

STRENGTHENING THE IMAGE OF NZ DADS

by
Dean Comerford

TOOLS &
INSPIRATION

Promise Keepers has a positive and proactive approach to fatherhood

Mike didn't have a great relationship with his dad. In fact, it was highly dysfunctional and often violent. When Mike was 16 years old, his stormy childhood came to a head in a vicious confrontation that left his father hospitalised and saw Mike leave home.

Mike discovered he had a gift for business and enjoyed significant financial success from the endeavours he pursued. He also got married, but struck difficulties in his relationship with his wife. Almost predictably, he turned to alcohol, drugs and sex to fill the void in his life.

Sound familiar? While this true story may be more extreme than many people's accounts of their early years, the basic thrust of it is heard over and over again in our nation. And all these stories share a similar theme, one that starts with the words, 'I didn't have a great relationship with my dad.'

Andrew starts his story with the same line. His account doesn't feature the same degree of violence and

abuse, but it's no less dysfunctional. 'As the eldest child of three, my father was emotionally distant from my family,' Andrew explains. A severe illness suffered by his father made things worse. 'My dad experienced a lot of physical pain, transferring it onto us kids through angry outbursts and unrealistic expectations.' As a result, Andrew grew up with the emotional scars of family dysfunction.

Have Men Lost the Plot?

But are most dads as dysfunctional as Mike and Andrew's fathers were? Are fathers in general failing our society? In recent years, dads have come in for some pretty heavy criticism.

There seems to be a commonly held feeling that men as a group have lost the plot and are abdicating their responsibilities en-masse.

When questioned about the quality of fathering in New Zealand, Paul Subritzky, National Director of Promise Keepers, says,

'While it's probably fair to say that some individual fathers are appalling role models, the vast majority of men desire the best for their children.' When asked to comment on the perception that men are failing in their role as fathers, he declares, 'There seems to be a beat-up going on, and our image of fatherhood in general has suffered unduly because of a creeping national disregard for men.'

He cites David Murrow, a US commentator on men's issues (and author of the book *Why Men Hate Going to Church*) who asks why many churches gush on about how wonderful mothers are on Mother's Day, yet on Fathers' Day they often give men the message that they're failing and need to shape up. Paul comments, 'Men don't often receive encouragement from either the church or society about the work they are doing or the role they play. Perhaps that could explain some of the sense of failure we are seeing.'

Time for a Positive Message

That's one of the reasons that Promise Keepers want to make sure men hear a proactive and positive message, he explains.

With that in mind, this year's publicity for the Promise Keepers 'Unleashed' Events currently happening around the nation carries the line: 'Promise Keepers knows that you have got what it takes. You don't need to be "fixed up", just "fired up". You only need some tools and inspiration.' Paul comments, 'It's part of a

deliberate strategy on our part to stop beating up on men and start being positive about their abilities and their role.'

What about Mike though? Does he think positively about his Dad? His story, which features in this year's Promise Keepers events, continues. 'After years of alcohol and drug use and with my marriage on the rocks, I ended up in another altercation with my father.' He had called his parents in to help him sort out the issues he had with his wife, but when they took her side, he was livid. He tossed them out of his house and stormed off in his car.

Despite having no Christian input into his life, Mike cried out to God as he drove along the motorway. He can't remember how it happened, but he found himself talking to his father on his mobile phone, confessing his drug problem and asking for help. Mike recalls, 'My father dropped everything and spent the next six months walking me through a journey that led me out of drug use and into a new freedom.'

Incidentally, while Mike became a follower of Christ, his father is not.

Should we be shocked that even a 'dysfunctional father' was capable of so much support? Absolutely not! Jesus acknowledged that most men want the best for their children and are capable of providing the fundamentals of life, even though they are sinful and flawed.

In Matthew chapter 7:9-11 Jesus asked, 'Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!'

Tools and Encouragement Required

Promise Keepers is convinced that the majority of men have the makings of a great dad in them, but often lack the tools and encouragement for the role. From generation to generation the problem often gets worse, however, as positive role models become harder to find.

Paul notes, 'It is Promise Keepers' experience that up to 50 per cent of men have had either no relationship with their dad or a poor relationship with him. This will often impact on a man's life in negative ways, such as trying to overachieve at work to seek the approval of their father or behaving in anti-social ways.'

He adds, 'A man's relationship with his own dad

While some individual fathers are appalling role models, the vast majority of men desire the best for their children

directly impacts his perception of God as Father and of God's acceptance. A large number of men have retained hurts and unforgiveness and as a result fail to honour their fathers, which is a direct contradiction to God's Word. This failure has often led to a curse over their life that will be repeated down the generations unless broken. This year's Promise Keepers Events are placing an emphasis on breaking that cycle of failure and releasing blessing and healing into men and their families.'

A lack of honouring his father became a core issue for Andrew, but his story has a positive ending. Andrew found Jesus and began to forge a new identity in Christ, an identity that helped him overcome many of the shortcomings from his childhood. As he asked God for help, God came through for him.

As a result, not only has Andrew been able to understand the issues that caused his own father's dysfunction, he has also been able to forgive him and now honour him, choosing to focus on the positives and not the negatives. Furthermore, he has been able to largely re-parent himself to give his children the fathering they require.

From Pain Comes Healing

There are many other stories of God overcoming the pain of one generation's fatherhood experiences, in order to bring healing into the next.

Collin, a 59-year-old member of a Salvation Army Corps (church) in Auckland, endured a father who was a heavy drinker. When his father had been drinking he became very violent, and Collin has memories of a childhood filled with violence toward himself, his siblings, and his mother whenever she tried to intervene.

His father died a lonely death in 1986, estranged from family and still an alcoholic. Collin was living in Australia at the time and didn't attend his dad's funeral. 'To be honest,' he says, 'I didn't want to go to his funeral and there were very few people there.'

In 2002, Collin attended his first Promise Keepers event where he heard someone talk about healing relationships between fathers and sons. He remembers, 'Even though he was obviously talking about restoring relationships in the "now", the Lord spoke to me about my own relationship with my late father.

I became aware during the session that I only ever spoke of my father in a bad way and was aware that even though he was my father, I had no respect for him and that I hated what he had done to the family.

'The Lord began to heal my mind while the speaker was talking. He showed me the many good things that my dad had done, simple things such as taking me fishing and on family picnics, attending all my rugby games and encouraging me in my schoolwork. When he was sober he also taught me moral values, and as a result I have never taken drugs or got into trouble with authorities. I began to look back during that session and realised that my father was trying to teach me many of the things that he struggled with in his life.'

After prayer at the end of that session, Collin felt God was giving him a forgiveness and love for his father. And even though he could not go to his dad and set things right, he could begin to honour him and to pass that honour on to his own son.

Fathering Despite a Rocky Start

And so Mike, Andrew and Collin share one thing. They have found a path to positive manhood and fathering despite a rocky start and despite the flaws of their own dads.

It is this vision for positive fatherhood that Promise Keepers wants to instil in this generation of men, which is why Promise Keepers events always include a strong, positive session on fathering. They want the blessing of fatherhood to be passed on to the next generation of men and women.

At this year's 'Unleashed' events, men will be challenged to impart a vision to their children in a way that will captivate their imagination. Paul explains, 'Many children these days have no godly vision for their future. And too many Christian parents expect the church and its leaders to be the ones who should provide that vision.

'Promise Keepers wants to encourage men to seek a godly vision for themselves—and then as dads, to cast vision and encouragement for their children. We want to communicate clearly that as fathers our task is to inspire and unleash the next generation'.

