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Reformed World is an international journal that provides a forum for sharing and debating theological studies and prophetic witness that seek to engage and transform the realities of our time. The journal draws on, widens, and deepens the treasures of Reformed sources, past and present. *Reformed World* purposefully and joyfully embodies a diversity of voices and contextual perspectives, inspired by ecclesial, academic and grass roots communities. In the understanding of *Reformed World*, theological studies include the biblical, historical, systematic, and practical, as well as reflections on visual art, music, poetry, and other expressions of the human mind and soul that aim at the transformation of the world.

In doing so, *Reformed World* is committed to the mission of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) to be a global *koinonia*, covenanting for justice, and marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. The journal also strives to receive impulses from and give impulses to the wider ecumenical movement, working together with all the partners God provides.

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A Needed Change Is Emerging

By Terry A. DeYoung, Guest Editor

Read the short biographical statements connected to each article in this issue and you'll discover that two-thirds of our authors are people with disabilities. This is not coincidence but by design. Especially for an issue of *Reformed World* focused on the intersections of church and disability, it's important to center the voices of disabled people. Sadly, this doesn't happen often enough.

Many of us may be surprised when we learn that an important historical figure lived with a lifelong disability *and* made a significant contribution. While some may consider such information heartwarming or a curious anomaly, others of us see it as a beacon of hope. Even though people with disabilities make up 15 to 20 percent of the world's population, we only take notice when we find that something significant was created, discovered, or written by a disabled person.

We don't like to say this out loud, but the uncomfortable truth is that most people consider a person with a disability to be "less than," so not much is expected from disabled people. Consequently, we don't give them opportunities or look to them to be full participants, much less leaders. Over the centuries, people with disabilities have been silenced, and often this has been truer in the church than in the world in which we live, serve, and witness. Scripture does not support this injustice, but the church has been reluctant to recognize it or act on it.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

As someone with a lifelong physical disability who has grown up in the church and served within the Reformed tradition for nearly 40 years, I have come to read

this text from Isaiah 40—whether in Advent or in any other time in the church year—as a prophetic call to the church to provide a generous welcome of physical, programmatic, and vocational access for all people. This includes people with and without disabilities, as we seek to live out our calling as disciples in response to the promises made and received at baptism.

Full participation in the body of Christ is not reserved for a certain class of (nondisabled) people.

Certainly, there are regional and cultural distinctives in how people with disabilities are viewed and treated; for example, in some parts of the world, disability is viewed as a curse for wrongdoing or a matter of shame for the individual or family members. But the call of the church to move toward justice for marginalized people, full inclusion, and greater belonging for all God’s children is not and should not be subject to the winds of cultural realities.

This invitation applies to ecumenical organizations as well. Late in 2020, I was honored—and surprised, frankly—by the invitation to participate in the WCRC’s yearlong discernment process called [COVID-19 and Beyond: What Does God Require of Us](#). Along with a few others, I was invited specifically to represent people with disabilities. I was aware that the World Council of Churches has established working groups to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities for at least 30 years (see articles in this issue by Angeline Okola and Samuel George), but to my knowledge this was a first for the WCRC and its predecessors, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC).

Although the voices of people with disabilities were highlighted at times during the COVID-19 and Beyond discernment gatherings, the reception and integration of our contributions felt uneven. So, I was pleased, late in 2021, to learn of WCRC leadership’s interest in devoting an issue of this journal to an exploration of disability and the church. The request to serve as its guest editor signals continued awareness and movement.

As part of the WCRC’s strategic plan to “Become a Just Communion,” it has committed to including all people in all activities, especially those who are often excluded (for various reasons). Here are two objectives from the WCRC’s current strategic plan:



- “The WCRC will intentionally address the call by the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN, part of the WCC) and disabled people in member churches for their full and just participation in programmes and structures of the WCRC, including the protection of vulnerable adults in church and society.
- “The WCRC will strengthen its advocacy work with the United Nations and ecumenical bodies and associations. The WCRC will also focus its regionally based advocacy work on disability to ensure that all our churches are safer and more accessible spaces for people with disabilities.”

Further, in its theological work, the WCRC is committed to developing the theme of “embodied justice” to be a touchstone of projects and dialogues. “It is essential that justice be embodied, attentive to issues of the human body, the body of the church, and the body of creation. Special attention should be given to the situations of the impoverished, women, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples.”

There’s a reality check in these intentions and proclamations, since the WCRC (and WARC before it) has perpetually been understaffed, with more agendas and expectations than the staff can reasonably handle. To their credit, the WCRC and WARC have attempted not to duplicate efforts already being undertaken well by other ecumenical bodies, meaning a lot of things worthy of their attention have not been addressed by the WCRC.

Still, I am encouraged by these recent efforts, which are consistent with the themes expressed in every article in this issue of *Reformed World*. However, it’s also incumbent on every member church of the WCRC to also take these matters to heart within their own denomination.

If you’re open to that but aren’t sure where or how to begin, there’s an untapped and gifted array of people within *every* church who are wanting to exercise their God-given gifts to serve and build up the body of Christ. People with disabilities are not a monolith, and there are hundreds of types of disabilities, so do some research and invite our participation. Most disabilities are not physical and are not immediately apparent or visible, so establishing relationships and creating an atmosphere of trust are essential to learning who in your church lives with a disability and what gifts they have to contribute to the body of Christ.

In my work as the staff person who resources our denomination of 750 churches in the United States and Canada, I am regularly astonished and disheartened by the number of church pastors who tell me they have no disabled people in their church (or maybe one or two who are unable to attend). That immediately reveals three things about them: 1) they don't know their congregation, 2) they don't know much about disabilities, and 3) their congregation hasn't made much of an effort to welcome disabled people.

I can affirm that I find remarkable support and encouragement in the disability work I do in ecumenical circles. More than most other ministry areas, there's a tremendous openness and willingness to work collaboratively across denominational lines to advance the work of inclusion, justice, and belonging for and with people with disabilities. That bodes well for the WCRC and member churches seeking to respond to God's call to work for full and just participation of people on the margins in our churches and in the world.

If you count yourself among those wanting to welcome the full participation of people with disabilities in your church, read and share the articles in this issue of *Reformed World*. Then search out various people with disabilities in your midst, ask them what barriers are keeping them from participating in your church and its ministries of justice, inclusion, and reconciliation, and then invite them to be teachers, leaders, and change agents. Many of us are eager to join you in responding to God's call.



The Rev. Terry A. DeYoung has served as coordinator for Disability Concerns for the Reformed Church in America (RCA) since 2009 and does so in partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) Disability Concerns ministry. Both the RCA and CRCNA are members of the WCRC. Since receiving his Master of Divinity from Western Theological Seminary in 1987, he has served as a pastor, magazine editor, and denominational staff member. Terry lives with a rare, congenital bone condition that affects all his joints and the growth of his bones. His wife, Cindi Veldheer DeYoung, also ordained in the RCA, has lived with significant hearing loss since childhood, and is a chaplain at a large hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



Disability Questions about Embodiment and Resurrection

By Talitha Cooreman-Guittin

A few years ago, I attended a congress in the famous pilgrimage site of Lourdes in France. About 3.5 million visitors come to Lourdes every year to visit, to pray, to celebrate... but also to ask for healing and/or curing. Indeed, Lourdes is renowned for the miraculous healings that have occurred there over the last 160 years. Between presentations and workshops, I met Amélie, a young woman with a hearing impairment. We started talking and she made it crystal clear that she didn't come to Lourdes expecting to be "cured" of her deafness. "But do you think that in the afterlife, you'll be able to hear?" I asked her. She looked at me and smiled: "I really don't think so," she said, "but I am convinced that in the afterlife you will be able to speak sign language." I remember being taken aback by her forthright answer and feeling puzzled: Was my inability to communicate in sign language a bigger obstacle in heaven than Amélie's deafness?

The possibility of the persistence of disability in the resurrected body has been the subject of passionate debates among theologians, as evidenced by the articles published in April 2022 in *Sapientia*, the periodical of the Henry Center for Theological Understanding¹. It is also a point of contention among persons with disabilities: Some people have a deep-rooted hope of being healed or "restored" in the afterlife; others hold fast to their disability because they consider it identity-conferring. Surprisingly, it is much less a source of disagreement among persons without recognised disabilities: the vast majority of my able-bodied friends, relatives, and colleagues believe that God will make all disabilities disappear in heaven. Indeed, quite a number of the people I talked to still associate disability with suffering and pain. For them there seems to be nothing positive and worthwhile in the experience of disability, and thus it seems only logical to them that there will be no more disabled bodies or minds in the afterlife. According to this line of reasoning, people with disabilities will be "healed," as it is said in Revelation 3:21: "God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." But things are never that simple.

1 Chris Donato, ed., *Sapientia* (April 2022) <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/category/areopagite/>

Valuable Disabilities?

Scottish theologian John Swinton writes: “What exactly does God think is wrong with Down syndrome that it is not to be represented in the resurrection body? What does it say about the value of [persons with disabilities’] bodies now, in the present, if they are to be transformed or perhaps even ‘healed’ in the eschaton?”²

Of course, we *know* next to nothing about the way our bodies will be in heaven, but in the normate, ableist perspective of eschatology, there is an expectation of the outright elimination of all impairment in the afterlife. This eschatological expectation has dramatic consequences on the way we represent our corporeality on this side of eternity. French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier states that our hopes for the hereafter immediately arouse the will to organize the here-below³, which is precisely the line of thought of American theologian Amos Yong when he writes: “If disabilities are to be purged in the afterlife, then why shouldn’t that purging process begin in this one?”⁴ According to Yong, the idea of a “disability-free heaven” devalues the lives of people with disabilities here and now. We see how the fantasy of heavenly perfection has ethical consequences for our understanding of what a dignified life is, even in the afterlife. Surely, if God welcomes people with disabilities at the eschatological banquet *with* their impairments, then this should be an invitation for all of us to make sure that these people are welcomed here and now and are encouraged to participate in the building of God’s kingdom. There is, of course, a major difference between our earthly and our heavenly lives: In the afterlife none of us will be hindered by our human limitations, and we will be able to fully flourish whatever our abilities and disabilities.

But can we reasonably affirm that God allows disability to persist in the resurrected body? Is there any theological or biblical ground to claim such a stake? English New Testament scholar Candida Moss certainly thinks so. In her book *Divine Bodies*⁵ she comments on Mark 9:43-47: “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go into hell, where the

2 John Swinton, “Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15 (2011/1), 5-19.

3 Emmanuel Mounier, “For a Time of Apocalypse,” *Esprit* 129/15 (1947), 6.

4 Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2011), 121-122.

5 Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).



fire never goes out.” Moss convincingly argues for a quite literal interpretation of these verses. We know that in Jesus’ day people readily associated disability with sin. But in this pericope, sinners are *able-bodied* and Jesus invites them to become *disabled* in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. This leads to the paradox that able-bodied sinners go to hell, while the crippled repentant go to heaven; the unattractiveness of the crippled repentant is preferable to the symmetrical beauty of the sinner. Moss does not deny the New Testament passages that suggest healing for all in the afterlife, but she encourages exploring the interpretive possibilities latent in the image of the justified mutilated. She writes: “If impaired bodies can be signs of virtue and if impairment was a persistent detail in some ancient portraits of the post-mortem self, then perhaps we should take Mark’s vision of the body more seriously.”⁶

I think there are other verses of Scripture that support the idea of a possible persistence of disability in heaven. In the parable of the Great Banquet for example (Luke 14:21-22), the guests who are poor, crippled, blind, and lame are not freed from their disabilities in order to attend the feast. Moreover, I would suggest that in Matthew 21:14 (“The blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them”), Jesus invites the blind and the lame inside the Temple *before* he heals them. This was revolutionary in Jesus’ time. Jesus goes against the grain of the entire Jewish heritage, because in first-century Palestine, the blind and the lame were prohibited from entering the Temple! I would like to take it one step further: Matthew does not mention what Jesus heals the lame and the blind from. It is usually understood that Jesus restored the sight and the mobility of those who came towards him in the Temple. Now, the Greek words *etherapeusen autous*, which we usually translate as “he healed them” or “he cured them,” also mean “he took care of them.” Could it be that the healing operated by Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem was not of a physical, biological order? What if the care he provided was of a more fundamental, spiritual, and social order? It certainly opens up a world of new possibilities if we try to interpret these verses along these lines.

All of this is to say that there are scriptural arguments in favour of maintaining disabilities in the afterlife. Again, we don’t know what our bodies will be like in the afterlife. However, the way we think about our bodies in heaven has consequences for how we consider them here and now.

⁶ Ibid., 64.

An Irrelevant Question?

During an informal conversation last summer, a Catholic priest suggested that the question of disability of the resurrected body in heaven is completely irrelevant since only our souls will be concerned by the Resurrection, and souls don't have disabilities. Yet, this is not consistent with the Christian faith: the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body are two different concepts. The Apostles' Creed clearly states that we believe in the resurrection of the body. Thomas Aquinas deems both body and soul equally important and doesn't conflate the question of the immortal soul with the question of the resurrected body: "*anima mea non est ego*" he says ("my soul is not I")⁷. Thus, believing in the immortality of the soul doesn't do away with the question of the destiny of the body. The writings of John and Paul never mention the resurrection of the soul, but they do mention the glorification of the body. That this body will be transformed (Philippians 3:21) stands beyond doubt. However, glorification doesn't necessarily imply that our resurrected bodies will comply with our earthly, contemporary standards of bodily perfection. Honestly, I don't know what our resurrected bodies will be like, but I do hope for some sense of continuity between our earthly experience and the experience in the world to come. Hence, eradicating altogether the experience of disability from the afterlife feels like a denial of the positive aspects of life with a disability.

Pastoral Aspects of This Question

How does all this resonate with our pastoral field practices? Changing people's convictions takes time and tact, and I would advise against bluntly telling people who sincerely hope for the elimination of disabilities in the afterlife that impairments might persist. Still, in my years of conversations with persons with disabilities and their relatives and friends, I have often seen that people found it liberating to reconsider their perception of the disabled body and mind. In her recent book *Fragile Body, Living Heart*, French author Cécile Gandon—who has a physical disability and regularly prays for a cure—writes about our encounters: "These encounters create a passageway: if God wanted me with my body as it is, with my disability, then my body as it is—and not despite what it is—is beautiful, lovable, and it can fully testify to something of the order of Love. I shouldn't want to have another one."⁸ Slowly but surely Cécile learns to love her body and to take

7 Aquinas, *Super I Epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura*, cap. 15, lect. 2.

8 Cécile Gandon, *Fragile Body, Living Heart* (Paris: Editions de l'Emmanuel, 2022), 104.



pride in it. In so doing, she unwittingly embraces the aims of the Disability Pride movement, which seeks to change the way people think about disability, to end the stigma of disability, and to promote the belief that disability is a natural and beautiful part of human diversity in which people living with disabilities can take pride.⁹ This leads me to wonder: if disability can be perceived in a positive way, as a source of pride, as a source of good, how can we then articulate it with the goodness of God?

American philosopher Eva Feder Kittay reflects on the value of people with disabilities and asks if anything would be lost if people with disabilities were simply eliminated from our societies. She writes: “To exclude people with a certain disability from the realm of intrinsic value is as if we were to say all artworks are valuable except those sketched in charcoal. If we eliminated these, what would be lost? What is lost is simply all the artworks that might have been sketched in charcoal. We don’t need to specify it any more than that. The same should be said of people with disabilities. What is lost are just those persons. If we think artworks are of value, then there is a real loss of value. If we think persons are of value, then there is a real loss of value.”¹⁰

Indeed, all these wonderful artworks that God has woven together in the womb of mothers, as the psalmist sings¹¹, are precious and valuable in themselves. However, the possible capacitating or *capacity-building* dimension of their disability only comes to light in relationship—in their relationship to God, of course, but also in their relationship to others. If there is no one present near the person with a disability who attempts to detect how God speaks to all of us from this specific place of vulnerability, *nothing generative happens*, neither for people with disabilities nor for the people without disabilities who share their lives. It is only when one opens up to the other that the Spirit can flow through the *gap created*. Hence, we should resist the all-too-common temptation to equate disability with reduced value of life. According to Eva Feder Kittay, people with disabilities have intrinsic value, and there is a distinctive value in the fact of being disabled. Why then should it be eradicated in heaven?

9 “Our Mission,” The Disability Pride Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120321152117/http://www.disabilityprideparade.org/whypride.php>

10 Eva Feder Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter: Valuing Disabled Minds and Caring that Matters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 88. See also, for a more theological point of view: Brian Brock, Jason Byassee, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ’s Body* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021).

11 Psalm 139:13-14.

In conclusion, reflecting on these issues in our practice could unsettle us and disturb the consensual discourse, but this disturbance seems to me to be a welcome one, as it points to a much-needed revolution. Instead of systematically associating disability with suffering, exclusion, and death, why not bring benediction, love, and life into the conversation? If only we could reflect on disability in terms of bodily differentiation originally blessed in creation and view it as an essential and good part of human nature, maybe we could stop supposing that it would be better not to be born rather than to be born with a disability.



Talitha Cooreman-Guittin is senior lecturer and researcher at the Catholic University of Lille (France) and book review editor for the Journal of Disability and Religion. Her research focuses on intellectual disability, dementia, and the relevance of developing friendships, especially through resources of Christian spirituality, beyond the barriers of disability prejudice. Talitha taught religious education for young people with intellectual disabilities and has served as a dementia ward chaplain.



Beyond Curing: Healing as Wholeness

By Carlos A. Thompson

Healing was central to the incarnated ministry of Jesus and retained a central place amid the life of Jesus and witness of the early church. As a theologically oriented action, healing remains central to theological inquiry around God and God's ongoing work in the world today.

Healing has always been a complicated subject for me because I live with congenital cerebral palsy. I cannot remember a time in my life without Christ, faith in Christ's goodness, or belief in God's ability to alter my bodily state. Yet, it took many years of exegetical study, prayer, and inquisitive wrestling to bring peace: not necessarily peace between me and God, but to bring the church to a place where it could be at peace with my embodiment. Over the course of my life, I have belonged to or served within twelve different denominational contexts. Some have felt more charitable and welcoming than others. However, prior to my time as a doctoral student and professor, none of these ecclesial contexts readily embraced my disability as an ideal, holy, or perhaps even good way of being.

As a faithful Christian who believed in healing, I was presented with only two options: 1) I must have faith that God would remove my disability and give me a "normal" body on this side of eternity. Then, as a reward for my faith and obedience, God would eventually grant me a body that fit the able-bodied ideal. Or 2) healing ought to be understood in primarily individualistic and bodily terms—the removal of my disability in favour of a "normal" body, for example. However, this was only promised to believers upon entering heaven because all the marks of sin and the fall are removed at the throne of God, given that no imperfection or trace of the fall will be allowed to remain. All imperfection (of which disability is a major one) must, and will be, cured.

Nonetheless, these options and the bodily ideals of health that follow as a result seem to align more with the values of a twenty-first century, Western, medicalized culture than with Scripture. The notion of healing as primarily a theologically oriented action intended to reveal Christ and restore relationship(s) has been lost. Instead, health and the act of tending to its restoration—healing—has become defined in medicalized terms. For example, to describe a person as "healthy"

is to refer to an individual as being free from medically diagnosable sickness or dysfunction. To be healed, then, is synonymous with an individual being cured from a particular bodily vexation, often through medical intervention. Because we reside in a highly medicalized, individualistic, and bodily fixated context, notions of healing are distilled down to an individual's reception of a bodily cure.

One ought not assert that bodily care or relief from ailments is of no theological import. Nor should one assert that curing a disease, sickness, or bodily ailment is not valuable to human beings or to God. Rather, the healing ministry of Christ directly expels such errors. For example, if one avoids counting parallel narratives more than once, the Gospel writers retain 37 of Jesus' miracles.¹ Additionally, more than 75 percent of them (28 of 37 miracles) recount Christ altering human embodiment—or, providing what might readily be rendered a cure in medical terms. Therefore, it is tenuous for any theological anthropology to uphold a low view of the body in praxis. Indeed, Christ's embodiment through the incarnation—the act of God taking on human flesh—would more readily invite those who are in Christ to embrace an elevated view of life in the body and its care. And beyond considering the healing miracles, for example, consider the bodily care demonstrated by Christ as he seeks to feed multitudes and his hesitant disciples (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14). Furthermore, the bulk of Christ's miracles hold hands with the temporal, concrete, created order in a way that demonstrates Christ's authority amid creation while upholding the goodness of human interdependence upon creation. The biblical witness upholds the desire to be cured of a sickness, ailment, or disabling form of embodiment. Jesus responds to the outcries of Bartimaeus with the question, “What is it that you would like me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51).

Every time that I look into the eyes of my daughter, some part of me longs for a cure; the part of myself that finds it all too easy to project my hopes, dreams, worries, and fears ahead of the one who gave me the capacity to form these hypotheticals in the first place. That part of me gropes beyond the temporal reality that is my day-to-

¹ Excluding parallel passages beginning with Matthew's Gospel, compare the following list: (Miracles 1-22) Matthew 1:1-4; 8:5-13; 8:14-15; 8:16-17; 8:23-27; 8:28-33; 9:1-8; two occur in 9:18-26; 9:27-31; 9:32-34; 12:9-14; 12:22-23; 14:13-21; 14:22-33; 14:34-36; 15:21-28; 15:32-39; 17:14-20; 17:24-27; 20:29-34; 21:18-22. (Miracles 23-25) Mark 1:21-27; 7:31-37; 8:22-26 (Miracles 26-31) Luke 5:1-11; 7:11-17; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 17:11-19; 22:50-51 (Miracles 32-37) John 2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5:1-15; 9:1-12; 11:1-45; 21:4-11



day and still hopes to grasp a reality where the limits of my daughter's world aren't restricted to the boundaries of mine. She grows stronger; I become weaker. Her body quickens with youth; mine grows noticeably slower with age.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is gentle enough to sit with us and be patient amid the uncertainty presented by the potentially undesirable aspects of our lived experience. As John Swinton poetically highlights in his book, *Becoming Friends of Time*, love has a speed. Christ walked with his disciples and amid the brokenness that many of us would rather rush past. However, the truth of the matter is that if we seek to move faster, we run the risk of paying a much higher price than if we acquiesce to that which invites us, however reluctantly, to slow down. We run the risk of missing—simply moving faster than—God. Thus, the same body that is all too familiar with wanting a cure is *also* the body in which I experience my daughter. It's the body through which I am joined to my wife, the body within which I am invited to *be with* my family and present to the gift of inviting slowness, presence, and patience. Indeed, there is space for both gratitude for what *is* and a longing for what *might be* one day. Perhaps the space to hold both is a form of healing that allows me to see my full self—the person Christ indwells for the good of the world and the glory of his name.

Thus, the problem is not whether one desires, seeks, or receives a cure. Rather, problems arise when the theologically rich reality that God *can* cure gives way to a mandate by which the faithful assert that God *must* cure now. This conflation of healing with curing results in one giving primary voice to biomedical paradigms while attempting to answer a primarily theological query. Though medicine is certainly a gift from God and deeply helpful for understanding how to improve aspects of this embodied life, how one begins a journey does have repercussions upon how one finishes and where one ends up. If one aims to arrive at a more faithful theology of healing, one's starting point ought to be theological in nature. Within theology in general, however, since theology of healing is intimately linked to praxis, one's model—the place one begins from, returns to, and concludes with—must be Jesus.

Instead of looking to language of curing for a theologically faithful understanding of healing, then, I would posit looking at Jesus' actions within the Gospel accounts. Christ's healing ministry explicates an understanding of healing that decentralizes a shallow emphasis upon the physical body in favour of the restoration of the whole

person. Something akin to “wholeness,” the Jewish concept of *shalom*. “Wholeness” as *shalom* denotes a kind of divinely relational and cosmically restorative action that God has been enacting since the dawn of time, rather than reducing healing to primarily an individualistically and bodily fixated action that mirrors the work of an earthly physician. The kind of wholeness denoted by *shalom* is enacted within temporal reality, within God’s created order, and sustained through God’s restorative presence.²

Thus, it is not that one’s understanding of healing should minimize the physical body; rather, in Christ, Christians are invited into understanding healing as a wholly transformative and restorative act. The whole of one’s embodied person is touched by and drawn near to God. Indeed, God’s transformative work happens to and often through physical, fleshly bodies—embodied people—and encompasses the sustaining and redeeming of all creation in all its facets. This is a far-reaching, all encompassing, eschatological reality in which the whole of the Christian is restored to right relationship—right relationship with oneself, others, God, and creation. This thoroughly transformative action—shalom as the act of restoring wholeness—is what the Gospel writers are retaining for us in the words used for “healing.” This is the kind of all-encompassing restoration those in Christ are called to carry on through the Holy Spirit as members of the body of Christ.

Given that the life and witness of those in Christ ought to align with the life and witness of Christ, the most faithful way to demonstrate the centrality of wholeness as *shalom* is to turn to the healing miracles enacted by Christ. I will limit my engagement to two narratives: The woman with the continual bleeding and the man who was lowered through the roof on a mat.

The Woman Living with a Hemorrhage

A rather individualistic and bodily fixated reading of this encounter with Jesus simply asserts that Jesus cured the woman’s hemorrhage, and therefore, this woman received divine healing. Reading this encounter through the lens of *shalom*,

² For a more thorough engagement of *shalom* and a detailed overview of precisely how this relates to the concepts of health, healing, and wholeness see, L. S. Carlos Thompson, *Reframing Faithful Christian Healing: An Exploration of Healing and Disability within the Pentecostal Tradition* (Aberdeen, Scotland: University of Aberdeen, King’s College, 2021), 118-82, <https://abdn.primo.exlibrisgroup.com>. For a closer look at the pervasive nature of *shalom* from the Old to the New Testament see Ulrich Mauser, *The Gospel of Peace: A Scriptural Message for Today’s World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), chap. 2; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 69-72.



however, displays the fullness of Christ's divinity as the one who brings *shalom*. This is the reading that the Gospel writers retain for us. This woman existed as a social and spiritual pariah who would rather remain invisible because she is spiritually, and therefore socially, unclean (cf. Lev. 15:19-23; 20:18; Lk. 8:47). She is not in right relationship with herself given her bleeding. She is not in right relationship with others because she is assumed to be a social pariah; and she is presumed spiritually unclean according to Levitical law. Furthermore, the woman is financially destitute because of desperately searching for a solution to her problem (Luke 8:43; Mark 5:26). No part of this woman's person is *whole*.

With the full extent of this woman's relational isolation in view, then, Mark recounts that the woman sought Jesus out while saying to herself, "If I touch even the hem of his garments, I will be made well" (Mark 5:28). It is worth noting here that the word Mark chooses to denote her hope of being made well is *sōzō*—to be wholly rescued or completely restored. Yet, upon reaching out in anonymity and touching Jesus, Mark recounts that she is only physically cured (*iomai*) of her disease (Mark 5:29). It is only upon responding to the call of Jesus, a call that beckons her out of anonymity and into the light as one whom Christ calls "daughter," that Jesus extends that which she sought all along. Beckoning her out from the place that shame had banished her to, Christ says, "Daughter, your faith has wholly restored and delivered you (*sōzō*); go in peace (*eirēnē*) and be cured (*iomai*) of your disease" (Mark 5:34). Thus, this woman sought out Jesus in search of a wholistic rescue from her circumstances—the completely restorative wholeness denoted as *shalom*. Yet, this only came in and through an encounter with the bringer of *shalom*, God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, each one of the terms utilized in this passage for peace or healing (*eirēnē*, *sōzō*, *iomai*) touches upon an aspect of *shalom* and is used in place of *shalom* in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, here one sees the far-reaching and multifaceted notion of healing enacted by Christ. *Shalom* certainly encompasses the bodily state of a person. However, the emphasis is not upon an individual cure; rather, the emphasis is first upon Christ as the bringer of complete and total restoration of all that is relationally fractured; and second, upon the restoration of the whole person unto right relationship(s) with God, creation, oneself, and others. This is healing as *shalom*. This is what we are inviting others into as Christians.

The Man Who Lived with Paralysis

This same notion of shalom as wholeness is evident within the narrative of the man on the mat. However, it is far more implicit in that the direct references to shalom are not linguistically prevalent in the same way. Nonetheless, reading this narrative through the lens of healing as wholeness—*shalom*—renders a more Christologically robust and contextually faithful reading.

This passage is often erroneously used by some readers to assert that Jesus upheld an association between bodily conditions, ailments, and human sin. However, engaging the text through the lens of *shalom* highlights that this is not the case. As the bringer of *shalom*, Jesus encounters and seeks to restore the whole of this person to God, to the person, and to his community. Thus, simply altering this man's bodily state and giving him the ability to walk is not the only miracle present in this text. According to the accounts of Luke, Mark, and Matthew, the first words Jesus declares to the man on the mat are "your sins are forgiven" (Luke 5:20; Mark 2:5; Matthew 9:2). This is clearly seen as a divine and miraculous pronouncement that is impossible for anyone but God to uphold! Thus, to declare the man forgiven, and for it to be so, is a miracle and a manifestation of Christ's divinity (Matthew 9:3; Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21). Furthermore, this act pronounces the man to be spiritually restored—forgiven and welcomed near to God—in his present bodily state. Forgiveness as the doorway through which this man's spiritual relationship is restored, then, is the first miracle, the first fracture healed.

It is important to note, however, that this first restorative miracle—the pronouncement of forgiveness—is vehemently doubted on the part of the scribes and pharisees. It is this doubt, then, that prompts Jesus to say to the man on the mat, "Pick up your mat and go home." Indeed, Jesus pronounced the man spiritually restored by declaring him forgiven. Nonetheless, onlookers only saw the state of this man's flesh and attributed his embodiment to divine retribution. Thus, Jesus offers this bodily cure as an undeniable corrective that affirms both this man's forgiven state and Christ's divine right to forgive (Luke 5:22-26; Matthew 9:4-6; Mark 2:8-12). The narrative concludes with Jesus directing the man to "go home," and all who were present glorified God as the man went out from there. Thus, this man was spiritually restored through Christ's declaration of forgiveness; the man was socially restored through the validation that Christ's words were trustworthy; and this man is relationally restored by being directed to return to his family anew (Luke 5:25-26;



Mark 2:12; Matthew 9:6-7). Finally, this man is then moved from the margins to the center as one through whom others are drawn to glorify God!

Conclusion

Expanding one's understanding of healing to account for the theological reality of *shalom*, then, allows one to align with the lived example of Christ more faithfully. Aligning with Christ, then, opens one to the possibility of finding life and wholeness as one who belongs to Christ, a perceptively broken yet healed and restored—whole—Christ. Wholeness locates healing squarely within the overall redemptive and restorative divine arc of history, rather than simply allowing healing to be contingent upon whether one's bodily state fits a medicalized social ideal. Membership or belonging is the state of relation by which health is measured, rather than a medicalized notion of one's individual capacities (or lack thereof) measuring how close one is to a human ideal. Healing as an invitation to enter wholeness through Christ as the bringer of *shalom* allows Christians today to fold into God's ongoing work in the world as agents who are about the work of wholistically restoring relationship(s). The church becomes the community where humanity is restored by being welcomed into healthily embracing the reality of creaturely existence—the truth of being embodied, limited creatures.

Within this framework, then, all who are embraced by the body of Christ are made whole in Christ. We are welcomed into oneness with Christ as we await the restoration of all things through Christ. To be healed is to truly belong, limits and all, to God as members of Christ, one another through Christ, and to God's good creation as a co-creature in Christ. Thus, beyond a bodily cure, the kind of healing that Christ models for us is an invitation to beckon all—with and without disabilities—toward *shalom*, toward right relationship(s), at last.



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How to Turn a Black Man into a Child in One Second: Gender and Disability

By Eske Wollrad



In most German restrooms you find pictograms differentiating between “male” and “female,” the well-known binary construction of two sexes, and “disabled,” a third category that exceeds gender specification. The differentiation is not simply about facilities for groups with impairments, but rather points to a fundamental problem. Often people with disabilities are perceived as not really having a gender, as existing beyond the demarcation lines of social norms and stereotypes attached to what it supposedly means to be male or female. Constructions of disability are determined by the NOT: not attractive, not sexually desirable, not beautiful, not fertile, not lover, not married, not parent, etc.¹ In a society informed by ableism, people with disabilities are perceived as “disabled people” whose impairment is not just one aspect of their being, but rather the overarching condition dripping into every crack of one’s life and shaping every moment.²

Within the dominant fabrication of disability gender is there but rendered completely invalid. This is especially true for people whose disability is visible—or becomes visible in a particular moment. Lynn Manning captures this moment in his poem, *The Magic Wand*.

Quick-change artist extraordinaire,
I whip out my folded cane
and change from a black man to ‘blind man’
with a flick of my wrist.
It is a profound metamorphosis— [...]
From sociopathic gangbanger with death for eyes

1 This especially refers to visible disabilities and to a lesser degree to disabilities such as diabetes, epilepsy, or chronic gastrointestinal illnesses.

2 As early as 1992 German feminists with disability criticized that their impairment supposedly canceled out their gender. One book they published is entitled *Neither Kisses nor Career* (Sigrid Arnade), another is *Gender: Disabled. Special Characteristics: Female* (Gisela Herms et al, eds.).



to all-seeing soul with saintly spirit;
From rape deranged misogynist
to poor motherless child;
From welfare-rich pimp
to disability-rich gimp;
And from 'white man's burden'
to every man's burden.
It is always a profound metamorphosis.
Whether from cursed by man to cursed by God;
or from scriptures condemned to God ordained,
My final form is never of my choosing;
I only wield the wand;
You are the magicians.³

Racist imaginations of Black male hypersexuality immediately disappear once blindness enters the scene: The ableist gaze turns the man into a child, crippled and bereft of any self-determination. Both his blackness and his gender are no longer threatening since blindness declares them invalid. The metamorphosis Manning describes in his poem is an ideological one since his body undergoes certain dominant reinterpretations. Quite different from that are changes that involve the physical mutilation of people with disabilities: one of them became famous under the title the "Ashley Treatment."

The "Ashley Treatment" refers to a girl who at the age of six years underwent a highly experimental medical intervention designed to arrest her physical and sexual development.⁴ The reason was that physicians classified her as "severely disabled." The procedure carried out in 2004 entailed surgical sterilization via hysterectomy, breast bud removal to stop breast development, and extensive hormone treatment to freeze the child's physical and sexual development. Ashley may age in chronological years, but her body will maintain the appearance, size, and weight of a six-year-old for the rest of her life. The declared goal of her parents was to

3 Lynn Manning, "The Magic Wand," *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 13, no. 7 (November 2009), 785, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603110903046069>.

4 "Ashley Treatment," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashley_Treatment

“realign” Ashley’s cognitive mind with her physical body. Moreover, they argued that pregnancy, menstrual pain, and uncomfortable breast formation would decrease Ashley’s quality of life. Finally, as a child Ashley would be easier to handle. Ashley’s so-called realignment—that is, the prevention of her becoming a woman—met with a lot of critique. However, the “Ashley Treatment” continues to be an “option elected by parents and other caregivers of intellectually and developmentally disabled children.”⁵

The examples of the blind Black man turned into a child discursively and the girl frozen in an ongoing physical childhood point to a fact often overlooked in critical gender studies, namely, that gender (in any form) is nothing everybody simply has and retains. Instead, even in its binary construction as man/woman, gender is a signature only bestowed upon certain groups, i.e., temporarily able bodied (TAB) people. An intersectional analysis opens up avenues to look at gender as a privilege denied to those who are not in line with the social normativity of the “healthy” body.

What does this mean theologically? The creation story talks about God creating the world and all creatures: plants and birds and wild animals and so on. Each time a certain species is created the text emphasizes the variety: God creates plants of every kind, birds of every kind, wild animals of every kind, but when it comes to humans, no broad variety is mentioned. Humankind is created in God’s image, and the only differentiation is gender—humankind is created male and female. Therefore, gender is God’s gift to be revered and cherished. This might mean female bodies, male bodies, bodies containing both, and others containing something in between—in short: gender of every kind. Consequently, any attempt to deprive someone of enjoying this gift can be labeled a sin. Sinful, then, would mean to attach gender exclusively to bodies that conform to ableist social standards.

Within the Christian tradition it goes without saying that dominant interpretations of Second Testament healing stories have contributed a lot to current manifestations of ableism. Many people with disabilities define these healing stories as “texts of terror” since most of them combine the encounter with the divine with the (re)building of the fully functioning body, that is, with a dominant fantasy of wholeness. “For those of us who live with disabilities, miracle stories such

5 Julia Epstein and Stephen A. Rosenbaum, “Revisiting Ashley X: An Essay on Disabled Bodily Integrity, Sexuality, Dignity, and Family Caregiving,” *Touro Law Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, Article 9 (2019): 199.



as John 5, because of a certain cultural preunderstanding with which these texts tend to be approached, might best be designated ‘texts of terror’ [...]. Such healing accounts, with their purported promise of miraculous remediation to normalcy, often contribute, not to the well-being of differently abled persons, but most frequently to our social and spiritual segregation.”⁶

Healing perceived as a miraculous remediation to normalcy also occurs in some TAB-feminist interpretations (for instance, Luke 13:10-17). Here the disabled female body is defined as an expression of patriarchal submission, and her healing is interpreted as a visible sign of her liberation from sexism.⁷ Put the other way around: Her upright “healthy” body is the signature of her faith in Jesus and her status as a free woman. According to such a TAB-feminist interpretation, the contorted back of the woman renders her femaleness somehow invalid—only through the erasure of the disability she becomes the incorporation of a woman to be looked up to.

More often than not, Christian interpretations of disability are characterized by the idea that disability is a “punishment for one’s own sin or for the sin of one’s parents, a test of faith, an opportunity to build character or to inspire others, an occasion for the power of God to be made manifest, a sign that one lacks faith, or simply a mysterious result of God’s will.”⁸ These interpretations always aim at the production of “The Other” by objectifying, classifying, and devaluing certain people. Interestingly, many biblical stories themselves convey a quite different message about disability: it occurs as part of one’s personal life, as a part of Israel’s collective memory, and as a part of the greatest biblical vision of peace as described in the book of Micah.⁹ These stories are of particular interest for gender studies since they contain a criticism of power with regard to dominant constructions of masculinity. In Western culture biblical heroes all look more or less like Charlton Heston, although many of them did not meet the physical standard attributed to a “healthy body”: Moses was stuttering, Saul struggled with depression, and Paul suffered from a chronic disease.

6 Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 70.

7 Eske Wollrad’s overview, “So ist mein Fleisch—Postkolonial-feministische Anstöße,” is part of Ilse Falk et al (eds.), *So ist mein Leib. Alter, Krankheit, Behinderung—feministisch-theologische Anstöße* (Gütersloh 2012), 107-122.

8 Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.

9 The most prominent part of Micah’s vision of peace in chapter 4 is the verses 2-4. However, verse 7 makes clear that this vision presupposes the presence of people with disabilities not only as members of the new community but rather as those who lead: “The limping one [in Hebrew female] I will put at the beginning.” An exploration of Micah 4:1-8 is beyond the scope of this article.

Another biblical leader—one of the forefathers of the people of Israel who altered the path Israel took and set the pace for his community with his disabled body—was Jacob. The story starts in Genesis 27 with the consequences of a disability—not Jacob’s but his father’s. Being almost blind, Isaac wants to bless his firstborn Esau, but his brother Jacob deceives him to receive the blessing of the firstborn. Many years later Jacob regrets his ruse and wants to become reconciled with Esau. On the way to his brother’s place close to the river Jabbok, at night he meets somebody (a “man,” an angel, God?) with whom he wrestles (Genesis 32:23ff). During the fight Jacob’s hip is put out of joint, and despite this impairment he keeps on wrestling until his opponent requests release. But Jacob sets a condition: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). That is also what happens: Jacob gets the blessing and a new name.

Jacob (in Hebrew “deceiver”) receives a new identity, a second chance. From now on his name will be “Israel,” meaning, “You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” For the first time in Scripture, the name “Israel” is mentioned. “Jacob’s frontier experience at the river Jabbok marks Israel’s founding legend of the creation of a new identity because here at the Jabbok river a vision of a reconciled living together on this earth arises.”¹⁰ Part of this founding legend is Jacob’s limping. Against suggestions the limping could be just a temporary condition, Old Testament scholar Ulrike Bail maintains: “It is safe to assume that the limping is permanent—with an open end. At least Jacob’s limping remains part of the collective memory.”¹¹

Taken together one could argue that Jacob’s story is one of success: he gets a new chance, a blessing, a new name, and finally he will reconcile with his brother. However, some of the interpreters offer an image quite different: supposedly Jacob is a tragic hero since “he will be a bit of a cripple for the rest of his life.”¹² Brueggemann maintains that not only his able-bodiedness is gone, but even something more essential: Jacob’s impairment is a “mark left on his very manhood and future.”¹³ Being “a bit of a cripple” stains dominant conceptualizations

10 Klara Butting, “The Center of the Bible,” *Junge Kirche* (2/2021), 3.

11 Ulrike Bail, “Die verzogene Sehnsucht hinkt an ihren Ort,” *Literarische Überlebensstrategien nach der Zerstörung Jerusalems im Alten Testament*, (Gütersloh, 2004), 135.

12 Naomi Rosenblatt quoted in Bill D. Moyers, *Genesis. A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 264.

13 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 270.



of masculinity—one cannot be a man and disabled at the same time. Scholar Kerry Wynn even labels this view the “emasculatation”¹⁴ of Jacob. Once disability becomes center stage (according to the interpreters, not to the biblical story), all his achievements fade: Jacob is not a “real man” any longer; a hero yes, but a tragic one. Finally, his supposed “woundedness” and “brokenness” come to stand as a metaphor for the situation of the religious community as a whole: “... the community—whether Israel or the Christian Church—is never going to be the beautiful people. They’re always going to be weird and odd misfits.”¹⁵

On the one hand we have the classic feature of ableism, namely the identification of disability with ugliness, tragedy, loss, and deficit. On the other hand (here, one-legged theologian Sharon Betcher would snigger: “if there is one...”¹⁶) the biblical account talks about difference. Jacob’s twisted hip makes a difference in his personal life and alters the way Israel proceeded from then on—no symmetry here, no marching in step possible, only a slow swaying walk. The disability is neither glorified nor a sign of guilt, but a part of Israel’s collective memory—nothing more and nothing less.

The biblical text gives us a glimpse of a kind of masculinity beyond dominant constructions, one that replaces the “despite” by an “and”: “a man despite his disability” changes into “a man and disabled,” a leader and disabled, successful and disabled. Jacob’s impairment is part of the story, “something he took away as a lifelong reminder of what happened there—lifelong for Jacob but, for all Israel, a sign for all time.”¹⁷

One important task of Christian theology today is to disentangle the unholy dichotomy of either being disabled or having a gender. To be created in God’s image means to be wanted and seen by the Holy One as having gender of every kind and bodies of every kind. According to this fundamental anthropological understanding, healing can be reinterpreted as the process of the Christian community coming to terms with the violent implications of ableism and of welcoming all bodies the way

14 Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within Yahwistic Narratives,” Hector Avalos; Sarah J. Melcher; Jeremy Schipper, eds., *This Abled Body. Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 99.

15 Walter Brueggemann, quoted in *ibid.*, 97.

16 Betcher made her “funny remark” during a speech at Harvard Divinity School in March 2013 implicitly pointing to the fact that our language is loaded with ableist metaphors. See *Crip/topography: Disability Theology in the Ruins of God*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AigFqXR4-s

17 Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic,” 101.

they are. Maybe today Christian discipleship involves nothing less than—in the words of Sharon Betcher—“creating spaces, pockets of other worlds, of Crip Nations.”¹⁸



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18 Sharon Betcher, *Spirit*, 154.



Perspectives on Disability and Theology from Confucian Societies in Asia

By Wen-Pin Leow

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a disability ministry leader from the West. He shared with me that he found it difficult for his ministry to gain traction in Asia. I asked him to tell me more about the nature of the ministry—what ministry model they applied, what materials they used, and how they went about engaging churches. After hearing him out, I gently explained to him that the problem was likely contextualisation. For example, just content-wise, the materials he used focused heavily on Western concerns. In particular, I remember one set of materials being focused on a topic that I had never seen anyone even remotely showing any interest in during my decade of ministry in Asia.

This brief anecdote reflects the importance of recognising and adapting to contextual differences in disability theology and ministry, which parallels the larger ongoing quest among Christians in Asia to develop their own theological self-identities.¹ As Hwa Yung avers in his seminal book on Asian theology, *Mangoes or Bananas*:

Western theologies are the products of the histories, cultures and realities of the West. They cannot, therefore, adequately address the existential realities of the rest of the world because these differ so much from those of the West. ... [E]ven when Western writers deal with concerns similar to those in the Asian scene at the rational level, the very approaches taken have tended to leave the treatment emotionally cold to the Asian heart.²

1 For a sample, see the following significant works: Edmund K.F. Chia, *Asian Christianity and Theology: Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogue, Integral Liberation, Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021); Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, eds., *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2019); Sebastian C.H. Kim, *Christian Theology in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

2 Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Theology*, 2nd ed., Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 1-2.

Thus, in this article, I explore disability from the perspectives of Asian churches,³ specifically focusing on those in Confucian societies⁴ like China, Japan, and Singapore. Given the limited space, I will only reflect on two areas: disability theology as performative theology and disability as shame.

Disability Theology as Performative Theology

When I was studying in seminary, I remember one of my professors, an American, lamenting that no great systematic theology textbook had ever been penned by an Asian. I replied that, regardless of whether such an assessment were true, perhaps the reason for this was not a lack of capability among Asian theologians but simply a lack of perceived need for such systematic theologies. In hindsight, I realise that my comment was just a lesser paraphrase of Hwa Yung’s observation that Western theologies “cannot... adequately address the existential realities of the rest of the world.”

A similar complaint to that offered by my American professor has likewise been levelled by critics of Confucian thought. For example, Confucian emphasis on 禮 (lǐ, “ritual conduct”) has led some commentators to describe Confucianism as mere finicky rule-making or as an anti-philosophy disinterested in systematic argumentation. However, this surface reading of Confucian thought overlooks the deeper connections between praxis and abstract thought that lie at the heart of Confucian thinking. Praxis and thinking are intertwined, with thinking being operationalised in the performance. As observed in *Lunyu* 12.1a:

Yan Hui [Confucius’ disciple] asked about authoritative conduct. The Master replied, “Through *self-discipline* and observing ritual propriety one becomes

3 The use of the term “Asian churches” should not be understood as implying that every country in Asia has been influenced by Confucianism. Rather, Asian countries—and the churches within—are incredibly diverse and have a variety of cultural influences other than Confucianism, including influences that have been historically critical of Confucianism, e.g., Daoism. This article therefore makes no claim of representativeness for any national viewpoint. It simply presents selected perspectives. I make no claim to uniqueness, either. It would be fallacious to say that such perspectives are absent in Western societies. Rather, they are simply perspectives that I have encountered frequently as an active ministry practitioner in this part of the world.

4 Confucianism, like any ancient system of thought, should not be considered a monolithic philosophy. Like Christianity, it has undergone development and refinement and has varied schools of interpretation. However, just as the term “Christian” is typically used, I use the term “Confucian” here as a broad adjective without making a claim that the viewpoints in this article are fully representative of the diversity of Confucian thought. Nor do I claim that modern Confucian societies are identical to those represented in ancient texts.



authoritative in one's conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model. Becoming authoritative in one's conduct is *self-originating*—how could it originate with others?⁵

颜渊问仁。子曰：「克己复礼为仁。一日克己复礼，天下归仁焉。为仁由己，而由人乎哉？」

This Confucian dynamic between one's inner self (where abstract thought happens)⁶ and one's conduct is often present in disability contexts in Asian churches. For example, consider the issue of bioethics, an intensely theological area of study vis-à-vis persons with disabilities. However, in Asian church settings, the presenting issue would rarely be an abstract consideration of ethics. Rather, the pastoral “problem” would be, say, a mother who has to decide whether to abort her child because of a positive Down syndrome test.

I remember being posed this precise ethical quandary by a Japanese student in a seminary seminar I was delivering on disability theology. Memorably, after giving my answer—an ethical argument given in the abstract—she countered, “But how can I ask the parents not to abort the child? After all, *I cannot live their life for them.*” It was then I realised that the theological issue at stake was not ethics or even theological anthropology. It was actually practical ecclesiology! What needed to be worked out for this Japanese seminarian was the role of her local church in the life of parents gifted with a child with Down syndrome. This was a question that could not be answered simply in the classroom in the abstract.⁷

Disability ministry in such settings begins with the question “but how?”, yet it never ends there. It is by answering “how” that “why” gets answered. This echoes the highly situational character of the Confucian ideal of authoritative conduct (仁, rén). For example, it is written in *Lunyu* 4.5a:

5 Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, Classics of Ancient China (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 152 *Italic added*.

6 “One of the central threads which ties the early and late Confucians together is the importance of self-cultivation—the central theme of the *Analects*—not only for aesthetic development, but for moral strength, the social good, and spiritual insight as well.” *Ibid.*, 16.

7 For a pastoral discussion on how to support families with children with special needs, see Wen-Pin Leow, “Understanding Their Grief: 5 Ways to Support Parents of Children with Special Needs,” *Salt&Light* (8 March 2022), <https://saltandlight.sg/service/5-ways-to-support-parents-of-children-with-special-needs/>.

The Master said, “Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequences of deviating from the way, I would have no part in them. Poverty and disgrace are what people deplore, but if they are the consequence of staying on the way, I would not avoid them. Wherein do the exemplary persons who would abandon their authoritative conduct warrant that name?”⁸

子曰：「富与贵是人之所欲也，不以其道得之，不处也；贫与贱是人之所恶也，不以其道得之，不去也。君子去仁，恶乎成名？」

In this text, wealth/status and the lack thereof are evaluated circumstantially in relation to whether they promote the way (道, dào). Arguably, one also sees a similar dynamic in ancient Semitic thought. Consider, for example, the superficially incongruous pair of statements in Proverbs 26:4-5,

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

One might, in fact, imagine these words coming from the mouth of Confucius! As a result of this circumstantial character of Confucian thought, a common answer to theoretical questions of disability theology would be: “It depends.” For in Asian settings, disability theology is often performed, particularised, and even personalised.

Disability and Shame

One clear example of how disability is viewed particularly and situationally in Confucian contexts is through the lens of shame. Shame and honour have been much discussed in biblical and missional studies in recent years.⁹ Earlier approaches described specific societies as shame cultures (usually Eastern) or guilt cultures (usually Western), or characterised shame as external and guilt as internal.¹⁰ These

8 Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 89-90.

9 Consider, for example, the following: Richards E. Randolph and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); Daniel Y. Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt: Social-Scientific Approaches to the Book of Ezekiel*, *Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 14* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016); Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).

10 Cf. the survey in Jean Geaney, “Guarding Moral Boundaries: Shame in Early Confucianism,” *Philosophy East & West*, 54.2 (2004), 113-19.



earlier distinctions were simplistic, and open to the charge of neo-colonialism, especially when it was implied that guilt (and therefore Western) cultures were superior. While scholarship has since corrected itself, such simplistic dichotomies still occasionally persist, even in Christian literature.¹¹

In contrast, Barrett provides a more sophisticated definition of the Confucian view of shame when he states that “shame can arise from the failure to realize any value through adequate harmonization” (和, hé).¹² This definition highlights shame’s particular character (i.e., what is harmonious is situationally defined) and its performative character (i.e., disharmony as a failure of action). One clear example is the shame associated with nakedness (a much-discussed issue in the literature on shame). As any one who has visited a Japanese onsen (温泉) would know, nakedness within the bathing area is required and not at all shameful, even when both sexes are present. This contrasts with typical Japanese attitudes towards nakedness in other public contexts.

Since shame arises from a failure to realise harmony, knowing shame is socially valuable, and may even constitute “the human characteristic.”¹³ To accuse someone of “not knowing shame” (不知羞耻) is a grave insult. As Mencius famously observed (*Mengzi* 7A6):

Mencius said, “A person must not be without shame. Shamelessness is the shame of being without shame.”¹⁴

孟子曰：「人不可以无耻。无耻之耻，无耻矣。」

How does this shape the view of disability in Asian societies? One manifestation that I have seen repeatedly in ministry contexts is how the disruption caused by disability leads to shame in familial contexts. For example, when a child with disability is born, the presence of the disability disrupts typically expected patterns of family life, preventing the realisation of harmony within the extended family

11 For an example, see the (albeit well-meaning) chapter on cultural anthropology of honor and shame in Georges Jayson, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 33-64.

12 Nathaniel Barrett, “A Confucian Theory of Shame,” *SOPHIA* 54 (2015), 147.

13 Geaney, “Shame in Early Confucianism,” 121.

14 Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom, *Translations from the Asian Classics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 145.

and beyond. Thus, a common response to children with disabilities in Singapore is to keep them at home away from the rest of society.¹⁵ A similar kind of behaviour is experienced in the church setting when, say, a child with autism chooses to address his sensory needs by loud clapping. Judgmental stares of unsympathetic congregation members are meant to chastise the child's parents: Why have you allowed your child to behave beyond the bounds of expected decorum?¹⁶

One must not underestimate the significance of familial shame and its impact on disability ministry. Elsewhere, I have argued that any "Asian disability missiology must also take into account that familial collectivism is a cultural trait prevalent in Asia" and that "the family tends to bear the main responsibility in caring for a person in Asia, compared to the West, where care tends to depend more on professional and state support."¹⁷

Moreover, this problem is compounded when one realises how interconnected the family construct is with larger social constructs in Confucian societies. Much like how ancient Rome (and the New Testament!) viewed the family as a paradigm for society at large,¹⁸ Confucian societies often view "the family [as] the model for all types of relationships... [and] social and political order was conceived in terms of mutually implicating radial circles, so that strong person, family, community, state, and cosmos are coterminous and mutually entailing."¹⁹ Thus, the disruption caused by a member of the family with a disability might hinder one from participating in

15 Consider, for example, this reflection by a Singaporean father of a son with autism: "Even when [he] was six years old, I felt embarrassed to go out with him, especially since I could not manage him one-on-one. Thus, during his early years, we were largely homebound. We only went to church and then back home. At the very most we would stop by the neighbourhood *kopitiam* [diner] to grab some food to bring home to eat. I tried to keep him in a box because of my pride. I wanted to display my macho disposition; I wanted to hide the problem. And so I hid [my son] away from the public. I would not even bring him to gatherings or any place that would reveal who he was." From Kee-Hian Loo, "God Is a Healer," in *Call Me By Name: Stories of Faith, Identity, and Special Needs*, ed. Wen-Pin Leow and Anne Wong-Png (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018), 104.

16 Recently, the author spoke to a Singaporean mother (of a child with disability) who recounted an episode where, upon being stared in such a way, she chose to stare back. That action successfully shamed the onlookers for their own thoughtlessness (that also failed to realise harmony).

17 Ching-Hui Ong and Wen-Pin Leow, "Towards an Asian Disability Missiology: Reflections from Singapore," *Journal of Asian Mission*, 22.1 & 2 (2021): 12-13.

18 Cf. Eva Marie Lassen, "The Roman Family: Ideal and Metaphor," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 103-20. For an illustration of family as a social metaphor in the New Testament, see my discussion in Wen-Pin Leow, "Ekklesiā and Civic Discourse in the Rhetoric of Ephesians," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 34.2 (2020), 80-82.

19 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "A Pragmatist Understanding of Confucian Democracy," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel Bell and Chae-bong Ham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136-37.



larger society, and even negatively impact one's self-image. The latter was conveyed to me when a father of a son with autism lamented to me: "How can *my* brood, *my* offspring, be like that?"²⁰

Nonetheless, if we understand that the shame associated with disability is a result of a perceived disruption of harmony, this also provides would-be disability ministry practitioners a clear method to address such shame: to reshape social norms through biblical teaching so that harmony itself is redefined.²¹ Moreover, the interconnectedness between family and larger social units means that cultural shifts at the church level might have ripple effects, impacting family culture as well.

On a personal note, such reshaping is exactly the kind of ministry work that my colleagues and I have been doing with churches in Singapore and beyond through the ministry of the Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN).²² Through a combination of preaching, training, authentic sharing, and guidance, we help churches understand Paul's transformative view of the body of Christ:

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:24-25 ESV)

Harmony, as Paul sees it, is not created by uniformity. Rather, when the Church honours those who are shamed by society, 和 (hé) is achieved—there is "no division in the body." My experiences testify that such ministry can be profoundly liberating, as both church and family are reshaped together by the gospel of Christ Jesus. Indeed, such interventions change what is considered shameful. No longer are persons with disabilities considered shameful. Instead, what is shameful is excluding them from the family when they are God's precious children!²³

20 Loo, "God Is a Healer," 104. Italics added.

21 This, in fact, is one of Confucianism's own strategies for moral formation. See footnote 2 in Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," 146.

22 KIN is a Christian parachurch organisation based in Singapore that helps churches include and disciple persons with disability. For more information, see <https://www.kin.org.sg/>.

23 One disability ministry that I work with named themselves "Ohana Ministry," after the Hawaiian term for family. As they often tell me, "Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten." See Nathanael Goh and Dominique Phang, "A Home for Everyone, and for Everyone a Home: Ohana @ Sengkang Methodist Church," in *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches*, ed. Wen Pin Leow (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021), 145-50.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have discussed two ways in which disability is viewed in Confucian societies among Christians. First, I argued that theology is often engaged via praxis. Thus, disability theology is frequently both performative and particularised. Second, I averred that such particularity is exemplified in the Confucian view of shame as the failure to realise harmony, a situational construct. Since disability is perceived as shameful because it disrupts harmony, I proposed that one possible solution is to reform definitions of harmony through a biblically-guided renewal of our ecclesial and familial cultures. Of course, this short discussion hardly scratches the surface of the differing ways that Asian Christians view disability and theology. Far more consideration is needed for this important topic—but that is a task for another time.



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Ableism in the Church:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not [what it is or] what they do.”

by Jasmine Duckworth and Chantal Huinink

Genesis 1:26–27 is the foundation of the Christian understanding that every person has inherent dignity and value because we are all made in the image of God. To reflect this, churches should work toward dismantling the problems of “isms,” such as racism and sexism, that degrade or demean the dignity and value of certain people. Likewise, to reflect that people with disabilities are also made in the image of God with inherent dignity and value, we should work toward dismantling ableism in our churches and beyond.

Experiences of racism, sexism, and ableism are not the same. We are not necessarily able to address their negative impacts in the same way. Nevertheless, all forms of discrimination are problematic for churches because they do not represent loving one another as we love ourselves, but rather presume that one person or one group of people is more valuable than another.

It can be difficult to address the problems of discrimination because our value judgments and the ways we behave as a result are often subconscious and implicit. Few people intend to treat people differently because of certain characteristics. We are often oblivious to the unconscious biases we hold—biases formed by the environment we grew up in or the actions and beliefs of the society we live in. Unfortunately, ableism is often similarly embedded in the theology and practices of churches. We hope that this article will provide helpful insights into what ableism is, and how one might begin or continue to address its negative impacts in the short term and dismantle ableism in the long term, particularly within churches.

Christians are called to share one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), but unless we are disabled or close to someone with a disability, we cannot fully appreciate the extent of ableism and its negative impact within our churches and beyond. For this reason, it is important that we listen to and practice solidarity with marginalized people if they share such burdens with us.

What Is Ableism?

In brief, ableism represents the privileging of non-disabled bodies and minds. Bullying, teasing, or discrimination toward people with disabilities are overt forms of ableism. While such behaviours are inappropriate and often painful, there are more subtle forms of ableism that can be even more harmful. When we are attuned to ableism, we may observe its negative impacts in one or more of the following categories: individual ableism, cultural ableism, systemic ableism, and internalized ableism.

Individual Ableism

Individual ableism refers to attitudes each person holds about the value of people with disabilities. One may assume that disability equals inability or may feel that disability is a tragedy and respond with pity. Individual ableism can be demonstrated in a patronizing tone of voice used when speaking with people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities. A person may intend to show respect for the skills and abilities of people who have disabilities by using terms like “*diverse abilities*,” or “*differently abled*”; however such terminology can have unintended negative connotations or imply discomfort with the term “disability.” Therefore, these terms are examples of individual ableism. “Disability” is not a bad word, unless its use suggests a hierarchy—in which to be able-bodied is the best and to have a disability somehow makes one person, or group of people, less than another.

Cultural Ableism

Ableist attitudes of individuals contribute to **cultural ableism**, a collective cultural viewpoint wherein society does not consider people with disabilities to be as valuable as non-disabled citizens. With respect to churches, an example of cultural ableism would be the belief that people who do not use words to communicate do not communicate or connect with God in other ways, and God does not communicate or connect with them. Cultural ableism may also be represented in the expectation that to participate in worship services one should sit still and be quiet for the entire duration. We may be a part of a culture that discourages people with physical, cognitive, or mental health challenges from taking on leadership roles simply because their gifts and insights differ from those of able-bodied leaders. Another example is the faulty assumption that because no one with an *apparent*



disability attends a particular church, that church does not have any current or potential members with disabilities. There may very well be members with *non-apparent* disabilities or those who do not self-identify as disabled. A common result of cultural ableism is that money may not be allotted for infrastructure to make a church or wider society more accessible due to “other priorities.” In turn, people with disabilities face further barriers to participation.

Systemic Ableism

When cultural ableism becomes formalized through the built environment, policies, laws, regulations, and practices, it becomes **systemic ableism**. This is at the root of structural barriers—buildings that are accessible according to building codes but not functionally accessible in a meaningful way, laws that allow marriage to affect funding for disability supports, and the fact that disability support programs leave citizens with disabilities living disproportionately below the poverty line.¹ In a church, systemic ableism can look like creating a separate “disability ministry” and assuming all members with disabilities should attend there, rather than giving people options to choose what is best for them; or insisting that the timeline of sacred rituals, like baptism or confirmation, remain rigid rather than allowing people to participate at an age and stage that is meaningful for them. Another example of systemic ableism is letting the credentials of clergy with disabilities lapse, rather than utilizing the vocational gifts that God has given them. Systemic ableism requires people with disabilities to adapt to typical worship practices. Parishioners with and without disabilities are better served by worship services and religious education classes designed for people with various learning styles where information is presented in multiple formats, including visually, auditorily, and tactilely or experientially.

Internalized Ableism

The categories of ableism described above together foster **internalized ableism**. Internalized ableism refers to thoughts and feelings of many people with disabilities who may feel like a burden or like they don’t deserve the same access as everyone else. They may have an intensified sense that as people, they are not enough. An example of internalized ableism would be if someone with a visual impairment feels

¹ Erika Ibrahim, “Disability Benefit Bill in Limbo As Parliament Breaks for Summer,” *Global News*, The Canadian Press, June 24, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8946209/disability-benefit-bill-canada-parliament/>.

that they could not preach because they would need to be prompted by someone else rather than reading their sermon notes for themselves, or if a youth group member who uses a wheelchair doesn't ask about coming along on a trip because they assume accommodations for accessibility would be too difficult. Internalized ableism makes it difficult for people with disabilities to recognize that they are made in the image of God and hold equal value with their non-disabled peers.

Many members of the disability community are also members of other marginalized communities. Thus, they must contend with multiple forms of discrimination. For example, if a disabled person is also a member of the BIPOC community (Black, Indigenous, people of colour), oppression is compounded by intersectionality. Various forms of ableism and intersecting forms of oppression may hinder people with disabilities and their families' involvement in, and sense of belonging to, a faith community.

How Can We Make Things More Accessible?

Having explored the various kinds of ableism, it is valuable to consider some of the more common ways that churches reflect ableist biases. Many churches exhibit ableism with respect to accessibility. Accessible entrances are often separated from the main entrance, "around the back." Autistic congregation members who vocalize are frequently asked to listen to the service from a separate room where their sounds won't disturb others. Online events may be portrayed as a last-resort, less desirable, alternative to on-site events, even though online access often presents fewer barriers for disabled people to engage. Both online and on-site options provide valuable opportunities for person-to-person connection. Sanctuaries may have accessible seating, but stages often only have stairs. Environmental features communicate a lot about who can lead and who is expected to follow.

Options that promote accessibility for people with diverse access needs should not be considered alternatives, but rather part of the normative experience of being in a diverse community. Rabbi Ruti Regan, a disabled disability advocate and rabbi, articulated this well at the 2022 Institute on Theology and Disability in her workshop entitled, "Not Your Ritual Object: Disabled Perspectives in Inclusive Liturgy, Ritual, and Spiritual Arts." She said, "It's all normative. Nothing is an alternative." Disability is one of the ways that God has created diversity in humanity. Approximately 15



percent² of the world's population lives with some form of disability. It is the largest minority group. Even if the proportion of people with disabilities in the general population were smaller, accessibility should be a priority since Jesus taught us to go out of our way to accommodate the one, rather than the 99 sheep. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for accessibility. The best way to ensure equal access and equal treatment is to simply ask and listen to what people communicate about their needs and gifts.

When churches start to think about disability, one of the first questions they ask themselves is “Are we accessible?” A better question is “*How* are we accessible?” or “In what ways are we accessible?” One church congregation was meeting in a movie theatre, and since theatres meet all legal criteria for accessibility, they assumed their building was accessible. But in speaking with disabled congregation members, they realized that the way they were using the building meant that not all spaces were accessible. When regathering after the long pandemic-induced shut down, they sought out a new building to rent and used the question “*How* is this space accessible?” to filter their options. By continually asking, “*How* can we become more accessible?” churches can make incremental changes to make sure everybody experiences belonging.

Disability Theology: What about Healing?

With respect to a theology of healing, ableism assumes that it's better to be nondisabled than disabled. Preaching the healing stories of the Gospels as *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* can also be harmful, as it suggests that expecting Jesus to cure people with disabilities is more holy than working toward universal accessibility. Ableism assumes that in eternity everybody will be “cured” according to standards of normalcy. A common experience of many people with disabilities when interacting with Christians is having a stranger approach and say something along the lines of, “The Lord told me I should pray for your healing, so can I pray for you?” In the awkwardness of the moment, many disabled people are unsure how to respond, but they might want to reply like this: “Hi, what did you say your name was?... It's nice to meet you. Certainly, you may. When you are finished praying for

² World Health Organization, “World Report on Disability 2011,” December 14, 2011, <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>.

me, I would like to pray for you....” If given the chance to reciprocate in prayer, they may want to say something like this: “Father, forgive my new friend. They do not know the harm they cause by not accepting me and my body as they are. Through our encounter, please change their ableist attitudes so that my bodily differences will no longer be a barrier for them to recognize that you are indeed active in my life, and you have blessed me with spiritual gifts and skills to share with them and others. Amen!”

A better way to honour the diverse gifts and abilities of people with and without disabilities would be to ask people what they would like prayer for and respond accordingly. They might ask for patience in pain; that they be able to fulfill their familial duties even while ill; or that they would find opportunities to bless others with their gifts. They may even ask for prayer for physical healing, but that should not be the default assumption.

Who Is Serving Whom?

Ableism with respect to serving in churches may be represented by the idea that all people with disabilities are overburdened and do not want to serve in any capacity. Ableism could also appear in the assumption that people with disabilities have nothing more than a “disability perspective” to contribute to their church, or that people with disabilities can only serve in particular roles such as greeting or praying. It is also ableist to expect all individuals who fulfill a particular role to fulfill it in a particular way. When talking about adapting roles within the church to suit the individual, Chantal Huinink explains, “I will serve you if you’ll let me, but I’m no longer going to pretend that I can serve you the same way someone else can. As far as I can tell, nothing in scripture instructs us to pretend to be someone or something we are not.” Perhaps, being wholly oneself, living faithfully into the life and body that we have been given, is an important part of pursuing holiness.

In his book *Disability and The Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*,³ Lamar Hardwick suggests that a community’s commitment to diversity is visible according to who is allowed to lead and who determines people’s positions within the community. He also says that how much we are willing to develop our accessible ministry demonstrates how much we trust God rather than ourselves for the provision of resources as well as the outcomes of the ministry.

³ Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2021).



Conclusion

Michelle Eastman, through her Instagram account @disabilitytheology, draws refreshing insights out of scripture by applying a disability lens. Moses' example of working with Aaron as his mouthpiece teaches us that "dependency on others is not a bad thing."⁴ Although the text tells us God restored all that Job had lost, it does not mention any healing of his boils, so this could mean that "God does not always treat illness as something that needs fixing."⁵ Jacob's limp, in the wake of wrestling with God, shows us a leader with a visible disability. King David inviting Mephibosheth to eat at his table in the royal court shows us that "people with disabilities should be included at all levels of society."⁶ Paul spread the gospel to most of the known world while simultaneously enduring a "thorn in the flesh," illustrating the fact that while disability may be a part of someone's identity, it does not define the whole person. Eastman concludes, "The stories of disabled biblical characters prove that disability is not a tragedy but part of the human experience that challenges the dominant norms of the first and second century and modern societies today."⁷

Just as disabled biblical characters can be instructive, disabled congregation members worshipping, serving, and living alongside members without disabilities is the key to creating anti-ableist communities of belonging for all.

4 @disabilitytheology, "Disability and the Bible," Instagram post, July 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfxYMCFJyne/>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 @disabilitytheology, "Disability and the Bible," Instagram post, July 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfxYMCFJyne/>.



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Reformation Messages to the Church: Voices of Disability in a Pandemic

By Gordon Cowans

Any calamity the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is certain to have long-lasting effects. The pandemic has had devastating health and economic consequences, with unprecedented disruptions to people's lives and the world economy. While high death rates have been experienced in many developed countries, the social and economic disruption might have been unevenly felt in its harshness in less developed, fragile economies. The unevenness of impact between nations has also been reflected within nations, with the most vulnerable populations disproportionately negatively affected. Both the virus and impact of some policy responses, such as lockdowns, have hit vulnerable populations hard. Economic problems and disruption of daily life coupled with fear and anxiety have damaged the mental health status of many and reduced overall wellbeing.

The world has faced a crisis with an end not yet clearly in sight, and its potential long term consequences are still uncertain.

As suggested by the words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to “never let a good crisis go to waste,” the world would do well to consider lessons to be learned. This experience—unprecedented in recent generations—affords opportunities for rethinking some global norms that proved unhelpful in a crisis faced by all humanity. There are lessons to be learned and lessons to be applied. The Reformed Church globally should consider itself well placed to heed the message for change from within and, by its own application of these lessons, exemplify for the world the transformation so needful in societies and organizations the world over.

By its self-definition, the Reformed Church is a movement toward full expression of the mandate of scripture. In seeking to be true to scripture, a church of the Reformation is both a church reformed and a church always being reformed. In each ensuing era, it faces the challenge of transformation. As followers of Christ, the church consists of disciples committed to making disciples of others. With Christ at its head, it must seek to identify all the “members of the body” to engage life experiences of all in the unity of Christ. No category of humanity can be excluded or

ignored if the mandate of its head is kept sacrosanct.

People with disabilities are by no means a homogeneous group. There is a range of impairments that affects persons in their lifetimes. Some impairments may be occasioned at birth, while others may develop at varying stages of life. Types of disability include physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments as well as intellectual impairments and mental illnesses. Some disabilities are more apparent than others.

Among the commonalities shared by people with disabilities is the experience of exclusion. In some societies, the lack of inclusion in aspects of life accepted as norms for the general populace is commonplace. However, the right to full inclusion in all aspects of life for people with disabilities is enshrined in the 2007 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Signed and ratified by 177 nations across the globe, this convention has provided the basis for many nation states to draft legislation from the Convention's goals and apply them as laws in their jurisdictions. Under the Convention, parties agree to hold each other to account through the established monitoring mechanisms that have been effectively implemented within the UN structures.

By themselves, laws do not necessarily change attitudes. Attitudinal change is effected when influencers in society are motivated to recognize and affect issues on which to focus action. The church's role as influencer is enshrined in scripture. In Jesus' own words to those who dare to follow, "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.... Let your light so shine before others" (Matthew 5:13-16).

In each succeeding era, a church reformed renews its commitment to shine and to produce flavor. Now it needs to shine in a world full of neglect and exclusion.

The church's vocation is to be the sign and servant of God's design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the lordship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The church will only be able to live this vocation when it learns to appreciate the presence of and the gifts from all its members.

At its best, the church can become the exemplar it was meant to be to the world.

Very often, people with disabilities consider themselves among the unheard voices



in the church. Indeed, studies show that many people with disabilities withdraw from churches, citing feelings of rejection and a perceived unwillingness within churches to respond to their needs. For them, a reformed church would be one in which the particular needs of a constituency estimated to be some 15 percent of the global population is given ample consideration.

The Reformed Church in its life and witness in the world speaks of its vision of sharing the gospel of God's kingdom for the transformation of lives and communities. People with disabilities must be affirmed and encouraged to find their place in that mission. The onslaught of the global pandemic of COVID-19 magnified the challenges with which the most vulnerable populations are fed in the world. Disabilities often feature among the most vulnerable populations. Poor populations in which basic material needs are unmet—who survive in a constant condition of food insecurity and substandard housing—find that those with disabilities are doubly challenged. A crisis such as the pandemic magnifies as well as exacerbates these challenges. Access to appropriate health-care facilities is often more challenging for people with disabilities, a stark reality brought into sharp relief in the throes of such a global health emergency.

If the able-bodied world was as stunned as it was by the unprecedented scale of a modern pandemic, one can imagine how unnerving its onslaught would have been to a person with disability.

Lockdown rules and physical distancing come with increased potential for isolation and anxiety for people with disabilities. Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons who communicate through facial and speech reading have encountered additional obstacles where wearing of face masks have been required. Many people with disabilities and their advocacy agencies have criticised the inaccessibility of important security communiques where policy makers have failed to consider communication with persons with a range of disabilities. Lengthy periods of confinement in homes increased the risk of physical and sexual abuse to which children and adults with disabilities are disproportionately exposed. School closures have led to the exclusion of many young people with disabilities, since educational materials are not always in accessible formats and access to assistive technology, including Internet, not always secured. Consequently, the learning losses sustained during lockdown by students with intellectual disabilities were likely greater than for other children, who could quickly adapt to remote learning modalities.

Yet in these very circumstances, there have been so many examples of people with disabilities, and sometimes their caregivers, devising unique responses to meet the unique challenges. People with disabilities have taken advantage of the general lowering of communication barriers through increased utilization of the Internet. Some have wisely extended their education and training in new areas of interest through remote learning opportunities. Some disability advocates have grasped the opportunity of a global health emergency to increase sensitivity to the need for disability inclusive public health responses and emergency preparedness.

The able-bodied world has much that it may learn from people who live constantly with restrictions that often force them to find innovative coping strategies and to demonstrate remarkable resilience.

Attitudes enshrined in an ableist world with the mantra of “survival of the fittest” create a context of unrelenting competitiveness and restrict the room for collaboration and cooperation. Those with limitations are squeezed and often relegated to last place.

Overwhelmed health systems disproportionately affected people with disabilities. Many health systems across the world faced chronic shortages in facilities and personnel. People with disabilities faced not only the challenge of accessing some health care opportunities for COVID care, but cancellations of many regularly scheduled health care interventions. Children with disabilities may have been particularly disadvantaged where regular health care interventions are related to their condition of developmental delay.

And even part of the “solution” presented special problems for some people with disabilities. While the benefits of physical distancing were well communicated, this response created particular challenges for those needing consistently present caregivers, including some with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays.

In churches the world over, information technology assumed a new focus with the advancing waves of COVID-19. Interestingly, many of the opportunities uncovered by the churches were not new technologies, but rather existing technological developments previously underutilized. Many of these devices and modalities offer people with varied disabilities improved access to information and opportunities for inclusion in worship. Their underutilization reflects the fact that often the needs of people with disabilities and the provision of suitable accommodations eluded



churches in their design and implementation of ministry. Additionally, even in the context of an urgent response in the face of a pandemic, many people with disabilities may have been overlooked in the provision of access and the necessary training to utilize devices.

In many parts of the world, the lessons of chronic exclusion of some were forcefully taught in the crisis of a pandemic. Access to vaccines was largely restricted to the most economically able, and large swaths of the world's population lagged behind in vaccination rates. Increased sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities could have motivated a more equitable global policy, because a comprehensive success requires more than the knowledge that vaccines are safe and effective among those with access. Since the availability and access to all determines global efficacy, the illness of one threatens the health of all.

At the height of the pandemic, the world came to realize that some employees can work effectively from home. Remote work became commonplace in many societies. Many disability advocates have opined for years that opportunities for employment could be increased to talented, capable people with disabilities if employers were willing to reduce some of the disabling conditions found in some work spaces and the related limitations occasioned by some commutes. Where the voices of people with disabilities remained largely unheard, the roar of the pandemic prevailed.

In an article “foreshadowing a new normal,” authors Tiago Jesus, Michael Landry, and Karen Jacobs state: “Challenges and opportunities arising from the pandemic need to be identified and addressed in a systemic and timely manner. If successful, we can move towards a transformed society with improved capacity and capabilities for increasing the health, employment, equity, and quality of life for persons with disabilities, broadly a more disability-inclusive society.... To achieve anything less would be a lost opportunity to ‘build back better.’”¹

A church transformed by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is a church willing to reform its perceptions, attitudes, actions, and habits to focus more intentionally on the lessons which the presence of people with disabilities in the world could teach.

A church that is inattentive to those with disabilities is a church yet to become the

¹ Tiago Jesus, Michael Landry, Karen Jacobs, “A ‘New Normal’ Following COVID-19 and the Economic Crisis: Using Systems Thinking to Identify Challenges and Opportunities in Disability, Telework, and Rehabilitation,” *Work*, vol. 67, no. 1 (October 2020), DOI 10.3233/WOR-203250.

whole body of Christ. The Reformed Church is best positioned to be at the vanguard of societal change that would usher in a more just, disability-inclusive society.

Our application of lessons learned would be a gift toward a more wholesome world. The truly reformed church is the church committed to being ever reforming until “the whole body [is] joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped” (Ephesians 4:16).

As it engages continuous reformation, it better becomes the salt of the earth and the light in the world, especially in times of descending shadows of darkness. In an increasingly ableist world, the church’s gospel message must prioritize the most vulnerable. Among the most vulnerable in all societies are those people with disabilities, many of whom are relegated to the outskirts of humanity. People with disabilities are persons first. In each, humanity is to be affirmed. The Church, in seeking to transform society’s attitudes, must affirm all humanity in its recognition that all are made in the image of God.

The Church’s pilgrimage towards becoming is a journey upon which it is set by the “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). It is a journey toward attaining “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The body of Christ is revealed in its fullness in our experience when we recognize that each “joint” has something of value to supply. People with disabilities can offer much more to the fullness of life to a world more willing to recognize, receive, and respond. If it took a pandemic crisis to teach this lesson, may it not be lost on us.



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When Community Gets in the Way: Reflections on Autism and Worship

By Armand Léon van Ommen

Introduction

When COVID-19 hit, it made physical gathering for worship impossible, raising questions about ways in which worship was still possible, not least with regard to the celebration of the sacraments. Many members of the body who, pre-COVID, did not have access to worship because of chronic illness, disabilities, or otherwise, enjoyed the provision of online worship. Members who had taken access to physical worship and the Eucharist for granted felt the loss of such access.

This article discusses some basic assumptions and questions about worship and the sacraments. It then discusses the problem of worship services that exclude people because of the way the services are conducted, drawing on research on autism and liturgy. When “going back to normal”—post-COVID-19—means that some people will be excluded again from worship, as they were before the pandemic, it raises serious and critical questions for the church.

The COVID pandemic has radically changed the way we have worshipped over the past two years. The prohibition to gather physically immediately led to very practical questions for worshipping communities and their leaders. How can we worship together? If we need to use online platforms, do we have the expertise to do so? Do we have the means to organise online worship? How can we celebrate the sacraments? Can we celebrate them at all?

Of course, these practical questions led to theological questions, not least around the possibility of celebrating the Eucharist online. Or would it be better to bring it to people in their homes? But even that was not possible during certain times. Theological concerns and practical and pastoral considerations led to all kinds of practices. Some churches chose not to celebrate the Eucharist altogether—sometimes backed up by theological notions of fasting or being in exile. In other churches, priests or ministers went around bringing wafers, which were to be used at the time of next Sunday’s Eucharist, rather than the piece of bread one has at home for breakfast. Yet other churches and ministers were happy to consecrate anything—including M&M’s, toast, crackers, bread, and substitutes for wine such as apple juice or water. COVID uprooted our normal practices, which forced us to rethink these practices. Pastoral, theological, and ritual perspectives and practical considerations all had to be thought through anew.

At the time of writing this article, many countries around the world have lifted most, if not all, COVID restrictions. That is certainly the case where I live, in Scotland. There is the sense of “going back to normal,” of continuing where we left in 2020. However, we should pause and consider what we have learned from being uprooted and rethinking our practices. In this article, I want to focus on the accessibility of worship. (The term “accessibility” has its own problems, which I will come back to.) What I want to think through here is one particular change that happened over the past two years: Many believers who, pre-COVID, did not have access to worship because of chronic illness, disabilities, or otherwise, enjoyed the provision of online worship; yet believers who had taken access to physical worship and the Eucharist for granted felt the loss of such access. If we just go “back to normal,” the roles will be turned again, excluding some people from worship, and others taking for granted physical gathering. The latter could cause critical questions that COVID necessitated—and that potentially helped believers to become more faithful followers of Christ—to be ignored.

Assumption and Basic Questions

In the Christian tradition, worship takes place in community and has a strong corporate or communal element. Many of the images in Scripture for our relationship with God, and images of the church, seem to presume community.

The Eucharistic celebration assumes that we gather in a physical space together, where we physically engage with the whole liturgical ritual and physically take bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. Pre-COVID, most churchgoers did not think twice about this, but it is here where important questions arise. To be sure, online worship existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, and perhaps some online communities celebrated the Eucharist somehow.¹ For most Christians, however, the default was to gather physically and celebrate together, taking bread and wine together, in that physical space. Obviously, COVID has led to questions about this assumption, asking whether it would be possible to have other forms of Eucharistic celebration. Is the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist tied to the physical gathering of the believers? Is a consecration through cyberspace possible? These have significant implications for one’s Eucharistic practices.

1 One of the first substantial studies on online worship is Teresa Berger’s *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).



Over the past two years I have heard different answers to the question whether online communities are real communities. On the one end of the spectrum of answers was a clear “no.” Online worship is individualistic, it doesn’t really establish a community, it’s very limited in what it does in terms of community. On the other hand was a clear “yes.” Of course, online communities are communities.

Wherever communities find themselves on the spectrum, it is safe to say that online communities are different from physical communities, and even if it is the same community that gathers, gathering physically is different from gathering online. For example, much of our communication happens nonverbally; when gathering online usually we get to see only one’s face and shoulders, which means we miss out on much of the nonverbal communication.

God is present in Christ and through the Holy Spirit in worship. Most Christian traditions also affirm that Christ is present in a specific way through the sacraments. Christ is truly present in the Eucharistic celebration (and worship more broadly), through the Eucharistic elements and in the gathered community. The sacraments are important practices for the life of the church and they should be available to all the faithful. That last point brings us to the final part of this article: the accessibility of the Eucharist and worship.

The Accessibility of the Eucharist and Worship

It is often said that COVID has uprooted our usual practices of worship. There is something disturbing in that statement. The uprooting of our Eucharistic and worship practices brought to light that some members of the body of Christ—some living stones of the temple of the Spirit, members of the royal priestly class (1 Peter 2)—had been excluded all the time. Why did COVID need to happen for the church to see that these members did not have access to worship and the sacraments—despite their importance, as we’ve just seen—and were never able to participate in the way most of us were and are? This is a very disturbing question, because it shows that we may not have been aware enough of these members of the body. When this happened in the Corinthian church, Paul was indignant (1 Corinthians 11):

²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don’t you have

homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

In Corinth were different factions in the community and apparently considerable conflicts.² Moreover, the wealthy, those in the higher class in society, were keen to uphold the status they had in society in the Christian community as well. The result was that when the community gathered, the wealthy grouped together, sitting in the posh room, whereas those of lower classes were in the lesser rooms, being served last; sometimes there wouldn't be food left at all. Paul says in no uncertain terms that by humiliating those who are less well off the wealthy despise the church of God. Paul continues with words we know well, but it is worth reading them here in context:

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Paul's instruction for the Eucharist is all about community. The way the community celebrates its Communion meal, the Eucharist, says a lot about that community. In Corinth, some members did not understand that group distinctions according to societal norms are superseded by the norms of God's reign: In Christ, there is no slave or free, Greek or Jew, male or female; all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). It's not too difficult to discern what the norms of God's reign are. Whenever we eat and drink the sacramental bread and wine, we do this in remembrance of Christ. This does not refer only to Christ's death, but to his whole life.³ When looking at Jesus' life, we see that he habitually looked out for those who did not belong in

² For two excellent treatments of 1 Corinthians in relation to autism in the church, see Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 201–24; Grant Macaskill, "Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 15–41, doi:10.1080/23312521.2017.1373613.

³ Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn: Pueblo Books, 2000), 178–84; Paul Bradshaw, "Anamnesis in Modern Eucharistic Debate," in *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 73–84.



the eyes of society, who had lost connection with their community and who were excluded from worship. The healing narratives in the gospels are not (just) about curing diseases, but about restoring people to their communities and enabling them to participate in worship again; their health conditions had excluded them, often making them impure according to the ritual understandings of the day.⁴ We may not think of chronically ill people or people with disabilities as impure, but we apply our own versions of normalcy and stigma.⁵ This results often in exclusion from the community and from worship because communities and worship services can be very inaccessible.

The following examples from my research with autistic people make the point.⁶ Every person on the autistic spectrum is different, of course, but a few things come up regularly in my interviews and other conversations with autistic people about their experience of worship. Worship services are highly sensory environments. When music is played well, it can be a joy and a blessing (and not only to autistic people). However, when musical instruments are out of tune, this can be cringing. Likewise, the perfume of the person sitting in front of you may be overwhelming. The music may be too loud, the lights too bright, and incense unbearable. When it comes to that moment of sharing the peace, things can get very tricky. People want to shake hands, while some autistic people can't stand touch. Or you are expected to look people in the eyes, another difficult and even painful thing to do. Then there is the question of how many people you should share the peace with. If your church does not have clear instructions on what to say, that becomes another question. The social time after the service creates its own problems, navigating a social space that is pretty unpredictable. Some autistic people struggle with starting conversations or find it generally difficult to talk to people (which is not to say that autistic people do not like community or do not long for friendships!).

4 Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 61–99, esp. 83–86; see also Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019); John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

5 Armand Léon van Ommen, "Intercession and the Taboo and Stigma on Mental Health and Doctrinal Anomalies: Pastoral and Theological Implications of Public Prayer Practices," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 2 (2019): 206–23, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2018-0002.

6 See further Armand Léon Van Ommen, "Re-Imagining Church through Autism: A Singaporean Case Study," *Practical Theology*, forthcoming; Armand Léon Van Ommen and Katie Unwin, "The Sensory Aspects of Worship and Liturgy as Experienced by Autistic People," *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy*, forthcoming; Armand Léon Van Ommen and Topher Endress, "Reframing Liturgical Theology through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experiences of Worship," *Studia Liturgica*, forthcoming.

I am not suggesting simple solutions, although sometimes the solutions can be simple, but we need to hear Paul’s warning (1 Corinthians 11):

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. ³⁴ Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

It is not up to me to say that the exclusion of people from our worship is the reason we have illnesses and deaths in our communities. I do know that by excluding members of the body of Christ from our communities and Eucharistic services, we are diminished as communities. Making worship services accessible actually is not enough. In fact, the word “accessible” is misleading, as it presupposes that “they” should be included in the way “we” worship. (That is, people who are excluded from worship—because of unaltered dominant practices that make participation difficult or even impossible—should be accommodated by those upholding the dominant practices and who take gathering in person for granted.) This creates distinctions along the lines of what is “normal” in our culture, which results in the problems that Paul already encountered in the Corinthian church.⁷ Moreover, faith communities have not reached fullness of life in Christ when they are not valuing those members who are excluded. In the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle says that all members are important—in fact, those members of the body that we may think of as less important, or “weaker,” are indispensable. That changes the conversation. It means that as a community we are missing something, that we are not fully alive when we are excluding certain people. Perhaps that is what judgment looks like.

⁷ For a discussion of “normalcy” in the context of disability and autism, see Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).



Conclusion

When we consider all these points, one thing should be clear: Excluding people from worship and from the Eucharist is incredibly problematic. Positively, if Christ is truly present in our communities and through the Eucharist, we want to do everything we can to make sure that all members of the body of Christ can partake in Christ's presence and in the Eucharist. To be clear, that is not to say that God cannot meet people anywhere they are, whether within or outside the boundaries of the Christian community or of the sacraments. However, if we affirm that Christ is present in the Eucharist and the community, we want to enable all our members in the body to meet Christ and be met by Christ in that way. However, for some it remains impossible, for whatever reason, to join the physical community. If these people cannot join the physical gathering but can join online gatherings, then the church at large has the responsibility to think twice before abandoning online forms of worship; we need to be critical of simplistically going "back to normal" if the normal means excluding people. Communities have much to gain from valuing all members, especially those on the margins of society and our own communities—these members are "indispensable." As members of Christ's body, the whole community meets Christ through these members. In God's economy, weak becomes strong, foolish becomes wise, the first will be last and the last will be first, death on the cross turns into resurrected life. We don't need to understand this; we simply need to be faithful and "do this in remembrance of him."



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Disability Ministry in Singapore: Current State and Future Prospects

Jesselyn Ng, Janice Ho, and Wen-Pin Leow

Introduction

In recent years, accelerated by the work of organisations like Joni and Friends and the Lausanne Movement’s Disability Concerns Network, disability ministry has experienced robust growth worldwide.¹ Singapore, a highly developed island state deeply connected with the global economy, has experienced similar growth in this area among its churches. In this short article, we provide an overview of the Church in Singapore. We then discuss the current state of disability ministry in Singapore, both at the local congregational level and the broader level of the Protestant Church in Singapore as a whole. We conclude by discussing the future prospects of ministry among persons with disabilities in Singapore.

Introduction to Singapore and the Church in Singapore

Singapore is a small city state in Southeast Asia, situated on an island at the southernmost tip of the Malay Peninsula. Gaining independence in 1965, it underwent a rapid process of industrialisation and modernisation, and has become a significant aviation, maritime, and financial centre. According to its 2020 Census of Population, Singapore had a resident population of 4.04 million people, complemented by a sizable non-resident population of 1.65 million.² It has a multi-ethnic population that is majority Chinese (75.9%), with Malays (15.0%) and Indians (7.5%) forming the largest minority groups³; English is the lingua franca. This ethnic diversity is paralleled by a plurality of religions comprising mainly Buddhism (31.1%), Christianity (18.9%), Islam (15.6%), Taoism (8.8%), and Hinduism (5.0%).⁴

While the history of Christianity in Singapore can be traced back to as early as the seventh century CE, it was in the nineteenth century that Protestant missions were undertaken on the island in a substantive fashion by Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and other denominations.⁵ During this period the Malay Chapel was

1 See, for example, David C. Deuel and Nathan G. John, eds., *Disability in Mission: The Church’s Hidden Treasure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019).

2 Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2021), 3.

3 *Ibid.*, 7.

4 *Ibid.*, 32. These numbers only include those who are aged 15 and over.

5 Daniel S.H. Ahn, “Changing Profiles: The Historical Development of Christianity in Singapore,” in *Religious Transformation in Modern Asia: A Transnational Movement*, David W. Kim, ed., Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions 148 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 253.



established in Prinsep Street in 1843. Renamed in 1955 as Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, it is the oldest Presbyterian Church in Singapore.⁶ Today, there are about 400,000 Protestants⁷ worshipping in about 500 Protestant churches in Singapore.⁸

Disability Ministry in Singapore

Disability is a relatively common phenomenon in Singapore. Some 3.4% of the resident population between the ages of 18 and 49 years of age has a disability, with the prevalence climbing substantially to 13.3% of the resident population who are 50 years old and above.⁹ Singapore's population is aging,¹⁰ which is a key driver of the national rise in the prevalence of disability.¹¹

Historically, the Church in Singapore has ministered to persons with disabilities through the provision of social services. Agencies such as the Methodist Welfare Services, St. Andrew's Mission Hospital, Singapore Anglican Community Services, and TOUCH Community Services have made a profound impact on the national disability landscape. However, compared to social services, there has been relatively less emphasis on *congregationally based* disability ministry in the church, i.e., inclusion that takes place within Christian congregations. Thus, of the approximately 500 Protestant churches in Singapore, there are only about 25 churches (5% of the total) with one or more disability ministries that operate at least weekly. (The term "disability ministry" refers to any ministry that takes conscious steps to engage with or include persons with disabilities.¹²)

6 Gaik-Bee Chia, "An Overview of the History of PSPC," in *Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church* (Singapore: Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, 2013), 5.

7 Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census 2020*, 199.

8 Singapore Centre for Global Missions, *An Antioch of Asia: The National Missions Study 2019 Report* (Singapore: Singapore Centre for Global Missions, 2019), 1.

9 Timothy Teoh, "The Social Landscape for Disability in Singapore," in *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches*, Wen Pin Leow, ed. (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021), 28.

10 The median age of the resident population rose from 37.4 years in 2010 to 41.5 years in 2020, and the resident old-age dependency ratio increased from 13.5 to 23.4 in the same time period (the dependency ratio is defined as the "residents aged 65 years and over per 100 residents aged 20–64 years). See Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Census 2020*, 3.

11 Ministry of Social and Family Development, "Enabling Masterplan 3," 2016, 16–17, <http://msf.gov.sg>.

12 Such ministries could be segregated (a Sunday school class solely for persons with autism) or integrated (a service which makes adaptations to welcome persons with autism alongside other neurotypical individuals).

Of these churches with disability ministries, what might be said about them?¹³

First of all, most of these ministries (76%) come from churches which are Anglican (5 churches; 20%), Methodist (6 churches; 24%), or Independent Pentecostal (8 churches; 32%). Some of this skew is certainly simply due to demographic realities, as these denominations are relatively more populous in Singapore. However, significantly less represented in proportion to their populations are the Presbyterians (one church), Bible-Presbyterians (one church), and non-Pentecostal Independent churches (two churches). Sizable denominations without disability ministries are the Evangelical Free Church of Singapore, the Lutheran Church in Singapore, and the Salvation Army Singapore.

In terms of ministry focus, about half of the churches have a segregated Sunday school-type ministry where children with disabilities are taught separately in a specialised classroom setting. Some of these ministries also include an adapted worship session where persons with disabilities worship together (apart from the main congregation) with the facilitation of persons without disabilities. Only three churches have inclusive Sunday schools where children of all abilities learn together. For those with sensory impairments, there are five churches with ministries for the deaf/hearing impaired, while there are two churches with ministries for the visually impaired.

Ministries that are less common include: support groups for parents of children with disabilities (two churches), dementia support (one church), and sports-based ministry to persons with disabilities (one church). Notably, to the authors' knowledge, there are presently no churches in Singapore that specifically aim¹⁴ to provide respite care ministries to the families of persons with disabilities, suggesting a lack of focus on caregivers and the larger ecosystem surrounding persons with disabilities. Another concern is that many ministries are targeted at children and youths, with fewer ministries serving adults (especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities). This results in a "drop-off" effect, where persons with disabilities tend to disappear from their local churches upon reaching adulthood.

13 The figures in this paragraph were obtained through a thorough Internet search and through a three-year process of speaking to stakeholders in the sector to identify all disability ministries in Singapore. Nonetheless, there is the possibility that smaller or less well-known ministries might have been missed. All effort has been expended to ensure the figures provided are correct. This article's authors seek forgiveness if any church has been inadvertently left out.

14 Some ministries do provide respite care incidentally (i.e., by providing activities for persons with special needs, they allow respite for caregivers).



Enabling Disability Ministry: The Koinonia Inclusion Network¹⁵

In 2019, in response to the growing need for disability ministries in Singapore, the Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN) was formed to function as a sector enablement organisation. KIN's vision is to nurture "Enabled Christian Communities" by helping churches include and disciple persons with disabilities. As a literal para-church¹⁶ organisation, KIN works *alongside* churches to help them establish and develop their ministries. Such work takes a number of forms. For example, in response to the frequent laments from disability ministry leaders that organising training for disability ministry volunteers was challenging due to the varied skill sets needed, KIN established the Certificate of Christian Disability Ministry (CCDM) in 2020. The CCDM, a six-day program, provides the fundamental training (including both disability theology and practical skills) required for lay members to engage in disability ministry effectively.

In addition to such regular training platforms, KIN also provides customised training and consultancy to churches to help them establish and/or develop disability ministries. For example, in 2021, KIN worked with a local Anglican church that had decided to start a disability ministry by providing customised workshops to help the disability ministry team identify its focus and core values, as well as to help the ministry team members clarify any theological concerns regarding disability. Thereafter, KIN helped the church to operationalise a congregation-wide survey to better understand the needs of the congregation vis-à-vis disability inclusion. This led to the official launch of the ministry in late 2021, and KIN has continued to provide training and support for this ministry into 2022.

In addition, to further support disability ministries, KIN established the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia (CDMA), its research and publication arm to develop ministry resources that would be appropriately contextualised for an Asian context. Despite only being launched in 2021, the CDMA has already published two books (a one-stop handbook on disability ministry¹⁷ and a Bible study on inclusion for

15 The content in this section is adapted from Wen-Pin Leow and Ching-Hui Ong, "Towards an Asian Disability Missiology: Reflections from Singapore," *Journal of Asian Missions* 22, no. 1 and 2 (2021), 5-22.

16 Common glosses for the Greek word "para" include "beside" or "with."

17 Wen-Pin Leow, ed., *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021).

church small groups),¹⁸ and a series of occasional papers. All these resources have been authored by Asian authors for Asian contexts, and have been well received by church leaders.

Future Prospects

Given the brief survey above, what are some next steps that the Church in Singapore might take to further its efforts to promote disability ministry, and even more, to advocate for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in churches? There are three areas that stand out: First, as previously observed, disability ministries in Singapore mostly adopt similar ministry models (e.g., segregated Sunday schools). It would be helpful to explore other forms of ministry to reach out more broadly to persons with disabilities. For example, one church started Singapore's first sports-based Christian outreach ministry to persons with disabilities in 2021. The response to the ministry was overwhelming, including one participant who said, "As someone who has autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and auditory processing disorder, I was very touched and encouraged by the way the session was carried out, from keeping in mind the struggles of the children to making changes to the program to fit their needs. It was heart-warming to see this happening, especially as someone who was misunderstood in my church and in school."¹⁹ This ministry has attracted pre-believers with disability and their families, who subsequently joined the church because of the friendships forged over sports.

Second, one glaring lacuna is the lack of disability ministry for persons with dementia. As earlier mentioned, Singapore has an aging population which will be accompanied by a rise in dementia. In fact, in Singapore, one study estimates that one in ten people aged 60 and above has dementia.²⁰ This is a looming social issue that the Church in Singapore must address. However, to the authors' knowledge, only one Protestant church in Singapore currently has a ministry catering to persons with dementia. Like intellectual and developmental disabilities, dementia is complex and therefore challenging to address.²¹ It is therefore imperative that the

¹⁸ Wen-Pin Leow and Joanna Ong, *Enabling Communities: Bible Studies on Including People with Disabilities in Church* (Facilitator's Guide), Disability Ministry in Asia 2 (Singapore: Graceworks, 2021).

¹⁹ Personal communication with the participant.

²⁰ The Well-Being of Singapore Elderly (WISE) study was first conducted in 2013 by the Institute of Mental Health Singapore, and found a prevalence of 10% for dementia among adults aged 60 and above. A second WISE study is currently being conducted.

²¹ See, for example, the discussion in Kenneth L. Carder, *Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia through a Spiritual Lens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019).



Church in Singapore engages with it swiftly and holistically.²²

Third, another area of growth would be partnerships between different ministries. Disability ministry is a fertile launching pad for Christian unity and partnership. This article's authors observe that, in the course of their own advocacy work, churches from across various denominations often quickly agree on the needs to include and disciple persons with disabilities. While sector-wide programs like the Certificate of Christian Disability Ministry (CCDM) allow leaders and volunteers from different churches to interact with each other, more intentionality is needed to encourage churches to go beyond their local church or their denomination to partner with other like-minded churches to better serve persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

While only five percent of churches in Singapore have a disability ministry of any kind, it is nonetheless a good beginning. Such ministries, often supported by passionate staff members, lay leaders, and volunteers, make a substantial difference in the life of persons with disabilities. In turn, by being part of their local congregations, persons with disabilities often help the rest of the congregation come to a better understanding of one's essential humanity as well as every person's need for the gospel of Jesus Christ. People with disabilities do not disable the church. They are essential members of the body of Christ. Ironically, it is when churches exclude that these key body parts are lost, and the body of Christ is disabled.

²² KIN has already begun working with a series of like-minded Christian partners to develop ministry solutions in this area.



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Creating Space for Vocation: An Epistle to the Postmodern Church

By Daniel Aaron Harris

I'm 41 years old, live with cerebral palsy, and am completing a Doctor of Ministry degree in disability and vocation. I believe that I'm called by God to bring the Gospel to the disability community and beyond. I believe that by the power of the Gospel, along with the grace we have from our Lord Jesus Christ, we can begin to see a more inclusive community with the church as a whole.

This is my passion and desire now. Growing up charismatic, I was taught that to pursue a vocation I had to be healed. Being “normal,” I feel, is a narrative that my brothers and sisters with disabilities know well. By observation, some are not only held back from the vocation God has given us, but many of us also feel unwelcome in our own congregations, which brings me to my concern.

Galatians and Ephesians will help us better understand how we approach disability in our churches today. When Paul wrote to the city of Galatia, we understand that there were Jewish Christians who were trying to make their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ be circumcised. Although the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 said they did not have to be circumcised, there was still this thought going around that to be Christian you had to follow the Jewish law. So, Jews were trying to get Gentiles to follow not only Christ but Jewish culture. By the time of writing the letter of Galatians, Paul reminds the Christians that there is no need for this, that we are all members of the same body.

I think many people with disabilities struggle within the church because—although we have our freedom in Christ—our churches vastly reflect able-body culture; but if we are all in Christ Jesus as Paul points out, then we are a part of a whole new culture, a whole new body, where Christ is the head. We will also look at Ephesians through Colossians, as these letters are known as circular letters, written to different groups and meant to be passed along to the other churches, including the church at Galatia. It's my hope that this article will be shared with your brothers and sisters in Christ to help the disability community.

In Galatians 1:1-2, Paul points out that he was given the Gospel not by people but through the Spirit, meaning that nobody ordains but God. Jewish Christians were demanding a physical mark, but for Paul it is not about the physical but the spiritual.

In Jewish law, circumcision was an Old Testament sign of baptism. We can see God using circumcision to set his people apart from the world. But the New Testament does away with this. In Romans, Gentiles were grafted into the body of Christ. “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17).

Circumcision was an act of faith for believing in God, whereas now all we must do is believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to fulfill the requirements of the law, and now we are free to come fully before the Father as co-heirs with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says that we are now new creations in Christ Jesus: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Everything has been made new.

Jesus broke down the wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16). There is no more circumcision, and we are all free in Christ. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). I believe that some of my brothers and sisters in Christ with disabilities feel that this is the story confronting us. For people living in the United States, we have been told through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that we all should have access everywhere, but my concern is that the church is not looking at our freedom in Christ and is holding to traditional ableist norms.

Our friends within the disability community have further observed that ableist norms within the church cripple the church and can infect Christians with disabilities with an imposter syndrome, making them incapable of loving who they are because they no longer believe God loves them. When the church fosters ableism, it becomes a mindset of eternal ableism.

Sometimes you can see ableism in direct ways as far as not having a ramp or a handicapped bathroom, but in other ways you can see it indirectly. For example, people who are limited in their speech are not allowed to preach the Gospel from the pulpit. People with differently shaped minds are dismissed as someone who could never run a ministry.



Anna Katherine Shurley uses a person-centered approach as a way of helping people with disabilities find their vocations. A person-centered approach includes all people regardless of their abilities. Through collaborating, empowering, calling, playing, and witnessing, she argues that we can discover each of our own vocations and the gifts that we bring to the body. Shurley describes person-centered as “an exercise in collaborative dreaming, a true dialogue between one imagination and another.”¹

She claims that vocation “includes attention to every aspect of a care receiver’s life, since God has carefully crafted all aspects of every life for God’s glory.”² But Kathleen A. Cahalan explains in *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* that vocation is not something we do outwardly but inwardly. A huge part of our vocation is discipleship. The way we worship and the way we do mission is all part of our vocation.

Cahalan gives us an example of vocation in the way we worship. We, as humans, have been created to worship, and that’s what makes us the embodiment of Jesus Christ. As disciples we are to become worshipers. “To be a follower and worshiper, a disciple must also become a witness, one who gives voice to the claim that Christ has made on their life.”³

How are we giving our brothers and sisters with disabilities a chance to pursue their own vocation? Shurley argues that the person-centered approach is hard because you must get to know one another’s hopes and dreams in order to make space for reimagining vocation.

Some Christians think that people with intellectual disabilities are not going to heaven; or, on the other hand, they are going to heaven regardless of what they believe. But what does the Bible tell us? It tells us that through the Holy Spirit we are a part of the body of Christ. Paul says that the Holy Spirit is what seals our salvation. It is through grace that we become Christians, with Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith. We have forgotten that it is because of Christ and Christ alone that we are a part of his body. Our bodily impairments do not have anything to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ. In *A Healing Homiletic*, Kathy Black argues

1 Shurley, Anna Katherine. *Pastoral Care and Intellectual Disability: A Person-Centered Approach*. (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 11.

2 Ibid, 15.

3 Cahalan, Kathleen. *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 9.

that the way we can be partakers in the work of Christ is by removing the barriers in our congregation to allow all our brothers and sisters to experience freedom to live out their vocations in Christ. Black explains that interdependence is the starting point of healing. “The power of the resurrection image is that God can transform our lives through the healing touch of an interdependent community of faith. When cure is not currently possible, healing can happen through the supportive, accepting community; through our own ability (undergirded by God’s strength and the support of others) to make it through the hard times; and through the different, new possibilities that are open for us.”⁴

I would like to offer a new way of examining vocation and discipleship:

1. We are all created by God, but not only by God. We are created to go out and create.
2. We are connected to God and to one another just as Paul writes about the body in 1 Corinthians 12:21-26.
3. We are all called by God (Ephesians 1:1a, 11-12).
4. We are all commissioned (Matthew 28:18-20).

Disability fosters community. Disability forces engagement with temporarily able-bodied people, but these relationships must be collaborative. The able-bodied person must receive as well as offer. A person buying a cup of coffee needs the barista and vice versa. Your vocation exists in interdependence with the people around you. Your vocation is what keeps you up at night. A profession is about climbing a ladder, making money.

Regardless of ability, we are all called to cultivate the relationships around us. We need to dream together and listen to one another’s stories. We need to stir up one another to love and good works, encouraging one another, “because the day draws near”(Hebrews 10:24-25).

To walk with people and imagine their vocation and draw out the gifts God has for them to give to others, we must share in one another’s walk. Paul reminds us that we are one body. So, we are all participating in what each other is doing (Ephesians 4:4-6).

⁴ Black, Kathy. *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*. (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), Kindle Edition location 559.



Activate one another by building up and supporting one another by active service. Encourage each other to pursue the vocation that is in our life. It is not enough to dream together and walk together. We need to encourage the people around us to go and do the work that God has called them to do.

When we activate one another, we are empowering one another to live out the vocation that God has given us. In turn we are fulfilling the great commission. We are the ones who are sent out because we ourselves remember that someone else sent us out. If we don't allow ourselves to send our brothers and sisters who are disabled, then we neglect the first part of the great commission. Disciples are meant to be sent out, not just taught.

My prayer is that in learning together, we then pursue our vocations together. Jesus Christ has commissioned us all to preach the Gospel, sent as ambassadors of the kingdom of God by none other than Christ himself. But instead of looking at this as an individual movement, we can begin to see ourselves as one body. My hope is that as we function as one body, we will begin to have one heart, one mind, and one spirit. And may the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and was raised three days later, bless us and keep us and make us realize our one vocation."



Daniel Aaron Harris, a native of Memphis, Tennessee, identifies as an artist, author, actor, and activist with cerebral palsy. As the director and founder of Fallen Walls for 20 years, he encourages and helps people find vocation inside location regardless of ability. He has written nine children's books in a series, "Bobby Blue Books," including his most recent title, Go Be You Charlie. Currently working on a Doctor in Ministry degree focusing on disability at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, Daniel is active in the theater and film community in

Memphis, helping shape a new landscape for persons with disabilities.

Disability and the Ecumenical Movement

By Anjeline Okola

Introduction

The paper will look at the journey of the disability work in the World Council of Churches' (WCC) members and how this has led to disability discourse in churches and in theological education. It will also look at how this has given the ecumenical movement an opportunity to benefit from a variety of perspectives that have given voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability. This global advocacy has led to various statements that have been produced by the WCC on re-encountering God in the light of the experience of disability and a search for fresh understandings of what it means to live in the image of such a God.

In 1968 during the WCC's 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, participants explored the need for the church to be more inclusive. This gained momentum, culminating in the August 1971 Commission on Faith and Order in Louvain, Belgium, under the theme "Unity of the Church and Unity of Humankind." The document produced from this meeting examined the question of unity in light of the "handicapped in society," one of six sub-themes. This was the turning point on the issue of disability discourse in the churches as it formed the basis of incorporating persons with disabilities in its wider mission and agenda. Since then, efforts have been made to include persons with disabilities and to advocate for their recognition among member churches, councils of churches, and religious ecumenical organizations.

This was further emphasized at the WCC's 5th Assembly in 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya, which issued a statement on "The Handicapped and the Wholeness of the Family of God."¹ At the WCC's 6th Assembly in Vancouver, Canada, in 1983, 21 persons with disabilities were invited as assembly participants, after which a staff person was employed from 1984 until the next assembly. This was replicated in the WCC's 7th Assembly in Canberra, Australia, in 1991, after a staff person was hired to follow up on the assembly's deliberations between 1994 and 1996. In the twelve years beginning in 1984, these full-time consultants worked with a disabilities task force, re-establishing contacts with member churches, national and regional ecumenical bodies, and church and secular agencies working with persons with disabilities.

1 David Patton, *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November - 10 December, 1975* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 61-62.



In 1997, an “Interim Statement on the Theological and Empirical Understanding of the Issue of Disabilities” was prepared by the task force working group and brought to the WCC Central Committee for adoption. It was discussed and sent to member churches, regional ecumenical organizations, and national councils of churches. In his accompanying letter, the WCC general secretary wrote: “This document presents what may be a new perspective for many churches: that congregations need the presence of people with disabilities. The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable.”² (1 Corinthians 12:22)

In 1998, the WCC invited a number of people with disabilities as advisors on disability concerns to its 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe. The ten persons with disabilities who attended as advisors decided to form the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) to carry disability issues further to the respective regions where each individual came from. EDAN as a network and initiative of persons with disabilities was considered a model for work with persons with disabilities. As a programmatic initiative of the WCC, it addressed the concerns of persons with disabilities in their relationships not only with the church but with society in general, and it was given a new form that would provide continuity and visibility within the life of the churches.

A New Dawn on Disability Work

EDAN has continued to engage in theological reflection on the issue of disability to provide a foundation on which church engagement may be secured. This work has been carried together with the regional ecumenical organizations and Christian world communions, particularly the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, Anglican Communion, Lutheran World Federation, and Salvation Army. This theological engagement and reflection on disability is an attempt by Christians with and without disabilities to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of persons with disabilities.³ The perspectives and methods of this engagement are designed to give voice to the diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.

² World Council of Churches Central Committee Minutes of the Forty-Eighth meeting 11 – 19 September 1997, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).

³ John Swinton, “Disability Theology,” Ian McFarland, David Fergusson, Karen Kilby and Iain Torrance, eds., *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Disability theology begins with the recognition that persons with disabilities at best have been a minority voice in the development of Christian theology and practice, and at worst they have been completely silenced within the conversation. In listening to such voices and reflecting on the life experiences of persons with disabilities, it hopes to re-think and recalibrate aspects of theology and practice that exclude or misrepresent the human experience of disability.

Disability theology is ecumenical and traverses several theological disciplines. Working together with the WCC's Department for Faith and Order over three years, EDAN developed a WCC policy statement, *A Church of All and for All*,⁴ which was commended to all the member churches by the WCC Central Committee in August 2003 for study, reflection, feedback, and action.

Since most influential theologians, past and present, have been persons without disabilities, an able-bodied hermeneutic has been the norm for deciphering human experience and developing images of God; the experience of disability has not been allowed to inform the development of Christian doctrine and tradition. This has led to various modes of misrepresentation, leading to practices that oppress and exclude. *A Church of All and for All* therefore highlights the fundamental theological issues that affect persons with disabilities and that, if addressed, would challenge the church to become holistic and inclusive in its relationship to disability issues. The document is available in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Arabic, and Romanian; it is still being translated into various languages by churches, individuals, and national and regional ecumenical organizations. The document has also been shared with secular disability organizations for their reflection.

Within the Reformed family, the Disability Concerns ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and Reformed Church in America has produced the third edition of a handbook, *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*, with insights, tips, and essays from people with disabilities that are designed to help churches embrace persons with disabilities as partners in ministry.⁵

4 Arne Fritzon and Samuel Kabue. *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva, WCC Publications, 2004).

5 English, Spanish, Korean, and French translations of *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together* are available at www.everybody-belongs.com.



In July 2014, the Council for World Mission organized a large conference, “Building an Inclusive Community: Moving beyond Accommodation to Affirmation and Advocacy with and for Persons with Disabilities.” Statements of affirmation were compiled, published, and shared with member churches to be a guide undergirded by the value of mutual accountability. This was followed by an initiative—“A More Able Church?”—to grant funds to challenge and inspire member churches to devise projects that honor the lives, contributions, and ministry of persons with disabilities in disability advocacy as a justice issue.

Since 2003, *A Church of All and for All* had been useful to many churches and theological seminaries. As persons with disabilities have grown in their capacity as agents of change within the ecumenical community, EDAN acknowledged a new document was needed that interprets the disability experience from the perspective of creation. *The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All*⁶ was presented to the Central Committee in June 2016 and commended it to member churches for study, reflection, feedback, and action.

Disability in Theological Education

Many of the conceptual assumptions and practical goals of disability theology emerge from its theoretical connections with disability studies.⁷ The scope and focus of disability studies varies across cultures, with the United Kingdom tending to concentrate on the experiences of persons with disabilities and the USA engaging with a wider range of professions that are concerned with issues of disability.⁸

Disability theologians have applied principles of the disability studies model and similar analysis to the theology and practice of the church. Through a process of critical theological reflection on ecclesial practices, disability theologians seek to initiate a process wherein persons with disabilities can be empowered to find meaningful inclusion (physical, psychological, and spiritual) within religious communities.⁹

6 World Council of Churches Central Committee Minutes of the Forty-Eighth Meeting 22 – 28 June 2016, Trondheim, Norway (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016).

7 Colin Barnes, Michael Oliver, Len Barton, *Disability Studies Today* (London: Polity Press, 2002).

8 Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

9 Wilton H. Bunch, “Toward a Theology of Inclusion for Those with Disabilities: A Christian Response,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 5,4 (2001).

For the last 60 years, the WCC has been involved in theological education.¹⁰ The primary focus of theological institutions and seminaries is on ministerial formation and producing church leaders. Despite talk about contextual and ecumenical theologies, these institutions were yet to be inclusive of people with disabilities. In the early 2000s, the WCC's Ecumenical Theological Education program started challenging theological institutions and lay training centers to address disability studies as an important and urgent matter. This was done through the development of a co-curriculum in disability studies to prepare ministers at the training stage for pastoral work with persons with disabilities, which encompassed the existential experience of disability that is lived on the margins of power and authority.¹¹

Conclusion

Bias against active roles in churches—and sometimes ordination—for persons with disabilities have led many persons with disabilities to view the church as a “city on a hill”—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable. Persons with disabilities are an oppressed minority group within the church. The inclusion of people with disabilities involves both making churches physically accessible and fundamentally re-symbolising the tradition.¹²

A more deliberate effort on the part of scholars in religion and disability studies should engage persons with disabilities and disabled persons organizations. This is because the standard type of seminary training tends to create a professional elite—separated from the ordinary membership. This line of criticism leads to the further point that the standard type of seminary training aligns the leadership of the church, with the privileged elements in society instead of with the poor and the marginal. It thus serves to perpetuate an improper alliance between the churches and the ruling classes in society.

10 Paul McPartlan, Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

11 “Workshop on Disability Discourse for Theological Colleges, Kenya,” World Council of Churches (2004), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/workshop-on-disability-discourse-for-theological-colleges-kenya>

12 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20.



Anjeline Okola Charles describes herself as an enthusiastic optimist first and then a disability and development practitioner. She earned her BA and MA in Economics and Development and Disability respectively from the University of Leeds, England, with further theological education. She worked at the National Council of Churches of Kenya in advocacy for youth and persons with disabilities issues before becoming Programme Coordinator for the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network of the World Council of Churches. The daughter of blind parents, she has low

vision herself. She envisions a society that is truly inclusive of all her members, that leaves no one behind.

Disability and Theological Education: A Personal Journey

By Samuel George

I was born “normal” in India (in Jammu and Kashmir) to a Christian missionary couple. It was a time when the polio epidemic was quite common in the Indian context. When I was about two months old, my parents noticed that I had a fever, and from the next day onwards I was mostly immobile. By the time they took me to the primary health care center, I was affected with poliomyelitis.¹ Until the age of four, I could only crawl. Later, with lots of assistance, I started “walking” (with a considerable amount of limping). Due to the persistence of my parents that I should study well, they put me in school in 1979. There was nothing in the educational system to cater to people with disabilities. Despite all the physical challenges, I began my studies and was very successful (top of my class) in completing primary school. From middle school onwards I moved to an Army School, where I completed my secondary schooling. After that, I moved to a college to complete my Bachelor of Commerce and Masters of Sociology.

In hindsight, I can say with confidence that quality education lifted me from my disabled status. Yes, these years were replete with huge challenges and struggles because none of the institutions where I studied was disability friendly. The physical infrastructures of these institutions were not meant for a person like me. I had to make the adjustments to live and study with the able-bodied.

Theological Education and Disability

I began my theological journey in 1996 when I joined Bishop’s College, a premier theological institute affiliated with the Senate of Serampore (University). As a person with a disability, it was challenging to study in a system and structure that was not disability friendly. However, my classmates and teachers helped me to gel with the system, making it a memorable experience. In my theological journey as a student, I never came across disability as a theological issue.

The first time I heard about disability as a methodology of studies—and, more surprisingly, as a theological category—was in 2006, when I started as a research scholar. The Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network (EDAN) of the World Council

¹ Unfortunately, during this period polio vaccine was administered to children after 90 days of their birth.



of Churches, in collaboration with the South Asia Theological Research Institute and Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (University), organised a disability seminar for theological students and teachers in Bangalore. This was the meeting where I first encountered disability studies and disability as a theological issue. As a doctor of theology research scholar, I started thinking theologically about the issue of disability. Those attending this meeting believed that to make disability studies mainstream, it had to be included in the theological and ecclesial community. It could not be done without a sustained focus on theological education, and resources needed to be produced for theological education.

Consequently, a project was undertaken in 2007 to write a resources book in Manila, the Philippines, *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability*. I contributed an article entitled “Persons with Disabilities in India.” Since then, I have been associated with EDAN as a theological reference group member from Asia, contributing to the field of theological education as a resource person. I have attended many conferences, conducted workshops both in theological and ecclesial settings, contributed articles to major journals, and edited works and a monograph on disability.² I have also been associated with the Council for World Missions in conducting workshops and teaching disability issues.

For me, disability theology is missional:

Missional education is teaching “missional living.” It is pluriform ministry and service, encompassing a full spectrum from careful stewardship of creation,

2 Samuel George, “Persons with Disabilities in India,” *Persons with Disabilities in Society: Problems and Challenges*, ed. Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans, vol. 1 (Manila, The Philippines: ATESEA, 2007), 33-46; Samuel George, “Voices and Visions from the Margins on Mission and Unity: A Disability-Informed Reading of the Pauline Metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ,” *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 1 (April 2011), 96-103; Samuel George, “Image of God and Disability, Stigma and Discrimination,” in *Sprouts of Disability Theology*, ed. Christopher Rajkumar (India: NCCI, 2012), 60-65; Samuel George, “God of Life, Justice and Peace: A Disability Informed Reading of Christology,” *The Ecumenical Review* 64, no. 4 (December 2012), 454-63; Samuel George, “Disabilit(Y) Ethics: A Search for a ‘Different’ Paradigm in Christian Ethics,” *Bangalore Theological Forum XLVIII*, no. 1 (June 2016), 74-91; Samuel George, “Theological Education as Missional Formation: Contributions of the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network,” *International Review of Mission* 108, no. 1 (June 2019), 8-17; Samuel George, “Resurrected (yet) Disabled Christ: Resurrected Body and Disability,” in *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, ed. Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar (Kenya/Taiwan/Myanmar/India: EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/SATHRI/YTCS, 2019), 313-22; Samuel George, *Church and Disability, Reimagining Church as Event: Perspectives from the Margins*, ed. George Zachariah & Sudipta Singh (Delhi & Singapore: ISPCK & CWM, 2020), Samuel George, “Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Perspective from Disability Theology,” *International Review of Mission* 111, no. 1 (May 2022), 101-09, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/rom.12405>.

liberation of the marginalized, and creation of just societies to active evangelistic work as ambassadors of God’s reconciling love. Theological education (a disability perspective), therefore, strives to establish the kingdom of God (*missio Dei*) where people with disabilities find their rightful place in theologizing and missional living.

How to do this missional theological education? Disability is an experiential theology striving for liberation and justice. WCC-EDAN has striven to focus on the missional training of the theological fraternity from this experiential perspective. Since it is a lived theology, the focus too is on a lived missional education. People with disabilities are no longer objects of this missional education, but the subjects and initiators. The goal is to embark on a missional journey that will engage, expose (the forceful marginalization of people with disabilities by the “able-bodied” theologies), and empower the kingdom of God.³

My life, ministry, teaching, and writings are informed by the lived experience of disability. We know that about 15 percent of the human population lives with a disability or impairment, so why has disability as a methodology not become mainstream yet? The simple answer is that disability was never considered as an area (a methodology) of study. It was only considered a medical issue, and people with disabilities were objects of charitable acts. In my over two decades of theological education (both as a student and teacher), I have found very few people with disabilities who are engaged in theological education. Structural challenges and attitudinal problems (both theological and cultural) have dampened many potential aspirations of people with disabilities. There is also a dearth of theological trainers who are pedagogically qualified to teach disability theology.⁴ It is only a sustained theological education (from a disability perspective) that will bring paradigmatic change in the theological and ecclesial settings. This must be carried out both at the grassroots level and in formal theological education.

Disability Theological Education Today: A Continuing Journey

Through the efforts of EDAN, today disability issues are taught in several institutions around the globe. Its activities are divided into various regions: the Middle East

3 Samuel George, “Theological Education as Missional Formation: Contributions of the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network,” 16-17.

4 Since disability theology is an experiential theology like any other contextual theologies (feminist, tribal, black and others), a lived disability experience becomes paramount in learning and teaching disability theology. However, a methodological exclusivity of disability experience is not what I suggest here.



(Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan); the Caribbean (Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba); Asia (India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines, Korea); Latin America (Bolivia, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador); Europe⁵; North America (Association of Theological Schools; National Council of Churches of the USA); the Pacific (Solomon Islands, Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Cook Island, Davuilevu); and Africa (Kenya, Ghana, Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria).

In India, EDAN—through its Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) program—pioneered the teaching of disability theology in theological institutions. The Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College & South Asia Theological Research Institute partnered with EDAN to provide the necessary impetus on disability theology in theological colleges and seminaries in India. Today, at the Bachelor of Divinity (BD) level a course is taught on disability theology in all theological institutions affiliated with the Senate of Serampore College (University). Since it was formally introduced as a theological category, many students have written theses at B.D., M.Th., D.Min., and D.Th. level. There are efforts made both in theological and ecclesial contexts to address disability issues. However, challenges remain:

- Even after sustained theological training (in India since 2006), the attitudinal challenges (religious/theological, cultural, societal) persist.
- Theologically trained people with disabilities find themselves at the mercy of Christian organizations and churches to find ministerial opportunities. This affects their financial security.
- There are still very few people with disabilities who have attained higher

⁵ Unfortunately, EDAN-WCC was not able to influence as much in the European continent as it has in other parts of the globe. Records show that some attempts were made:

- In early 2000, there were attempts made at Stockholm School of Theology, Sweden, at offering courses in disability theology.
- In 2014 (28-30 September), a consultation was organized by EDAN-WCC in cooperation with the Volos Academy for Theological Studies took place in Greece.
- The University of Aberdeen, UK, offers a Postgraduate Diploma course on Theology and Disability (they teach: Historical Texts in Disability Theology, Disability Theology and Scripture, Contemporary Issues and Developments in Disability Theology, Disability: Reflective Practices in Context. <https://on.abdn.ac.uk/degrees/theology-and-disability/>).
- Network Disability Studies and Intercultural Theology (NeDSITh) of the Institute of the Protestant Missiology (<https://forschungsstiftung.net/en/node/88>) offers courses on disability theology.
- European Society for the Study of Theology and Disability is another platform that offers courses and conducts seminars and paper presentations on disability and theology.

theological education. This in turn affects the promotion and propagation of disability theology as a methodology.

- Since the number of people with disabilities in the theological and ecclesial arena doesn't match the global numbers, it raises a fundamental question about the attitude and theology of the church.

Conclusion

In my journey both as a theological student and educator, I have experienced the positive power of education. Living with disability, being educated is itself half the battle won. However, the same cannot be said about disabled people and theological education overall. The reasons for this are multi-pronged: attitudinal challenges, structural and accessibility difficulties, and theological and spiritual challenges all remain. My personal assessment is that sustained theological education that is informed by disability perspectives will go a long way in molding the theology, spirituality, hermeneutics, ministry, and mission of the church.



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