathering” by scholars (Doherty et al., 1998), it is interesting to note that an issue frequently addressed in the religion and family work of the 1950s and 1960s was the connection between religious beliefs and responsible fathering. Religious belief was found to extend the expectation for men to "bless" their children (Christopherson, 1956) and establish an "ought" for men (Clark, 1958). This “ought” refers not just to social responsibility. In fact, a unique and critically important element of Judeo-Christian belief is its capacity to hold men personally accountable to God for their responsible (or irresponsible) fathering (Horn, in press). Fichter’s (1962) finding of a lower absence rate among religious fathers indicates that such beliefs may have been influential in promoting paternal involvement. More recently, Latshaw’s (1998) work on the centrality of faith in fathers’ role construction found that for many religious fathers, faith provided them with an “axis mundi” or center of meaning that helped prevent them from becoming an “uninvolved father” (p. 68). Palkovitz and Palm’s (1998) qualitative work on fathers’ religiosity, morals, and values found that “about half of the total group of 64 fathers described some important changes in external behaviors/commitment to religion as a
result of fatherhood” (p. 41). Dollahite, Marks, and Olson’s (1998) study of fathers of special-needs children, although not initially focused on religion, found that religious belief and practice “influenced how [the fathers] coped, the perspective they took, the way they experienced their fathering, and the way they ‘told their story’” (p. 87).

Benefits of religious communities. Affiliation with a faith community has been positively associated with (a) marital satisfaction (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985), (b) faith in people (Bahr & Martin, 1983), (c) family support (Ellison & George, 1994), (d) larger non-kin social networks (Ellison & George, 1994), (e) greater family satisfaction for wives (Larson & Goltz, 1989), (f) martial satisfaction of both women and men (Willits & Crider, 1988), and (g) “various measures of personal well-being” (Willits & Crider, 1988). An interesting finding by Hendricks, Robinson-Brown, and Gray (1984), that relates directly to the problem of fatherlessness, is that participation in a community of faith correlated with a lower rate of fathering a child as an unwed adolescent. Until recently, there has been little examination of religious communities in connection with fathers (e.g., Horn, in press) and many questions remain unanswered and even unaddressed. However, the existing literature suggests that faith communities can be beneficial to fathers and their families in at least three ways. First, faith communities encourage men to be committed to their families. According to Nock (1998), “As a member of a congregation, . . . a man is known for how well he fulfills his obligations and responsibilities” (p. 88). Second, Judeo-Christian religious tradition emphasizes that “the proper context for fatherhood is within holy matrimony” (Horn, in press: 4), which is congruent with Doherty et al.’s (1998) statement that “enduring marital partnerships may
be the most important contribution to responsible fathering in our society” (p. 290). In addition to any spiritual benefits a father might derive from involvement in his religion, Ellison and George (1994) found that religious families also enjoy larger non-kin networks and a wider array of supportive transactions than do their more nonreligious counterparts. Thus a religious community may support and encourage responsible fathering efforts in a variety of ways.

*Religion as a psychological coping resource.* A rapidly growing body of literature, initiated in part by psychologist Allen Bergin (1983, 1987), has demonstrated that religion is a potent coping resource often positively correlated with mental health. Stark’s (1971) landmark finding that religiosity *inversely* predicted psychopathology provided a springboard for examination of religion as a psychological support. Pargament’s *Religion and the Psychology of Coping* (1997) documents a myriad of psychological benefits associated with religion, as does Matthews’ and his colleagues’ four-volume *The Faith Factor* series (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1997). Two recent, edited volumes include voluminous empirical support for a salutary relationship between religiosity and mental health (Judd, 1999; Koenig, 1998). It is also interesting to note that in connection with drugs and alcohol (substances historically more closely linked with men), religion has been shown to temper alcohol and marijuana use (Burkett, 1993) and problem drinking (Perkins, 1987). A psychologically stable and mentally healthy father is certainly more likely to be responsibly involved with his children.

*Marital and family satisfaction and religiosity.* Religiosity has been positively correlated with marital quality and “enduring” marriages (Burchinal, 1957; Redd, 1999;
Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers 6

Snider, 1971; Stinnett, 1983) and can be “a key sustaining factor in helping couples work through the challenges and stresses of marriage” (Redd, 1999). In recent studies, Call and Heaton (1997) found that several aspects of religious experience were positively correlated to marital stability while Lee, Rice, and Gillespie (1997) found that family worship was strongly correlated with marital satisfaction. Research documenting similar connections between various aspects of religious experience and increased marital/familial satisfaction are abundant (e.g. Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Bahr & Martin, 1983; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990), including increased family satisfaction for wives (Larson & Goltz, 1989). The repeated positive correlation of religiosity with increased marital satisfaction and stability should be of special interest to scholars interested in responsible fathering in light of Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson’s (1998:286) conclusion from their literature review that “the family environment most supportive of fathering is a caring, committed, collaborative marriage.”

Transmission of paternal religiosity. Perhaps no other topic within the frame of family and religion research has been examined more often as parent-child transmission of religious values. While mothers usually rate as more influential on most general, political, and social "value" measures, fathers often rate as more influential than mothers in the area of religious values and beliefs (Acock & Bengston, 1978; Clark, Worthington, & Danser, 1988; Francis & Gibson, 1993; Hoge & Petrillo, 1978; Hunsberger & Brown, 1984; and Kieren & Munro, 1987). Thus fathers may play an especially important role in transmitting moral and spiritual values to their children.

Authoritarianism and religiosity. Perhaps partly through the influence of Freud’s
notion of “the oppressive, religious father” (Vergote, 1980) and partly through media depictions of rigid religious fathers, authoritarianism (high control, low warmth) has become linked with religious fathers in the minds of many. However, a review of scholarship from the past five decades shows that such a notion is largely undocumented by the data. Christopherson (1956), Landis (1960), Stark (1971), Bahr (1982), and Thomas (1983) all failed to find a positive relationship between parental authoritarianism and religiosity. In recent studies on the authoritarianism-religiosity relationship, Giesbrecht (1995) again found no connection but did discover that anti-religious adolescents had the least authoritative (high control, high warmth) and supportive parents. Bartowski and Xu (1999), examining authoritarianism and religiosity in fathers, found religious fathers, especially conservative, evangelical fathers, to be less authoritarian than those fathers who identified themselves as not religious. Thus religion seems both to increase a father’s sense of responsibility to his children and correlate with fathering that is less authoritarian and domineering.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs

Relatively little research has been done on fathers of children with special needs (Hornby, 1994; Lamb & Laumann-Billings, 1997). In connection with this shortage, Lamb and Meyer (1991) concluded that these fathers had been “conspicuously ignored” (p. 153). This conclusion was further substantiated by Hornby’s (1994) finding that most research in this area paid little attention to fathers, focusing instead on mothers and siblings. The limited research available on fathers of special-needs children indicates that such fathers face increased challenges (Turbiville, 1994) and tend to have an especially
difficult time when the special-needs child is a boy (Frey, Greenwell, & Fewell, 1989).

Bristol (1984) found that a father’s acceptance or rejection of the child with special needs strongly influences the rest of the family. While paternal rejection of special-needs children does occur at a rate above the norm (Fewell & Vadasy, 1986), many fathers respond generatively and remain highly committed (Brotherson, 1995; Brotherson & Dollahite, 1997).

In his review of the literature, Olson (1998) identified six themes regarding fathers of children with special needs:

(a) fathers are an important part of family and marital systems and can have a significant impact on their child with special needs; (2) much what we know about fathers of special-needs children has come from maternal reporting of paternal involvement and behavior; (c) a disproportionate amount of the research has focused on negative rather than positive aspects of fathering a special-needs child; (d) some research suggests that religious practices, beliefs, and religious communities can be resources for meeting challenging circumstances; (e) fathers often respond creatively in caring for their special-needs children and want to be involved in their children’s special programs; and (f) fathers and children reciprocally influence each other (p. 5-6).

Families with special-needs children and religiosity. Given the beneficial elements of religious experience, it may be expected that such experience can serve as a valuable resource for parents of special-needs children. Although scholars have called for research that examines how fathers of special-needs children access support resources (Bristol & Gallagher, 1986; Lamb & Meyer, 1991), religious experience has only recently been examined in this capacity (Dollahite et al., 1998; Marshall et al., 1998). On a family level, religious beliefs and practices can provide a stable coping strategy and resource across the life span (Bennet et al., 1995; Weisner, Beizer, & Stolze, 1991). Specific
religious practices that have been shown to be helpful in meeting challenges associated with special-needs children include blessings and prayer (Dollahite et al., 1998, Richards & Potts, 1995), and religious stories and narratives (Webb-Mitchell, 1993). Religious communities have also been shown to be a valuable coping resource for some (Bishop, 1985; Maton & Wells, 1995; Webb-Mitchell, 1993) but unhelpful for others (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Marshall et al. (1998) summarized their work on religiosity and families with special-needs children by stating that family healing following the birth of child with special needs “is often inextricably related to religious faith” (p. 5). In connection with fathers of children with special needs, Dollahite et al. (1998) found that religious experience was a meaningful support.

*Research Questions*

Based on the review of literature, research questions regarding the specific meanings and influences of fathers’ religious experience were developed:

1) What meaning, if any, does religious experience have for Latter-day Saint fathers of children with special needs?

2) How does religious experience influence Latter-day Saint fathers of children with special needs?

3) In an age when fatherlessness has reached epidemic proportions (Popenoe, 1996), in what ways can religious belief, practice, and community encourage and support fathers in their efforts to be committed to and responsible for their children with special needs?
Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers 10

The Potential of a Qualitative Approach to Fathering and Religion

This study is a follow-up to Dollahite, Marks, and Olson (1998), whose qualitative work examined Latter-day Saint fathers of children with special needs. In that study, although none of the interview questions asked about religious belief or experience, the data indicated that religion manifested itself in the lives of these fathers in their beliefs, practices, and community ties. The present study thoroughly examines religion in connection with fathering challenges. Thus this study should provide a deeper and more deliberate look at the connection between religion and fathers of children with special needs. In addition to the fact that this topic is novel as a research focus, the methodological approach is designed to provide the kind of richness and depth called for by Thomas and Cornwall (1990).

Most extant data on religion and fathering were obtained through quantitative methods that are helpful in most research pursuits but are probably less effective than qualitative methods in tapping into the deeper meanings and nuances of religious experience. However, the fact that qualitative work on religion and family is relatively limited (D’Antonio et al., 1982) and qualitative work on faith and fathering is even more scarce (e.g., Dollahite et al., 1998; Latshaw, 1998; Palkovitz & Palm, 1998) prompted Bennet, Deleuca, and Allen (1995) to suggest that “future [religious] research should . . . include interviews with fathers” (p. 310). Indeed, interview-based qualitative approaches can “give us windows” (Daly, 1992a, p. 4) and “lift the veils” (Blumer, 1969, p. 32) to meanings and insights that are difficult to obtain by other methods (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992). Therefore, for this project, a qualitative, narrative-based approach was
used in hope of uncovering richer, thicker information about the relationship between
religion and fathering experiences, meanings, and processes.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

For this study, the desired sample was religious fathers of children with special
needs. Because of the deeply personal issues of discussing (a) religious experience, and
(b) a child with special needs, fathers of one faith and of the same denomination as the
researcher (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often referred to as LDS)
were selected to make the interviews as comfortable as possible for the fathers. To obtain
access to the desired sample, a respected agency that assisted families with special-needs
children was contacted in a predominantly LDS community. To preserve confidentiality,
the agency mailed out letters describing the project and requesting participation.
Seventeen of the nineteen fathers in the sample were contacted through this method. To
broaden the age range of children and type of special needs, two other fathers were
located through snowballing.

At the time of initial contact, all 19 of the fathers in the sample were active
members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which teaches that men
should give highest priority to their responsibilities as husbands and fathers (Hawkins,
Dollahite, & Rhoades, 1993). A sample characteristic unique to the LDS Church
(Marciano, 1991) was that all of the fathers also held the priesthood. In the LDS faith, the
priesthood carries with it the primary responsibility to love, bless, lead, and serve one’s
family. The LDS Church also teaches that fathers “will be held accountable before God
for the discharge of these obligations.”

Of the 19 fathers, 18 were married (one was divorced) and all of those married were married to women who were also active in the LDS faith. Of the 19 fathers, 17 were Caucasian; one was a Pacific Islander father and one a Hispanic father. Based on basic demographic information and place of residence, all fathers were of middle-socioeconomic status. The age range of the fathers was 25 to 49 years (mean = 34.8).

The number of children in these fathers’ families ranged from one to six, and each family had at least one child with special needs (four of the families had more than one child with special needs). The special needs of the children included a variety of moderate to severe physical and cognitive delays, serious chronic and terminal conditions, autism, Tourette Syndrome, Down Syndrome, heart disease, severe scoliosis, deafness, and blindness. The age range of the children with special needs was eight months to sixteen years (mean = 4.5; see Appendix A for a demographic summary of the fathers and children).

A letter explaining the study and inviting participation was first sent to a group of 50 Latter-day Saint fathers who had been involved in an early intervention program for children (birth - three years) with special needs in the last twenty years. Each father had the option of phoning the researcher to have any questions answered prior to consenting to be interviewed. Of the 50 fathers contacted, 10 responded (20% response rate), and 6

---

1Other unique Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices mentioned in this paper are further explored in the discussion section. The best source for further explanation is The Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Ludlow (Ed.), 1992.
fathers were interviewed (the other four indicated that the special needs of their children were minor). Two other fathers, mentioned earlier, were also recruited and interviewed.

In a second, similar mailing six months later, 12 of 33 fathers responded affirmatively (36% response rate), and 11 were interviewed. Though these response rates may appear low, they are average to high compared with the typical non-incentive mail survey response rate of 15-35% for middle-aged men (Call, personal communication, 5/21/99). Daly (1992a) indicates the additional difficulty of obtaining male participation in qualitative interviews: “A particular challenge . . . is to access men’s perspectives of family experience, because men typically have been difficult to recruit in qualitative research” (p. 6).

Fathers were given the option of being interviewed in their home, at their place of employment, or at a university site. One father opted for the university setting because of convenience, two fathers were interviewed at their place of employment, and the remaining sixteen fathers were interviewed in their homes.

*Interview Schedule*

The interview schedule for both samples consisted of 20 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) that were carefully constructed with sensitivity to the bodies of literature regarding (a) fathering, (b) fathering children with special needs, (c) fathering and religion, and (d) the previous work of the author and his colleagues in this area (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998). The first 12 questions addressed the contextual challenges of being the father of a child with special needs. The last eight questions asked if religious experience was meaningful and influential to the father and his family and, if
so, how. Questions designed to invite the sharing of personal stories, meanings, and interpretations relating to both contextual and religious questions were frequently asked. Interview times ranged from fifty minutes to four hours with a mean of one-and-a-half hours. As an expression of appreciation for their participation, each father was provided with the interview on diskette, audio cassette, and hard copy.

Coding

Consistent with the recommendation that the researcher be familiar with the sphere of life under study (Gilgun, 1992), I reviewed the religion and family literature prior to data analysis. However, to minimize potential biases resulting from a grounding in previous research, I was assisted in the coding process by two undergraduate students who were not “steeped in the literature [and] constrained in . . . their creative efforts by a knowledge of it” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 50). All interviews were coded atheoretically but with sensitivity to ways in which religious experience might encourage responsible fathering.

Interviews were read and reread by all coders before formal coding began. Once coding commenced, the units of analysis included (a) narratives (stories or experiences), and (b) meanings (interpretations of lived experience). From the coding, three dimensions of faith were identified: (1) *spiritual beliefs* (which included personal and internal beliefs, framings, meanings, and perspectives), (2) *religious practices* (which included outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture reading, and other less formal behaviors connected with faith), and (3) *faith community* (which included interactions with members of one’s congregation [Latter-day Saints call their congregation a “ward”])
both in and out of church meetings). These three categories offered a starting point for examining religion in a structured way.

In conjunction with the research question that asked if religious experience helped the fathers remain responsible for and connected with their child, interviews were also analyzed for data that related to involvement and responsible fathering (Doherty et al., 1998) termed in this study: (a) responsibility (the father’s sense of responsibility, duty, and commitment to his child), and (b) relationship (the father’s sense of relational and emotional involvement with his child). These dimensions are similar to, but are not based on, Levine and Pitt’s (1995:5-6) delineation of “financial support” and “emotional and physical care” as the key elements of responsible fathering (after a father has established legal paternity).

**Validity, Reliability, and Objectivity in Qualitative Terms**

The often-raised issue of adequate rigor in qualitative research calls for brief discussion of the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Credibility.* The qualitative researcher’s parallel to the quantitative standard of validity is credibility. Specifically, credibility refers to the fit between the respondent’s intended meaning and the researcher’s interpretation of respondent statements. Gilgun summarizes this concern in the question “Am I communicating what my informants are telling me?” (1992:25). One practice used in this study to increase credibility was *persistent observation* (Dienhart, 1998) that was maintained through the author’s first-hand involvement throughout the interview process. Second, in harmony with the
recommendation of *prolonged field engagement* (Denzin, 1994), the 19 fathers in the study were interviewed over an eleven-month span so that the author could be (and was) closely engaged in instrument development, interviewing, and analysis. A third recommendation, *peer debriefing* (Denzin, 1994), was used during the process of analysis through the assistance of two LDS undergraduate students who had excelled in a course covering qualitative methods. After reading and rereading the transcripts, analysis and coding were first done independently and then discussed jointly with members taking turns “leading out” on each narrative. Combination and elimination of themes and “final” dimensions were not assigned until consensus was reached. However, there was, in most cases, strong initial agreement.

*Transferability.* The quantitative methods’ “criterion external validity” is, in qualitative methods, called *transferability*. In other words, “whether or not a given explanation fits a given description” (Janesick, 1994:216). In an effort to better ascertain the fit between the data and coding schema, a rough draft of the coding categories discussed in this paper complete with additional data not presented in this paper were presented at a graduate student symposium for the inspection and criticism of graduate students and faculty.

*Dependability.* The version of “measurement reliability” in qualitative methods is called *dependability* and is concerned with the consistency, stability, and accuracy of an instrument over time. The fundamental issue is that changes in instrument design have a readable, coherent trail. For this study, a 20-question instrument (Appendix B) was carefully developed over a one-year period by three fathering scholars and included
interactive feedback from fathers in two pilot interviews. Although the interviewer was in no way constrained to the questions on the interview schedule, the schedule served as a stable, perennial structure from which to work, and no significant design changes were made throughout the interview process.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is the qualitative parallel of the quantitative methods’ demand that the researcher maintain objectivity. Some who embrace qualitative methodology disagree with the ontological and epistemological bases of the objectivist ideal and argue for reflexivity instead (Farnsworth, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Reissman, 1993). The author is sympathetic to this stance and will address it later. However, regardless where the researcher aligns herself/himself in the subjectivity vs. objectivity debate, all data should be traceable or confirmable to the original source. In compliance with this standard, all data reported in this paper are available in their original form on audio cassette, diskette, and hard copy. Second, a data trail composed of hard copies containing analyses of the interviews is available (from Dr. David Dollahite, School of Family Life, BYU).

**Reflexivity.** Because of the admitted subjective and interpretive position of the researcher, often preferred in qualitative methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Reissman, 1993), a critical issue is reflexivity, or the potential influence of the researcher’s bias on interpreting and reporting the results. Such information is especially vital when the researcher is an “insider” member of the group he or she is studying (Daly, 1992b; Dollahite et al., 1998; Farnsworth, 1996). I myself am a father and a devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As such, my objective is to
provide an accurate and thorough insider’s view rather than a more traditional and distant scholar-subject representation. This objective, coupled with the discussion of the intensely personal issues of religion and fathering a child with special needs, may make the insider approach the most effective for obtaining data with depth. However, because of my personal beliefs and experiences, I acknowledge a predisposition to see religion as valuable to fathers. In order to counter this tendency, the interview instrument included questions on possible detrimental or less than helpful aspects of religious experience, and those data will be reported as well.

FINDINGS

Findings are discussed in connection with each dimension of faith as follows: (a) the dimension’s meaning and influence in conjunction with father responsibility, (b) the dimension’s meaning and influence in conjunction with the father-child relationship, and (c) the challenges related to the dimension of faith as experienced by the fathers and their families. In harmony with Wright, Watson, and Bell’s (1996) conceptualization of beliefs (not only religious beliefs) as most fundamental to understanding ourselves and others, the findings related to the dimension of spiritual beliefs are discussed first, followed by the closely related dimension of religious practices. The more social and external dimension of faith community is addressed third, followed by discussion.

The Dimension of Spiritual Beliefs

*Spiritual beliefs and responsibility.* Several narratives seemed to describe a sense of “sacred responsibility,” sacred in that the fathers believed they had a personal responsibility to God for their children. This sense of responsibility did not seem
burdensome to the fathers but instead seemed to add a sense of meaning and identity.

Todd, the father of two sons who struggle with autism, discussed his ongoing "calling":

I felt like I had a special calling when they were born. I don’t think that calling ends when they turn thirty. I think a father’s calling is always a father’s calling. So whether you’re fathering a forty-five-year-old man or a two-year-old son it’s a very special calling. It means Heavenly Father has entrusted me with these spirits to help them grow and to teach them the things that He thinks I need to teach them. So I think if I don’t teach them I’ll be accountable. . . . Heavenly Father has entrusted me and called me, and He wants me to be a father. . . . If [God] were standing right here, would He say I was doing a good job or a bad job? I want Him to say that I was doing a good job. One day I’ll find out how good a job I did.

In a tone similar to Todd’s, Bruce, whose developmentally delayed two-year-old son Richard only recently learned how to crawl and has great difficulty communicating, provided an insight regarding his “long-term perspective” and what it means to him as Richard’s father:

After this life is over I will meet the Savior, and my son Richard will be there and he will be perfectly normal and alert and the child of God that I hoped he would be. And he will look at me and say thank you for taking care of me, for doing the things you did. . . . I think [about] the long-term perspective after this life, when we meet the Savior and He looks at you and says that you did a good job as a father.

A belief in the “long-term,” or (as the Latter-day Saints call it “eternal”) perspective Bruce alluded to was referenced about 30 times in the interviews and by a majority of the fathers. A fundamental concept in this belief is the potential for family relationships to endure beyond the grave. Jeremy, the father of Jeffrey (age 4 with severe developmental delays), was highly involved in several sports leagues before Jeffrey was born, but explained how a belief in eternal families has influenced the way he views his responsibilities:
[When] you truly know that families can be together for ever . . . once you realize that and know that, where its beyond belief and it’s a knowledge, it makes it easy to do whatever you have to do [as a father]. It doesn’t become burdensome; it doesn’t become "I could be playing ball"; it just becomes easy. There’s just no other way to go.

A concluding example that seemed to illustrate the connection between spiritual beliefs and a sense of responsibility was given by Bruce, who shared a childhood recollection relating to his own father, that strengthened Bruce’s commitment to his son and family in a way that he associated with his own spiritual beliefs:

One of the things that I remember [from my childhood] is when we were working on the yard [at our] cabin in Minnesota. We children would get tired and leave and go and play, but my father would always stay until the job was done. It would always impress me that I would be playing with my friends, and then I would still see my dad working on the same job, until the job was done. It always impressed me and has carried throughout my life that that’s what men do. They accomplish the job. They finish the job. As far as the religious or spiritual things, I see from my father through his example that this is my job. I am to finish the job, so no matter what it takes or how long it is, you just stick to it and go to work, until the job is done. It is the father’s responsibility, and the Church’s teachings that . . . you are responsible, that you are the support, that this is what you do.

Bruce’s narrative was significant in light of relatively high paternal abandonment rates among families with special-needs children (Fewell & Vadasy, 1986), because Bruce planned “to finish the job.” I will now address the connection between spiritual beliefs and the father-child relationship.

Spiritual beliefs and relationships. For some fathers, the sharing of spiritual beliefs with their children was, in and of itself, a relational experience. Jeff, the father of six children, including one young son with autism, discussed how his “faith” has provided him and his wife with opportunities to have meaningful conversations with their children:
We can sit down and have discussions with the children about why we are here [on earth]. I did that with my oldest son when we were on a camping trip about a year ago. We talked about why we are here, who is our Father in Heaven, and other things. How many times do we hear other people that don’t have a faith in God. . . . They wonder about the purpose of life, and is there a God and what do you teach your children about religion? I don’t have to worry about that because [we] . . . have faith [that we] know what is going on and what is to come.

Throughout his interview, Eric (whose son Benjamin, 16, suffers from a severe heart condition) referred to his wife’s positive influence, teaching, and correction in connection with his religious and family life. In response to a question if his religious beliefs were influential in his family relationships, he explained how he tries to make his personal beliefs more relational by inviting feedback from his children.

The [doctrines] of persuasion, longsuffering, gentleness – all those kind of characteristics – are not just Sunday practices. In fact, I have an interesting relationship with my children in that I invite them to help correct me when I demonstrate that I’m not being patient or longsuffering or kind or those kind of things. My oldest daughter is really quite good at it, and Benjamin is becoming good at it. They’ll be very candid with me, saying, "Dad, I feel uncomfortable with the way you're handling this." So the doctrine, the theology, to me, defines fatherhood, and it's just me learning how to apply those principles [as a father].

As with responsibility, a belief in the eternal nature of families was mentioned by several fathers in a relational context. Martin, the father of Andrew (age 9, severe spinal difficulties), related the influence that he perceived this belief had for his family:

When they were little, I'd tell [the kids], "I love you forever and ever, past the end of time" at the end of bedtime stories and stuff, when we'd talk in the evening. That was always the thing they'd know, and often I'd say if we were in the back yard swinging or whatever, I'd say, "Hey, how long will Dad love you?" And [they] know, forever and ever past the end of time. . . . It's neat because there is that bond. . . . We see our family in that context and so everyone is very integrated and highly interested in the welfare and the love and the well-being of every other member.

*Spiritual beliefs as a challenge.* Spiritual beliefs were almost always discussed as
meaningful and supportive in connection with both responsibility and relationships.

However, in response to a question that asked if any beliefs were less than helpful, Scott, the father of two children with special needs, mentioned his belief in “individual accountability” as “perplexing” in light of his autistic daughter Marissa’s limitations:

The concept that has been burdensome to me is the notion of accountability. The Book of Mormon speaks eloquently of our individual accountability and our responsibility to act and not be acted upon; and I have wrestled through the last several years with my child’s ability to be accountable to act and not be acted upon and to have the opportunity to demonstrate her abilities for Heavenly Father in terms of inheriting eternal life, and how that all fits in to His plan. . . . I don’t know why Marrisa has this handicap. I honestly don’t. I don’t know why she would be allowed to go through life never fully having full faculties. . . . [So accountability] is a perplexing although not a disturbing concept for me in my religious beliefs.

Summary. With the exception of this struggle mentioned by Scott, no other spiritual belief narratives were mentioned as a challenge, making this the least “challenging” dimension of faith explored in this study. In addition to being the least challenging dimension, spiritual beliefs were coded as positive in all 19 interviews, making spiritual beliefs the dimension the most frequently mentioned as meaningful or influential. Specifically, references to a belief in an “eternal perspective” in connection with both responsibility and relationships suggested that an eternal perspective was beneficial to many fathers in meeting their children’s needs.

The Dimension of Religious Practices

Religious practices and responsibility. A large body of research has correlated religious practices with a variety of beneficial personal and familial outcomes. However, less is known about the deeper questions of how and why religious practices are
significant in meeting parental challenges. The following narratives mention a variety of religious practices (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, singing, baptism) but more important than the scope of practices were the meanings the fathers attributed to them.

References to responsibility were less abundant in connection with religious practices than they were with spiritual beliefs. However, some fathers discussed their experience in ways that suggested a connection between their religious practices and a deep sense of responsibility to their children. Blake expressed feeling a profound sense of responsibility to his newborn daughter Jordan as she struggled for her life and was “in the most need.” He explained that he “just had to start praying for her”:

[The doctors] kept working on [my daughter] trying to get her to breathe, and she was just lying there. They couldn’t get her to breathe, and this went on and on. That’s when I get hit with this mantle of fatherhood. [I] realize that she is new to this world, and her mom is lying on the table, has undergone major surgery, and you’re the only person in the world she has. There’s all the doctors, there’s everyone around, but when she’s in trouble, you’re the one she’s going to look to. You’re the one that has to be there for her. I just had to start praying for her. . . . When she was in the most need it just hit me that it was up to me to pray for her. There was no one else on earth that could do that for her at that time. That was probably the most sacred [experience I’ve had with her].

Blake’s narrative is one example of the moral call a child’s need can extend to a father (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997).

Religious practices and relationships. While only a few fathers discussed religious practices in ways that suggested connection with a sense of paternal responsibility, more than half of the fathers mentioned religious practices in ways that seemed to influence their relationship with their children. Several fathers discussed the practice of family prayer and scripture study as important to their family relationships. In
this excerpt, Martin reflected,

A very positive thing in our life is early morning scripture study and prayer. We get up in the morning and we sing a children's hymn and one of the family members will give a prayer. Then we read the scriptures, and it's a beautiful experience. Then we talk about the meaning of the scriptures and try to derive applications for our daily lives. Then at the end of the scripture study I'll say a prayer for the family for the day, . . . and the love, the bonding, the unity, the reduction in behavior problems in our children, . . . the communion or closeness that we experience in our family, is very positive. . . . It has a calming, positive influence in our family.

One interview question asked the fathers if they could recall a special or sacred experience when they felt especially close to their child. Nearly one-half of the fathers responded to this question by sharing experiences related to religious practices. Monty, whose two-year-old son has experienced severe stomach problems and moderate developmental delays since birth, recalled,

When my little boy was blessed in church [given a name and a blessing], it was really neat. . . . Just being in that circle, holding him, being near him, it was great. After he was blessed I took and just held him. . . . The spirit in that circle, just after, was very strong. It was marvelous; it was great. It was wonderful. It was indescribable.

In response to the same question, Shane reflected on bonding time with his two-year old autistic daughter, Jenna:

Sometimes when I sing to her at night, I make up little songs and kind of tell her that God loves her, I feel the [Holy] Spirit really strong.

The LDS faith is unique in that it allows all faithful fathers to hold the priesthood and encourages them to use the priesthood on behalf of their family members. In response to a question about religious practices that have been meaningful, Jeff specifically mentioned what the opportunity to use his priesthood to baptize his children (at age eight)
has meant to him in his relationships with his children:

The religious thing that has been the most rewarding as a father is [when] my children get baptized. It's like a father to son or father to daughter thing that's passed down through the time, sharing that special thing with them. . . . Sharing the gospel is one of the most important things in my life, and it is their first entryway or doorway to following along the path. To be able to do these ordinances [e.g., baptism] for my own children has been a very special thing. . . . At no other time have I quite as strongly felt the presence of God, especially in conjunction with each of the kids, as during that time.

*Religious practices as challenges.* Although nearly all 19 fathers in the sample described their religious practices as helpful in some way, Eric, whose 16-year-old son Benjamin suffers from an extreme heart condition, discussed how the LDS practice of family home evening (a strongly encouraged weekly practice of gathering all family members together for instruction, council, activities, etc.) has presented a challenge for his family. He explained that his family had to be careful about being very dogmatic about family home evening. My wife and I at times [have had] a healthy debate: "[What] does family home evening mean; is it very structured? Does it start at 7:30 in the evening and conclude at 8:30 when there's always a treat?" Getting dogmatic about the non-doctrinal things, I think, is dangerous. . . . In terms of implementation of beliefs into practices, traditions, or rituals, I think we've got to be, we've had to be, very flexible.

*Summary.* While the above challenge was mentioned in connection with religious practices, positive references to this dimension were much more common. Religious practices, like the dimension of spiritual beliefs discussed earlier, had apparent meaning and influence for most of the fathers in connection with their father-child relationships. However, the dimension of religious practices seemed less connected with the fathers' sense of responsibility than spiritual beliefs were.
The Dimension of Faith Community

Faith community and responsibility. Data that correlate activity in a faith community with various measures of personal, marital, and family well-being are abundant (see earlier review). In the LDS faith, as in most Judeo-Christian faiths, father responsibility is strongly emphasized. In this narrative, Shane described how congregational meetings have reminded him of his “responsibility to [his] wife and children”:

If you go to conference or priesthood meeting [congregational meetings where church leaders address doctrinal topics, usually in connection with family relationships], something you realize every time is your responsibility to your children and . . . that you’re held accountable. That is one of the greatest accountings that you’ll make to the Lord is your responsibility to your wife and your children. So just understanding the judgments you’ll face and the importance [of these responsibilities] to God [makes] you realize more and more how important [being a good father] should be to yourself.

Martin similarly described the benefits he has felt from his church attendance:

I think going to church is good in helping me to be a good father and keeping me focused on the real meaning of life, keeping me focused on my family’s interests. I think that it’s an enriching, strengthening, and transformative process.

In addition to the emphasis their faith community seemed to place on responsibility, several fathers indicated that their congregations had “been there” for them in helping them to meet the special needs of their families. In reply to a question that asked if his congregation had ever helped his family through challenges, Monty reflected on the support his family received while his son was in Primary Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City, 40 miles from his home:

They [the church members] have been there. They were helpful to me when my son was in the hospital. I could call on them and depend on them to pick me up if
I needed a ride home [because my car was broken down]. They [also] helped us with meals. . . . It was great. It meant a lot to me. Here I had no transportation, my wife was at the hospital, and [we] could just call and rely on them.

When Laird’s prematurely born son Foster was hospitalized far from his family’s home some friends from church helped his family out of a “bind”:

We were kind of in a bind because we didn’t have the money to rent an apartment over here, but I still needed to work in Provo. So my parents talked to [some old friends from the church in Provo], and they invited us to come and stay with them. We stayed with them not only while Foster was in the hospital, but when he first got out and we were looking for a place over here. . . . It was such a huge help for us to have that burden removed from us for the time being so that we could be close to the hospital.

Faith community and relationships. While faith community references that suggested relational connections were less frequent than those that suggested responsibility, Martin shared how a church assignment his young son Andrew received provided them a bonding moment. This experience began by Martin seeking to meet a perceived need in Andrew (to be prepared).

I remember approaching Andrew as we were going into the laundry room and saying, “Hey, bud, you know you’ve got a talk coming up in Primary [children’s Sunday School] here in a few days, why don’t we work on that talk?” And he just stopped, turned around, smiled, and calmly said, “Dad, I already know what I’m going to say.” And, knowing it would be his first talk in Primary, I thought I’d better get a trial run just to see, ‘cause I need to help him if necessary. So I just squatted down, sort of about eye level, and he said, very persuasively – this was his little talk – “Jesus is real, he’s alive, and he loves us.” Then he paused and said, “And I love you too, [Dad].” Then he paused and said, “I have the faith to follow Jesus Christ.” That was his talk, and it was great.

Faith community and challenges. There were approximately three times as many references to the salutary influence of faith community that related to father responsibility and father-child relationships. However, there were seven narratives (from four different
fathers) that indicated challenges associated with some aspects of their faith community. In fact, more “challenging” references were identified in connection with faith community than the other two dimensions of spiritual beliefs and religious practices combined. Three examples pertained to the challenge of church “callings.” Local congregations of the LDS Church are fully operated by the lay membership, and members typically have at least one “calling,” a formal church responsibility (e.g., teacher, clerk, home visitor, etc.) assigned by the congregation’s bishop [pastor] (Thompson, 1992). In this first narrative, Scott, the father of five children (two with special needs), described the strain that accompanied his calling to serve in the demanding position of bishop’s counselor, largely because it made it more difficult for him to meet his families’ needs:

When Marissa [autistic] was a year or two old, I was in a BYU bishopric. I was spending Sundays at BYU and occasionally a week night at BYU. . . . I had my business, I was in a BYU bishopric, spending a lot of time there and each evening I was needing to put Marissa to bed. . . . [I was] trying to be a father to my other three children as well, and be a husband to my wife and deal with the other things, and that was very, very difficult.

Interaction with the LDS Church’s children’s organization (Primary) was mentioned as a struggle by four of the fathers. Lance’s narrative is representative because it illustrates Lance’s frustration with Josh’s unmet needs:

Our real challenges have been integrating Josh [age 6, Down Syndrome] into the ward [and that] has caused a bone of contention now and then. The Primary Handbook is very specific; it’s very appropriate to have a special aid [for] Josh through Primary. . . . It's just been really hard for me that [the bishop] won't find the resources to make that happen, because they're certainly available.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Following a brief mention of the limitations of this study, the major findings,
including the core for each dimension of faith, are discussed. Then, consistent with the
goals of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a conceptual model (Figure 1) is
presented.

An inherent limitation of qualitative research is that in order to achieve the
hallmark of rich, descriptive data one must usually focus narrowly. In light of this fact,
perhaps the four most apparent limitations of the present study were that it included (1)
only one religious faith, (2) only fathers, (3) only fathers who were religious, and (4) only
families with special-needs children. These limitations should be considered as the
conceptual model is presented as they may limit the adaptability of the model and its core
concepts which will be discussed next.

*The Conceptual Model*

The conceptual model is based on the major findings and illustrates the core
concepts that emerged and suggests how these concepts relate to one another. First, the
six core concepts in the model (eternal family perspective; sacred, binding practices;
covenant, familial community; eternal connection; sacred responsibility; and faithful
fathering) are discussed in turn, with reference to previous research. Relationships
between concepts are then addressed.

*The core of spiritual beliefs: Eternal family perspective.* A major research
question was “What meaning and influence do spiritual beliefs hold for these LDS fathers
of children with special-needs?” Thirty responses directly (and many others indirectly)
addressed a belief which is here termed an *eternal family perspective*. The frequency and
pervasiveness of this concept suggests that this is the most meaningful and salient crux of
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Religion and Faithful Fathering
religious experience for these LDS fathers. This finding is consistent with Wright, Watson, and Bell’s (1996) conceptualization of beliefs as fundamental to lived experience. The meaning of the concept of eternal family perspective is explained in the following statement of LDS beliefs:

In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by that His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally. (LDS Proclamation on the Family)

Thus, for these fathers, their eternal family perspective offered them (a) an identity as a spirit son of God, (b) a belief that his child with special needs, despite “imperfections” in this life, is also a spirit daughter or son of God, and (c) a belief that family relationships can endure eternally. These beliefs seemed to permeate the fathers’ lives as indicated by the way they discussed the other concepts addressed in the model. These beliefs profoundly influenced the sense of responsibility and connection these fathers felt with their children.

The core of religious practice: Sacred, binding practices. One research question asked if religious practices encouraged and supported fathers in their efforts to be committed to their children and, if so, how. These fathers mentioned practices such as prayer, priesthood blessings, and scripture study that helped bind them to their children in ways that transcended more ordinary father-child interactions. Thus, the core of the dimension of religious practice could be termed sacred, binding practices. Because of the
American dilemma of fatherlessness (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996), disconnection of fathers from their children is a focal concern of this research project. Therefore, sacred, binding practices are important because of the potential they have for binding and connecting fathers to their children in deep and lasting ways. This finding is especially relevant in light of relatively high abandonment rates among fathers of children with special-needs (Fewell & Vadas, 1986).

*The core of faith community: Covenant familial community.* One research question addressed whether the father’s faith community encouraged and supported him in his efforts to be committed to his child and, if so, how. Data suggested that faith community was a beneficial support for these fathers when it functioned as a *covenant familial community.* A key Latter-day Saint belief is that all persons are spirit children of God. Therefore, the common practice of considering and calling other church members ‘Brother’ and ‘Sister’ has a spiritually literal meaning (Jackson, 1992). In addition to this belief in a mutual “Heavenly Father,” LDS members have made sacred covenants which connect them to both their families and their religious congregations (Rozsa, 1992). Because of this, the LDS community goes beyond social support and becomes an extended family bound by shared covenants. When realized, this ideal made covenant community a great benefit to the fathers and their families. However, when this ideal was unmet, it was both disappointing and hurtful.

*The core of father responsibility: Sense of sacred responsibility.* Much of the research on fathering has emphasized two related but somewhat different concepts. One includes relationships, involvement, and connection; the second emphasizes temporal
commitment and responsibility (Doherty et al., 1998; Levine & Pitt, 1995). The concept

\textit{sense of sacred responsibility} indicates a transcendent, religious commitment these
fathers had to their children which was often discussed in relationship to God, whom the
fathers believed would hold them accountable for their actions toward their child.

\textit{The core of father-child relationships: Sense of eternal connection.} As mentioned
above, relationships are important in connection with responsible fathering (Doherty et
al., 1998; Levine & Pitt, 1995). The core of the father-child relationship for the fathers in
this study herein is termed \textit{sense of eternal connection}. The fathers’ descriptions of their
relationships with their children typically included a reference to the “eternal” nature of
family relationships, a concept also found in Marshall et al.’s (1998) study of LDS
families with special-needs children. This sense of an eternal connection between the
father and child encouraged a profound bond that would be difficult to facilitate in any
other less transcendent way and encouraged responsible involvement.

\textit{Commitment to faithful fathering.} The concept of \textit{commitment to faithful fathering}
has a two-fold meaning. First, it refers to fathers being faithfully committed to their
children and to meeting their needs (Dolahite & Hawkins, 1998). Second, it refers to
fathering done in a context of religious faith. Thus, religious belief and practice is not
inherent in faithful fathering, although religious experience, or faith, seemed to promote
responsible, involved fathering for the fathers in this sample.

\textit{Connections between Concepts}

In the model, thick arrows indicate strong relationships between concepts, thinner
arrows indicate moderate relationships, and dotted arrows indicate weaker relationships,
based on findings from this study. Other relationships likely exist but did not emerge in this study. Eternal family perspective, the core of spiritual belief for these fathers, was pervasively influential. This spiritual belief seemed to influence both the meaning of sacred, binding practices, and interaction with the covenant community. Also, like earlier work linking fathering and religious belief (Christopherson, 1956; Clark, 1958; Fichter, 1962), religious belief seemed directly related to these fathers’ efforts to be faithful, connected, and responsible. Sacred, binding practices seemed most strongly linked to the relational concept of eternal connection which, in turn, seemed to strengthen fathers’ efforts to be faithful.

For these fathers, their covenant familial community was influential in encouraging and supporting them in their efforts to be faithful fathers, particularly from social and temporal standpoints. This finding is consistent with previous work indicating an emphasis on responsible manhood by religious communities (Horn, in press; Nock, 1998) and research which has shown that religious communities can be a valuable resource for families of children with special-needs (Bishop, 1985; Maton & Wells, 1995; Webb-Mitchell, 1993).

CONCLUSIONS

What has been learned about religious experience and responsible fathering from this small group of fathers facing a particular challenge? The data indicate that although faith community can, at times, be less than fully supportive, an eternal family perspective; sacred, binding practices; and covenant familial communities were meaningful and influential supports for these men in their efforts to be faithful fathers.
While these core concepts are probably unique to the LDS faith in some ways, the dimensions of faith on which this study was based (spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and faith community) are found in many faiths. Future research should include quantitative and qualitative examinations of (a) a variety of faiths, (b) data from other family members, and (c) fathers and families in a variety of challenging circumstances. Such research should remain sensitive to ways in which religious experience is meaningful or influential to the fathers in their efforts to be connected and responsible (or faithful).

What do these findings have to do with the broader picture of responsible fathering? In connection with efforts to support and encourage responsible fathering, religious experience can often be a unique and powerful approach for at least two reasons. First, faith communities have tremendous reach and influence. In fact, Horn (in press) has emphasized that “there is no secular organizational network that has [the] degree of contact with as many men as do churches and synagogues” (p. 21). Second, faith-based approaches can inspire, motivate, encourage, direct, and offer meaning to fathers about the sacred responsibility and opportunities to care for and relate to their wives, their children, and their God (Dollahite, 1998a; Horn, in press). Indeed, a faith-based approach can give “a transcendence that no social scientist or secular fatherhood enthusiast can ever hope to find” (Horn, in press: 22). Thus, in addition to the strong social force religious communities may wield as leading proponents of responsible fathering, the dimensions of faith discussed herein may act as deeply meaningful and beneficial resources to fathers who are seeking to meet the needs of their children. Faith may yet be
a important and ongoing part of the solution to the urgent need for responsible fathers.
REFERENCES


Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers 40

Religion, 21, 218-225.


Ellison, C. G. & George, L. K. (1994). Religious involvement, social ties, and


Janesick, V. J. (1994). The dance of qualitative research design: Metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning. In Y.S. Lincoln & N.K. Denzin (Eds.), *Handbook of*
Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers 43


Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers


Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers  46


Aldous (Eds.), *Families and religions: Conflict and change in modern society* (pp. 267-288). Beverly Hills: Sage.


Appendix A
Father and Child Information

Craig Allen - Craig is in his mid-thirties and works in information systems. He is the adopted father of Weston, age two, who has developmental delays.

Scott Bench - Scott, 40, works for a computer software company out of his home. He is the father of Spencer, age eleven, who has Tourette's Syndrome, and Marissa, age nine, who has autism.

Lance Blake - Lance is in his late thirties and works out of his home so he can be more available to his son, Joshua, age 6, who has Down Syndrome.

Kline Burton - Kline, 34, works as a landscape superintendent. Kline is the father of three children with special needs; Kyle, 8, who suffers from autism, and two prematurely born triplets named Emily and Nicole (the third passed away at two months). Emily and Nicole, age 3, are developmentally and speech delayed, in addition to having hearing and vision difficulties.

Blake Call - Blake, 35, works as a software developer. He is the father of one daughter, Jordan, eighteen months, who has moderate developmental delays.

Brian Christensen - Brian, 34, works at a large home improvement center. He is the father of Matthew, six months, who has Down Syndrome.

Eric Davis - Eric, 40, works as a university administrator and professor. He is the father of Benjamin, 16, who suffers from a severe heart disease that has required numerous surgeries, including a heart transplant.

Bob Hanks - Bob, 49, works in business administration. He is the adopted father of Reed, 14, has Down Syndrome.

Jeff Hewitt - Jeff, 38, works as a computer programmer. He is the father of two-year-old Benjamin who has autism.

Shane Leavitt - Shane, 25, recently graduated from college and is searching for a job. He is the father of Jenna, age two, who has autism.

Jeremy Lovell - Jeremy is in his late thirties and works as a postal worker. He is the father of Jeffrey, age four, who has severe developmental delays.

Todd Martin - Martin, 40, works in a financial aid office. He is the father of Andrew, age nine, who was born with shortened forearms and missing fingers. Andrew also has an
extreme case of scoliosis that has required extensive medical attention.

Moale Moala - Moale, 33, works in construction. He is the father of prematurely born twin sons, Ricardo and Michael, age sixteen months. The children have many challenges including reactive respiratory disease, seizures, and growth retardation.

Scott Montoya - Monty, 27, works for large furniture company. He is the father of Allen, age one, who suffers from a spastic stomach and developmental delays. Scott is divorced but is actively involved as a father.

Bruce Rich - Bruce, 44, works in sales. He is the father of Richard, age one, who has learning and developmental delays.

John Smithson - John, 27, works as a studio technician. He is the father of Jonathon, age one, who suffers from speech impediment and delays.

Laird Snell - Laird, 29, works as a high school teacher. He is the father of Foster, eight months, who was born at five and a half months gestation and suffers from a variety of cardiovascular and respiratory problems.

Todd Thacker - Todd, 30, works in sales. He is the father of Connor and Antonio, ages 5 and 2, who both have autism.

Justin Tolbert - Justin, 25, works for a cement company. He is the father of Braden, age two, who suffers from chronic inflammation of the nerves.
Appendix B

Fathering and Faith with Fathers of Children with Special Needs

David C. Dollahite, PhD, Principle Investigator

Statement of Purpose

The following information is for the interviewer and to explain the purpose of the project to the fathers.

I am interviewing fathers for a project conducted by Dr. David Dollahite of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

The purpose of this project is to gather experiences, ideas, and suggestions from fathers who have a child or children with a special need. This can help us to (a) explore how father’s stories of their experiences with a special needs child can help other fathers facing similar challenges, (b) learn ways in that fathers are able to connect with and care for their children, and (c) explore how fathers are able to draw upon resources (i.e., faith, religious beliefs and practices, family, communities, special programs for children with special needs, etc.) to connect with and find special meaning in fathering their child.

The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Rather than paying you for your participation, copies of the audio tape of the interview and a written transcript will be provided to you along with a disk copy of the transcribed interview. From past experience, participants greatly appreciate having a copy on disk of their interview since they can then make this part of their family history.

I would like to explain some things about your participation in the project and then ask you to sign what we call an “Informed Consent Form” that indicates that you understand the purpose of the project, the ways this information may be used, and the ways we will protect your privacy.

Interviewer then reads the information in the informed consent form, has the father sign and date it, and then signs where it says “witness.”
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

(to be signed by the participant before the interview begins)

I __________________________ acknowledge that I have had the purposes of this project explained to me and I hereby give my consent to be interviewed for this research project.

I understand that the research project I am involved in is collecting narrative accounts (stories) from fathers to be used to better understand fathering with children with special needs and to help promote good fathering.

I understand that my privacy will be protected by the researchers in the following ways: (a) my name and the name of my family member will never be used when the experiences I share are discussed in written publication based on this research (unless I specifically and in writing request that my name and child’s name be used), (b) I can request that any story I tell be deleted from the written transcript of the interview.

I understand that I am free to decline to answer any question I do not wish to answer and that at any time I wish I can end the interview.

I understand that I will be given an audio tape and written transcript and a disk of the transcribed interview as a form of compensation for my participation in this project.

__________________________________________  __________________________________________
signed                                     witness

__________________________________________
date
INTERVIEW

Fathering a child with special needs:

To begin, I’m going to ask you a few questions now that pertain to your fathering your child with a special need. There are 11 questions with three parts to each. First, I will ask a general question. Next, I will ask for a specific experience from your life, and lastly I will ask you a question related to what meaning that experience might hold in your life today or how you are different because of your experience.

What is the name and the age of your child with a special need? (Insert the child’s name where appropriate throughout).

CHILD’S NAME ________________________
AGE ______

1. What were some of the initial feelings and thoughts you had when you learned of ________’s special need?
   _____ Ask for a specific experience
   _____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

2. What 2 or 3 things have been the most meaningful to you in helping you to be the father you want to be for___________?
   [finances, family, extended family, religious communities, friends, special community programs, health professionals, etc.]
   _____ Ask for a specific experience
   _____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

2a Hand father the survey “Influences on Father Commitment and Involvement.” Here is a list of things some have found to be influential in encouraging father commitment and involvement. We would like to ask you to tell us that of these have been most influential to you in terms of encouraging and maintaining your involvement as a father.

3. What are some of the things that you have done well in your family to meet _____________’s needs?
   _____ Ask for a specific experience
   _____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question
4. **What might be some of the greatest challenges you have faced in being a father of a child with special needs?**

   - Ask for a specific experience
   - Ask a meaning/interpretive question

5. **What has been your experience with the health care system, special education programs, support systems, and the communities in that you participate?**

   - Ask for a specific experience
   - Ask a meaning/interpretive question

6. **Are there specific people you have learned the most from in meeting ________’s needs?**

   - Ask for a specific experience
   - Ask a meaning/interpretive question

   *The research shows that fathers of children with special needs have unique experiences that are different from mothers or from other fathers.*

7. **In general, what are some of the experiences you have had unique to being a father of a special needs child?**

   - Ask for a specific experience
   - Ask a meaning/interpretive question

   [Time spent with the child, what is different, what is most enjoyable? Interaction with extended family, helpful or not helpful (burdening)?]

8. **Can you relate a story when only you were able to meet a need of your child when no one else could?**

   - Ask for a specific experience
   - Ask a meaning/interpretive question
9. **Are there ways in that you responded initially to ________ or now approach him/her affect other family members in how they first responded to and now approach him/her?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience  
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

10. **Are there ways in that you believe that fathering a special needs child has changed you in significant ways?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience  
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

11. **What advise or suggestions would you make to another father who has a child with a special need?**

**Faith in fathering**

The last part of our interview we will be asking you some questions about your religious beliefs, faith, and practices as they relate to your fathering your child with special needs. As before each question will have three parts, a general question, a question for a specific experience, and an interpretation question or what meaning that experience holds for you in your life today.

12. **Do your spiritual/religious beliefs influence the way you father your children (special needs or otherwise). If yes, how so?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience  
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

13. **What are some of your deepest and strongest spiritual beliefs (relating to your fatherhood, to your children, to your family)?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience  
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

14. **Is there a religious practice or ritual, or tradition (ordinance, ceremony, personal habit, worship, etc.) that holds special meaning for
Religious Meanings for LDS Fathers  55

YOU AS A FATHER?

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

15. **Are there any religious beliefs, practices, traditions, or rituals that have been burdensome or less than helpful to you as a father of a special needs child?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

16. **Has your religious community/congregation help you to meet your children's needs? In what ways?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

17. **Can you recall a time when you began to understand you had a special role/calling/responsibility in the life of your child?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

18. **Looking back, is there one experience that especially helped you to commit to be the best father you could be?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

19. **Can you share with us a sacred or spiritual experience you have had with your child?**

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question

20. [FOR LDS FATHERS]. **In what ways is the temple and the idea of eternal
FAMILIES MEANINGFUL AND HELPFUL TO YOU AS A FATHER?

_____ Ask for a specific experience
_____ Ask a meaning/interpretive question