

# Disability Inclusion is Missional for the Church

By Rev. Leow Wen Pin

## Summary

The article emphasises that disability inclusion is a missional care issue, in addition to being a pastoral care issue. Our God-given mission is to disciple all peoples, which must include people with special needs with special needs.

It accentuates the point that when our “why” for disability inclusion is built on mission, then our “how” will likewise be centred on mission. It will change how we view people with special needs.

Consequently, how we do disability ministry also changes.

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## Introduction

One day, a man was walking by a construction site, and he saw three workers digging. He asked the first worker, “What are you doing?” The first worker said, “Digging a drain.” He then asked the second worker, who was also digging, “What are you doing?” The second worker said, “Earning my living.”

Finally, he asked the third worker the same question. But this time, the third worker said, with a smile, “I am building a grand cathedral where people can worship Almighty God.”<sup>1</sup>

Which of these three workers do you think did their job with the most joy, the most diligence, and the most satisfaction? Which of them do you think did their job the best?

The answer is clear. It is the third worker. We know this from our own experiences in real life. It is the person with the compelling calling, the powerful purpose, the worthy “why”.

This is because **our “why” shapes our “how”**. Truly, why we do something affects the way we do it.

## The Limitations of Seeing Disability Inclusion as Pastoral Care

This key principle, that our “why” shapes our “how”, is critically important for disability inclusion in the church. Why we include people with special needs shapes how we include them. So, let us now consider the reasons why we include people with special needs, and consider how our reasons for inclusion affect the way we include them.

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest version of this story was told by the advertising pioneer Bruce Barton. It is adapted here with changes.

For about a decade now, I have been working with churches in Singapore to help them include people with special needs. A very common reason that is given by churches for disability inclusion is pastoral care. Church leaders often tell me that they want to include people with special needs to give them assistance and help.

Pastoral care certainly is a noble goal. It reflects God's call for us to love our neighbour. Churches that emphasise pastoral care provide counselling for special families as well as financial support for therapy and other interventions. These are all praiseworthy activities.

However, if pastoral care is the **sole reason** for why we include people with special needs, it becomes a problem. Why? Because if we view people with special needs only from a pastoral care perspective, then, we tend to see them as a "problem". We see them as being "needy". We see them not just as "disabled", but "unable". This perspective can have negative effects on people with special needs.

Sadly, I have had church leaders tell me that people with special needs compete with other groups in church for pastoral care! For example, this usually plays out in Sunday school. They ask, "Why should I assign a teaching aide to help this one student with special needs, when I already have ninety-nine other mainstream children without special needs to care for?" (Doesn't this sound like a certain parable to you?)

They hint to me that, while caring for people with special needs is a good thing, it is ultimately a distraction from the Church's mission to make disciples of all peoples. Their words point to an underlying mentality: "leave

the care of people with special needs to the secular authorities. The church should focus on discipling." It is never put quite so bluntly in the words actually said, but that is the implication.

All this arises from a basic worldview that sees people with special needs only through a pastoral care lens. As a result, because our "why" shapes our "how", disability inclusion in churches is often half-hearted because we see people with special needs as problems.

Thus, sometimes they are included begrudgingly: "Why does this boy with autism need to be there in the service? Can't he go somewhere else to carry out his own activity?" we ask.

Other times, we include them in a way that is patronising or condescending: "Okay girl, you sit there, but you don't make noise, ok? Don't disturb the other people who are here to worship." (As though she isn't here to worship too!)

### Missional Care, Not Only Pastoral Care

So why then should we include people with special needs, if not for pastoral care only?

The reason is this: disability inclusion is not just a pastoral care issue. Rather, **disability inclusion is fundamentally a missional care issue.**

"Missional care" means that disability inclusion is a key way of stewarding our God-given mission to make disciples of all peoples. If we truly care about God's mission to disciple the whole world, then we must include people with special needs.

The Church is called in the Great Commission to go forth and "make disciples of all

peoples". We are not called to make disciples of "some nations" or "some peoples". No! We are called to make disciples of all people.

**The Great Commission is fundamentally about inclusion.** Indeed, all of us have benefitted from God's inclusion. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:12-13 to remember:

*that you were ... separated from Christ ... strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Paul reminds us that, through Christ Jesus, we Gentiles were included to become the people of God. Inclusion is at the heart of the Church's mission. We have been given a mission to include everyone. We have been commissioned to make disciples of everyone. This must include people with special needs. We are not called to make disciples of just able-bodied people!

Indeed, we are called to make disciples of all peoples. And **all means all**. In Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—abled nor disabled—for we are all one in Christ Jesus (cf. Galatians 3:28).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of inclusion. Through this gospel, God is reconciling a broken world to Himself, a world that includes many people with special needs. In fact, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), one in six people worldwide experience a significant disability.<sup>2</sup> That is roughly the entire population of China!

No wonder mission experts have called people with disabilities "the largest minority group" in the world.<sup>3</sup>

We, in Singapore, are not immune to this reality. The rise of people with special needs in Singapore will accelerate, especially due to our ageing population. Statistics show that, by next year, Singapore will officially become "super-aged". More than a fifth of Singaporeans will be over the age of 65. By 2030, that number will rise to a quarter of Singaporeans, and when people get older, their disability also increases.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, if we do not recognise that disability inclusion is missional for our churches, if we do not engage with people with special needs now, our churches will become irrelevant to the world that God has sent us to disciple. After all, **how can we claim to be faithful to the Great Commission if we ignore one-sixth of the world's population?**

Not only will churches become irrelevant to the world, they will become irrelevant to us! This is because all of us, if we live long enough, will become disabled. Disability is a universal stage of life. So, will your church be ready to welcome you when you have dementia or some other disability?

Irrelevant to the world, irrelevant to us—this is what will happen to the Church if we fail to see disability inclusion as missional. To reiterate, we are called by God to disciple all the nations, including people with special needs. Thus, disability inclusion is not just about pastoral care, it is about missional care. If we care about our God-given mission, if we

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health> (accessed 29 May 2025).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://lausanne.org/network/disability-concerns> (accessed 29 May 2025).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/today/big-read/super-aged-2026-singapore-ready-4656756> (accessed 29 May 2025)

care about the Great Commission, we must include people with special needs. That is the main “why” for inclusion.

### The Implications of Disability Inclusion as Mission

Thus far, I have argued that the “why” for disability inclusion is missional. Now, because “our why shapes our how”, I want to show that viewing disability inclusion as mission affects how we include people with special needs.

There are two big ways that a missional view affects how we include:

#### *(1) It affects how we view people with special needs*

The first way is that it affects how we see people with special needs in churches.

As mentioned earlier, a pastoral-care only perspective treats people with special needs as needy, as unable. This is reflected in some language that is commonly used in the disability sector. People with special needs are called “beneficiaries”, “cases”, “clients”. This language reflects a mindset where people with special needs are passive recipients of care.

However, if we see disability inclusion as mission, as part of the Great Commission, we will start describing people with special needs in our churches somewhat differently. We will call them “disciples”.

To be clear: this is not about policing our language. Instead, I am simply recognising that our language is a reflection of our mindsets. **When we think about people with special needs as disciples, we create ripple effects that make a huge difference in the way we treat people with special needs.**

Let me elaborate on how these ripples effects work:

- Let’s start by considering this: when you address a person with special needs as a “disciple”, what are you affirming? You are, in fact, affirming that he or she can grow spiritually. This is what discipleship is about. You affirm that God can work in their hearts, and that they can grow in the fruit of the Spirit.
- Subsequently, because you believe they can grow spiritually, you stop seeing them as static individuals, as merely “persons with a disability”. Instead, you start looking past their disability, to see their potential, to see them as whole people. You see them as people who can change, just like you.
- Because you know they can grow, you then start asking about service opportunities for them: “where can these individuals serve in church?”
- And because you ask that question about service, you stop seeing them as mere recipients of charity. Instead, you start looking for their spiritual gifts, because all Christians are given gifts by God in order to serve Him. So, rather than focusing on their disability, you start looking for their ability, their God-given talents, however different they may be.
- When you realise they can serve, you start thinking about them not just as “disciples”, but as “partners”, as “co-workers”, as “co-labourers”.

- When that happens, you change the way you relate to them. It is no longer you being “above” them, “helping” them. Instead, you realise that you are in it together with them, equal in value before God. They do not look so different from you anymore. You start realising that they are your brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Consequently, because you do not see yourself as above them anymore, you no longer just “talk at” them. Rather, you spend more time listening to them, hearing out their experiences with God. As you listen, you begin to learn something from them: perhaps they can teach you something from their challenging life circumstances, or from the different perspective they have because of their disability. Indeed, sometimes, the blind “see” God more clearly than us. Sometimes, the lame “walk” with God more faithfully than us. And sometimes, even people with intellectual disabilities can “know” God better than with all the wisdom of this world!
- When you learn from them, you realise that they can not only be disciples, they can also be disciplemakers. They are our co-missionaries. They are our fellow soldiers in Christ. In my disability work in the Church, both locally and internationally, I have seen this time and time again, where people with special needs can serve in ways to advance the gospel.<sup>5</sup>
- When you finally realise that people with special needs do not disable the

church, we also realise that we are, in fact, disabled without them. Indeed, the church is only disabled when we exclude people with disabilities. It is only when we exclude parts of the Body of Christ that the Church is truly disabled. **They are essential, not optional to the church.**

The way that we see people with special needs, the way that we see the church, changes when we recognise that disability inclusion is missional. It is the one thing that ripples out, affecting everything. It is the one big “why” that changes everything.

### *(2) It affects how we do disability ministry*

The second way that a missional view affects disability inclusion is that it changes how we do disability ministry.

**i. Prioritise and Invest.** When we realise that disability inclusion is missional, we start to realise that disability inclusion is not optional. It is a priority. God’s call for us is to disciple all peoples, including the people with special needs which comprise a sixth of the total human population.

So, disability inclusion is not a “when-we-feel-like-it” ministry or a “good-to-have” ministry. It is not a social fad; it is not about being “woke”. It is an essential part of the Christian mission. Don’t forget: all of us will become disabled one day!

So, a missional perspective focuses us to prioritise disability inclusion. If we must prioritise it, then we must invest in it. The reality is that every church has competing priorities that it must make decisions over. At the end of the day, every church must decide

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the many missionary examples in *Disability in Mission: The Church’s Hidden Treasure*,

edited by David C. Deuel and Nathan G. John (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 2019.

what is core. From what has been shown, **disability inclusion should be viewed as a core activity under Christian mission and discipleship.** It should not be viewed as an optional activity that churches resource only after they have resourced other activities.

It is indeed quite strange if we desire to bring the gospel to the nations but we do not even try to reach out to people with special needs in our midst and in our country. We know that Jesus has a special heart for the marginalised. So, if we cannot even welcome the child with Down Syndrome into our Sunday school class, why should we be prioritising establishing Sunday schools overseas?

To make clear, I am not advocating for some kind of nationalism. I am not saying that churches must reach out to every person with special needs in Singapore before doing overseas missions. What I am pointing out is the imbalance: **there seems to be a real imbalance with our missional priorities when less than 5% of churches in Singapore have a ministry that reaches out to people with special needs.**<sup>6</sup> We must invest more in disability inclusion.

**ii. Train and Prepare.** Being willing to invest in disability ministry also means investing in training. No soldier goes on a mission without first receiving training. Likewise, very few of our churches will send out an untrained person into the mission field or an untrained person into the pastorate. Similarly, in the complex area of disability inclusion, we should be willing to invest our time and our resources in getting ourselves trained in the necessary theology and skills to be effective for disability inclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Singapore Disability Ministry Survey 2023. See [https://kin.org.sg/wp-content/](https://kin.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SDMS-2023.pdf)

**iii. Persevere and Persist.** If disability inclusion is missional, then we must be prepared to persevere in it. I will be frank—disability ministry is tough. The needs are plenty, and the challenges are complex. I have seen ministry volunteers being injured by persons with special needs. I have seen church leaders get hurt emotionally, sometimes by the very special people and special families that they are trying to love. I have seen ministry leaders burn out, mentally and physically exhausted by the demands of disability ministry. I myself have burnt out before.

For this very reason, we must know deep in our hearts that disability inclusion is missional. When the going gets tough, this is when the doubts creep in and you start to question yourself: “Is this ministry truly what God wants? Is what I am doing for this person with special needs helpful at all? Is the sacrifice worth it?”

It is at that moment that you must know that disability inclusion is a critical aspect of our God-given mission. Like Jesus who did not turn away from bearing His cross or continuing His mission, likewise, you must not falter or turn back.

But the good news is this: **since disability inclusion is part of our God-given mission, God Himself will equip us, empower us, energise us in our mission.**

I still remember a time when I met the leaders of a disability ministry. It was our first time meeting together and they had kindly let me observe their ministry in action. After the session, we had a debrief and I could tell that they were discouraged. They even said to me,

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[uploads/2023/05/SDMS-2023.pdf](https://kin.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SDMS-2023.pdf) (accessed 29 May 2025).



“We are not sure that anything we are doing really matters.”

I replied: “Hey, as I was observing your session just now, I wrote down a long list of things that I thought you were doing well. Let me give examples.” I must have spent at least 15 minutes praising what they were doing. I could see that they needed to hear the encouragement.

When I reflected after the session, I realised that even though my motive for being there was to learn, God’s motive for me to be there was to encourage them. I was God’s instrument to strengthen them for the next leg of their disability inclusion journey. I am pleased to report that this ministry continues to serve well to this day.

## Conclusion

In summary, I have argued in this article that disability inclusion is a missional care issue, in addition to being a pastoral care issue. Indeed, our God-given mission is to disciple all peoples, which must include people with special needs. I say it again: all means all.

When our “why” for disability inclusion is anchored on mission, then our “how” will likewise be centred on mission.

How we view people with special needs will change. We will not see them as charity cases. We will see them instead as potential disciples, ministry partners, and disciplemakers.

How we do disability ministry will also change: (i) we will prioritise disability inclusion in the same way we prioritise discipleship and mission. (ii) We will invest in disability inclusion, especially in training. (iii) We will persevere in disability inclusion, for it is the mission that God has given us.

In this way, let us all play our part in fulfilling the Great Commission that God has given us to make disciples, especially of disciples with special needs. Let us truly gather all in.

This article is an edited version of a keynote address delivered by Rev. Leow Wen Pin at the inaugural Special Needs Ministry Conference jointly organised on 31 May 2025 by the Chinese Annual Conference of The Methodist Church in Singapore and the Koinonia Inclusion Network at Bukit Panjang Methodist Church. This keynote address and the conference were also reported in a news article that can be accessed [here](#).



## About the Author



**Rev. Leow Wen Pin** is the founder and board chairman of the Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN), a mission organisation that enables churches to include and disciple people with special needs. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Koinonia Journal* and the book review editor of the *Journal of Disability & Religion* (the leading journal in the field of disability theology and ministry). He is also an advisor to the research-focused Centre for Autism and Theology of the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, where he also serves as an editorial board member for the centre’s *Neurodiversity and Faith* series. Find out more about Rev. Leow at [www.leowwenpin.com](http://www.leowwenpin.com).

### About the Journal

The *Koinonia Journal* is a publication of the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia of the **Koinonia Inclusion Network** (KIN), a disability mission organisation that enables the Church to welcome and disciple people of all abilities.

The *Koinonia Journal* is an occasional journal that publishes theological writing from an evangelical Christian perspective on matters concerning disability ministry, missions, and theology from an Asian perspective. If you would like to receive future articles from the *Koinonia Journal*, please sign up to KIN's mailing list here: [kin.org.sg/get-started/](http://kin.org.sg/get-started/).

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