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PTCA Study Series No. 17

# DISABILITY THEOLOGY FROM ASIA

A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies

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A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies

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# FOREWORD

Schools of theology equip thousands of future clergy every year and there is therefore a need to recognizing that young people in theological colleges need to be trained for building an inclusive church and society. The World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) started it's journey with theological institutions and networks in Asia in 2006. EDAN has been involved with theological institutions towards mainstreaming disability discourse in ministerial formation program of the churches. The twelve years' journey of EDAN with the theological institutions in Asia has been very productive. Curricula have been developed and now used in many theological seminaries, numbers of Teachers' Institutes have been initiated, and some books have been published. A survey was conducted and it was found that thirty-two M.Th. and three Doctoral theses have been written, excluding M.Div. or B. D. theses on disability issue over the years.

To make an impact assessment of ten years' of EDAN's journey with theological institutions in Asia and Pacific and to initiate further steps to strengthen ecumenical and ministerial formation on disability, EDAN in collaboration with the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) organized a major Asia-Pacific Consultation from December 11-14, 2016, hosted by the Yushan Theological College & Seminary, Hualien, Taiwan. Altogether twenty-seven teachers and church leaders and persons with disabilities engaged in ministry from ten countries, representing different theological networks in Asia and Pacific, attended the Consultation. The participants agreed to initiate a resource book project on "Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for

Theological and Religious Studies". The participants further suggested that the quality of masteral and doctoral theses must be assessed and published for strengthening disability discourse in theological and religious studies. In this connection, PTCA-EDAN-WCC organized two further workshops: The first workshop was organized during June 26-28, 2018 in Serampore, hosted by the Department of Research/ SATHRI, Senate of Serampore College (University), West Bengal. Altogether 48 participants attended the workshop from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, South Korea and India. The second workshop was organized in Yangon during November 21-25, 2018, hosted by the Association of Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM). Altogether twenty-two participants attended the workshop from Myanmar, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Taiwan. In the process of implementing the project, we discovered that the issue of disability is not addressed in theological studies in some emerging churches like in Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, etc. and so it was felt that they also be invited (though they were not able to present research papers) to enhance their capacity. Since the two workshops were hosted by theological association/university, we also decided to invite doctoral students as most of them are or will be teaching in theological institutions. Participants were persons with disabilities, caregivers, theological teachers, church leaders and disability activists who were both Christians and Hindus.

To remove barriers and engage with persons with disabilities who are our brothers, sisters and neighbors, we need to initiate dialogue with persons with disabilities and not simply have dialogue about 'them'. We need to equip theological educators to initiate these dialogues if we are to enrich the context of disability and theology studies. Since clergies have been called upon more frequently to give meaning to a family that has a child with a disability on why they have a child with a disability, it is imperative therefore that disability studies be offered at their formative training. This will go a long way towards helping the society end discrimination, isolation and denial of opportunities for persons with disabilities to live a better life because of their impairments. We need to recognize also that persons with disabilities are not just a gift for the family and society, they are also an opportunity to grow in love, mutual aid and unity as we are all called to be a gift to the other, to be Christ to our neighbors and to see Christ in our neighbors.

This book, Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies, is the outcome of the workshops to address the interaction of various aspects of disability such as social, religious, cultural, historical, biblical, theological, pastoral and legal issues. It also attempts to uncover the interconnection between the disability and other marginal communities' exclusion and marginalization. We hope that this resource book will provoke the readers and usher new theological thinking, attitude and new vision for action towards building a just and inclusive church and society. We are delighted that the book is being published in three regions (Taiwan in Mandarin version, India for South Asia countries and Myanmar for South East Asian countries) as PTCA Study Series No. 17. We thank EDAN-WCC for accompanying us and making this dream a reality.

We thank Rev. Allen Lao for facilitating the workshop and translating some papers into Mandarin. We also thank Rev. Dr. Limatula Longkumer, the Dean of Department of Research/SATHRI, Serampore, West Bengal and Rev. Dr. Lal Tin Hre, the Executive Secretary of Association of Theological Education in Myanmar, Yangon, for hosting the workshops and supports. Thanks also to Editorial Committee for their time and hard work. A special thanks to Rev. Dr. Pratap C. Gine, Professor of NIIPGTS, and Mr. Meyatoshi Longchar, Research Scholar, National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan for correction, suggestion and helping us in proof readings.

Editors
**Anjeline Okola**
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# INTRODUCTION

## EDAN – WCC Initiatives on Inclusive Church and Communities

Anjeline Okola

### Introduction

Persons with disabilities yearn to realise the dream of belonging to a church or a community. However, much work needs to be done to ensure that persons with disabilities have access and inclusion in all aspects of community life. Theology is not simply to do with words but it has to do with the ways in which these words, particularly the words of Jesus find flesh within communities where we all live. Present day faith communities are shaped by important Biblical texts that call us to respond to the marginalized in our communities including persons with disabilities. However, we still find that most of the Church leaders motivated by compassion and the desire not to offend often hesitate to approach persons with disabilities and their families to listen to their stories and respond to their needs. Families who have members with disabilities for their part are often so overwhelmed with the challenge of advocating for a loved one that they have little strength or initiative left to reach out to their faith community. The Church has become a place where you don't place yourself forward, burden others or complain.

There has been alot of debate regarding inclusion. There are two concepts regarding inclusion which are: a concept of 'functional inclusion' and a normative concept of human rights based inclusion.[1] Only the second concept is a valid basis of full and effective participation of marginalized people in all core areas of society. It is also the necessary foundation for respecting their inherent dignity. Although inclusion is not a genuine theological term, nevertheless inclusion as a process of social change and as a fundamental attitude

contains central intuitions of the Gospel.[2] Inclusion conveys an idea which is taken up by Christians with respect to the liberating practice of Jesus. Seen in this light, a modern understanding of inclusion can be linked with Biblical roots. Churches try to enable the marginalized and the poor 'leftovers' of society to become stronger actors who can enforce their own interests in order to live in dignity and gain sufficient participation. In order to do so Christian churches have to become an enabling church which can be adequately described as a diaconal church, a listening and learning church, a researching church, a participative church, a prophetic church and nevertheless sometimes a pondering silent church.

This Paper is going to look at the various initiatives EDAN has taken towards an inclusive community and how these churches and communities can be better equipped to address the needs of persons with disabilities.

**Disability Work in the World Council of Churches**

From 1968 during the 4th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) the churches explored the need for a Church to be a more inclusive society. This gained momentum afterwards culminating in the Commission on Faith and Order held in Louvain, Belgium, August 1971 under the theme "Unity of the Church and Unity of Humankind." This was further emphasised at the WCC's 5th General Assembly in 1975 which issued a statement on "The Handicapped and the Wholeness of the Family of God." At the WCC's Sixth Assembly in Vancouver, Canada in 1983, 21 people with disabilities were invited as part of the Assembly participants. At the WCC's seventh Assembly held in Canberra Assembly 1991 the WCC strongly affirmed the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) process, and a Justice, Peace, and Creation Unit was formed. That same year, the WCC initiated its Theology of Life Study, which drew on the experiences of local groups from around the world, to ground WCC theology more firmly in the lived experiences of local communities around the globe including persons with disabilities. This process brought about an interim statement on the "Theological and Sociological Understanding of the Issue of Disabilities" in 1997 which was prepared by a working group and brought to the WCC Central Committee for adoption where it was received and discussed. With a new title of "Interim Statement on the Theological and Empirical Understanding of the Issue of Disabilities"

it was 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.' (1 Corinthians 12:22)."

At its seventh Assembly in 1998, the WCC invited a number of people with disabilities as advisors on disability concerns to its eighth Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe. The 10 persons with disabilities from different parts of the world who had been invited to participate as advisors decided to form a Network known as Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN). This would carry out the WCC work on disability further to the respective regions where each individual came from. After the Assembly, EDAN as a network and initiative of persons with disabilities was considered by WCC as a model idea for work with persons with disabilities. WCC proposed to support the work through an ecumenical partner with both the interest and the working structure necessary for this kind of work. Since the WCC's ninth Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006, EDAN has been fully integrated into the work of the WCC and at its tenth Assembly, Busan, South Korea in 2013, the WCC fulfilled the initiatives from Harare and Porto Alegre in support of individuals, churches, and their ministries for the inclusion, participation, and contributions of persons with disabilities expressly in accepting human diversity, vulnerability, and the limits of mortality in all facets of its ecumenical work for peace and justice.

**Theological Statements on Disability**

In 2001, EDAN embarked on a process together with the Faith and Order Commission to come up with another theological statement on disability. The interim statement, "A Church of All and for All," was written by persons with disabilities many of whom are ordained ministers or students of theology, parents of children with disabilities and by those who have experienced life alongside persons with disabilities in various ways. The statement which was commended to all the member churches by the WCC Central Committee in its August 2003 meeting for study, reflection, feedback and action was an invitation to the churches to journey with us toward that radical place where all are welcomed at God's banquet table. It was not a comprehensive document but offered pointers and insights on major theological themes. The main themes

of the Statement were Commonalities and Differences; Hermeneutical Issues; Challenges to Theology; *Imago Dei*; Healing and Forgiveness; Giftedness of each other and finally Church for All: Community and Corporate Worship.

After ten years, the Network realised that its first document *A Church of All and for All* took the lead in the struggle against oppression and segregation of persons with disabilities in their respective churches and societies. It was realised that persons with disabilities had grown in their capacity as agents of change, also within the ecumenical community and therefore EDAN's position has changed in this respect as we were no longer demanding recognition from the margins of WCC. Even though for many persons with disabilities and their families the struggle for being included and accepted in their church communities continued, there are promising signs that inclusion and participation by all was more positively affirmed as part of God's gift. During a Consultation to update the document in 2013, it was concluded that in view of shifting positions it would be better to write a new document, and to opt for an approach in which the realities of "disability" experience are interpreted from the perspective of creation, making the notion of human creatureliness central to our theological reflections. This led us to a new document entitled "The Gift of Being: *Called to Be a Church of All and for All*." The document was presented to the Central Committee of June 2016 who commended it to the members for study, reflection, feedback and action.This Policy Statement is addressed to the ecumenical family of churches and their communities. Our greatest hope is to be part of a church whose communities know how to receive the gift of being the body of Christ, and celebrate the rich variety in the giftedness of all of its members.

**Persons with Disabilities in the Church**

The historical path towards the understanding, acceptance and integration of people with disabilities in church and society has been a long one as persons with disabilities have been treated differently from those who conform to or fit societal norms. We still cannot say with certainty that much has as yet been achieved in regard to their spiritual and social emancipation. However, after virtually centuries of misunderstanding, discrimination and downright paternalistic care, a dim light through the dark tunnel has begun to bring about a sign of hope in form of the prevailing good will. Churches have begun

to be sensitized to view persons with disabilities not just as people who only need physical and material help but as full members of the human family who like all God's people also require spiritual care and nourishment.

Whether or not it is always acknowledged, God has mandated the entire Christian community to show no partiality in the body of Christ. That means that within churches, church organizations, and any other entity claiming to be "Christian," all people, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, should be invited and included into the essential functions of that specific entity. To go one step further, God has called His followers to go out from their current location and spread the Good News of Christ to those at the ends of the earth. He also told His body to not only go out but also bring in those who are "poor and crippled and blind and lame" (Luke 14:21 ESV). That specific mandate, from Luke 14, in addition to Paul's description of the body of Christ from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 is what has guided this study. The body of Christ has been given specific instruction to reach out to people with disabilities and this study attempted to examine the degree to which the body of Christ has been successful or unsuccessful in fulfilling its responsibilities in this area.

The Christian community has a history of devaluing attitudes towards people with disabilities. In her article titled "Sacramental Bodies", Nancy Eiesland discussed the different marginalizing attitudes that churches have in regard to people with disabilities. She suggests that the church "has too long provided the ideological funding and charitable practices" to people with disabilities which results in marginalization.[3] Further on in the article, Eiesland discusses the church's flawed focus on healing as she states, "Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us. Healing has been the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine, in which the goal was 'normalization' of the bodies of people with disabilities".[4] He states that people with disabilities are devalued when society views them as an object of charity or as someone who is sick and needs to be healed.[5]

**Charity or a Gift?**

Though most of us laud Charity as a Christian virtue we know that it has wounded very many persons with disabilities as they have been

used to perpetuate acts of charity or during the promotion of pro-social behaviour which is aimed at benefiting other people rather than promoting one's own well-being.[6] Even though psychologists have pointed out that even in the absence of conspicuous external rewards, helping others may still be personally beneficial, incurring self-awards such as positive self-feedback for being kind it has been realised that most charitable foundations have been doing that annually as they were required to give away large sums as the condition of tax exemption.

In June 2018, we had discussions with Churches in Rwanda on disability discourse and the Presiding Bishop of the Association of Baptist Churches in Burundi shared a story about what his Church had done in this regard. In his story, he shared how they invited 200 persons with disabilities to a feast that was organised by his Church. They made special dresses and suits for the invitees, hired top of the range vehicles to go and pick them in their homes and bring them to the Church compound where they had a huge tent that was beautifully decorated. They had entertainment from some of the top gospel musicians in the country as well as comedians, served them food and gave them presents to take home. He was so proud of this 'great' achievement that his Church had made; however such an event feels like a good start but to serve persons with disabilities effectively, the Church leaders need to find ways to empower persons with disabilities to occupy such active roles in their churches. They need to see the giftedness that they bring to the Church.

Persons with disabilities are not just a gift for the family and an opportunity to grow in love, mutual aid and unity as we are all called to be a gift to the other, to be Christ to our neighbor and to see Christ in our neighbor. I believe that this can happen in any authentic relationship with someone who is objectively vulnerable, in which we allow ourselves to become vulnerable, to shed our masks of superiority and self-sufficiency.[7] Living our faith with individuals who have multiple disabilities or impairments that need high support needs have changed lives as has been witnessed among that L'Arche Communities as these individuals through these relationships have carried the experience forward, at least sometimes, and hopefully grow in their own ability to be vulnerable and open.

There are some real concerns with seeing someone as a vehicle for us to do good, which Hans Reinders in his ground breaking book

on *Receiving the gift of friendship: Profound disability, theological anthropology, and ethics*, shares has raised valid counterpoints.[8] Responding positively to the person with a disability depends on our disposition and moral orientation, which locates the person's value extrinsically, rather than intrinsically. Responding in charity is good, but it is not the reason to value the person with a disability. It is nice, even reinforcing, if I feel good as a result of the engagement, but it is an unintended result and not the basis of the individual's value as a person. It is not the reason for the other person to exist. We are all here because of God's love. Reinders says it well when he says that our origin and destiny are "grounded in God's graceful action toward us in Christ".[9] This is at the center of our call to love. We are "Friends of God" because God has reached out to each of us, unconditionally. So we are called to reach out to others in love, in charity, in friendship. For this to make sense to us today, however, we need to access the early understanding and tradition of charity.

This understanding of charity has formed the basis for pastoral ministry activity of the church since the early days, with the understanding that the words love and charity are interchangeable in meaning.[10]

In the recent past, there has been a paradigm shift by EDAN to embrace persons with disabilities as gifts to the Church. This is formed by the understanding that each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. This is strongly backed by the fact that the theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity. Marcel Mauss in his book *The Gift*, he says that a gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction. In the new statement on *The Gift of Being*, Gift language has been taken in a yet wider sense, as not regarding a particular condition, or even the person with that condition, but *life itself*. Taken in this sense, the gift of life refers to the condition of "being alive." It is important to realize, however, that this condition never comes in isolation. The gift of life includes family: a place where we feel at home and people whose acceptance means that we belong to them. But it also comes with ambiguities, limitations, and sorrows.

**Exclusion from Participation**

As discussed earlier, there's a long history of disability serving only as an opportunity for non-disabled people to demonstrate their

piety through service, a "charity model" of disability that's kind, but ultimately still promotes otherness and exclusion.We've all seen how some preachers and clergy especially in Africa have engaged with questions of disability and the use of persons with disabilities as spectacle in their public appearances. Some of their writings have consistently described persons with disabilities as passive, needing the love and care of others, but not envisioned as taking an active role in society as parents, workers, or even as caregivers themselves.

From a previous study done by EDAN, we realised that some of the experiences that clergy shared with us when they interact with persons with disabilities include among others pity, fear and uneasiness.

Pity, Fear and Uneasiness mainly emanate from the failure in the first place to have contact with the people with disabilities.[11] The basis of this is usually the uncertainty as to how to treat and to behave with a disabled person. Church ministers and others are often unable to act naturally with people with disabilities because of their own complex about disabilities, their lack of understanding, and because their attention gets dominated with the idea of the presence of disability and the imagined limitations it imposes on that person.[12] They remain in the awkward position of wanting to help but being reluctant to ask the concerned persons lest they are thought ignorant. It will be necessary to overcome these shortcomings in order to establish full understanding, fellowship and participation of people with disabilities in our churches.

However, God embraces all of humanity through the person and work of Christ, and identifies Himself with all of humanity through Christ.[13] Arguably the most significant aspect of Bonhoeffer's Christology is its emphasis on the idea of "Christ as Center." The essential thrust of this idea of Christ's centrality is not simply that human history pivots around the Christ event, but, as Bonhoeffer encapsulates this idea in his description of Christ as a "being pro-me," that is, an agent whose existence and purpose can only be understood in relationship to another agent; in Bonhoeffer's words, "Christ is Christ, not just for himself, but in relation to me and our calling then is to bear our brothers and sisters as they too experience the life of Christ as it transforms their lives."

EDAN is urging the clergy to make all churches accessible - not only architecturally, but also practically so blind and deaf people can

attend and follow the services. We have to open the clergy up to all kinds of people, including church ministers with disabilities. Secondly, we need to make inclusion an everyday enterprise. We build inclusive spaces not by holding special events in which the non-disabled allow the disabled to participate, but by constructing fully integrated environments in which all have access as equally as possible. Thirdly, our World Communions should show enormous leadership by pushing to move the Church from the charity model of disability to what activists and scholars call the "social model." In the social model, we respond to disability by creating systems and cultures that are radically inclusive, so that individuals are not disabled by lack of access or stigma.

**Endnotes**

1 Lob-Hüdepohl Andreas, *A New Demand: The Challenge of Inclusion to the Theology and Practice of Diaconia*, Diaconia: Volume 6, Issue 1, 2015: 17.

2 *Ibid*., 25.

3 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994): 240.

4 *Ibid*., 243.

5 *Ibid*., 15, 16.

6 C. D. Batson, "Altruism and prosocial behaviour" in *The handbook of social psychology*, eds, D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (New York, NY, US: McGraw-Hill, 1998): 282-316.

7 Jean Vanier, *Living our faith with the retarded person*. NAMR, 4(2), 15. 1972: 2–5,

8 H.S. Reinders, *Receiving the gift of friendship: Profound disability, theological anthropology, and ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

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10 E. McDonagh, "Love" in *The new dictionary of theology*, J. A.Komonchak, M.Collins, & D. A.Lane, eds. (Collegeville: Michael Glazier Books,1987): 602–615.

11 Cf. Wati Longchar, Cowans, Gordon, eds. Gordon. *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability* (Manila: ATESEA, 2007).

12 Samuel Kabue, Mombo, Esther. Galgalo, Joseph and Peter, C. B. eds. *Disability, Society, and Theology: Voices from Africa.* Limuru, Kenya: Zapf Chancery, 2011.

13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper, 1978).

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# Part I

# Disability, Religion and Society

# Disabilities, Church and Society: A Historical and Sociological Perspective

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## Introduction

I was once invited to address the final year students of a Bible School on the subject of People with Disabilities in Church and Society. I began my address with a rhetoric question as to whether people with disabilities were worth the effort in reaching them out with the gospel. The answer was as expected "yes". What else could I have expected from these future pillars of the church just about to begin their theological career especially when I myself was a person with a disability! Their training was based on a premise the God is no respecter of persons. After all, I was told, even the people with disabilities are created in the image of God. This is a very easy concept at the academic level. As I continued my interaction with these students for the short time I was with them, I wondered whether they really understood who persons with disabilities are. As the students described their own experiences, it was clear that even to them, the reality on the ground was different.

They agreed that participation in spiritual, social and development life of the church and society by people with disabilities is certainly wanting but they were not sure what could be done about it. The rest of this paper explores the practice from a point of view of a historical setting and experience from a personal viewpoint. I begin with a short explanation on who the people with disabilities are, after which I will give a historical background before going into specific experiences.

## Who are the People with Disabilities?

The terminology and definitions used to refer to the categories of the

people considered in this discussion have been the subject of an ongoing debate among academicians, health professionals, social workers and the disability movement at least in the last twenty or so years. The term "disability" is a creation of the modern society in its attempt to group people with different characteristics perceived to have related or similar effects on the human life. It is not a term that existed either in the Western or the African traditions. The Judeo-Christian tradition too did not have this type of classification as it described individuals in accordance to their specific infirmities. This explains why the term will not be found in the Bible. The term emerged in an attempt to have organized care for people who in the eyes of the society were seen to require care and attention. The earliest definitions of the term were therefore by caregivers. Arguments over definitions have intensified with the emergence of new players in the field. Thus, Disability has been defined in different ways at different times and by different categories of people. These definitions have reflected different interests and understanding depending on who is defining it. The definitions fall into two main classifications, namely, the medical model and the social model. Care givers, health workers and academics have largely embraced the medical model while persons with disabilities through their movements are largely proponents of the social model.

Persons with disabilities argue that there is a hidden political purpose behind the definition by the care givers - which is to justify their roles. Their definitions are backed up by political and academic supporters who rely on them for advice. There is also, on the other hand, an important political task facing the people with disabilities' movement as a social group. This is to gain control over the way their situation is described and defined. A commonly prevailing view among persons with disabilities especially in Britain and Western Europe is that the carers' definitions locate the cause of the problems persons with disabilities face in their individual impairments. It is argued that as long as these carers are able to maintain the idea that it is the bodies of those with disabilities that are at fault, the social structures they have created can be protected. By the simple device of focusing on their bodies, these definitions draw attention away from the discriminatory society. Such definitions underpin the dominant hegemony of ideas these people have constructed to justify their position.

Typical of definitions according to the medical model, are those put

forward by the World Health Organisation (WHO): as far back as 1980.

*Impairment:*

Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.

*Disability:*

Any restriction or lack, resulting from an impairment, of ability to perform any activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

*Handicap:*

A disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual. The emergence of fresh thinking and new organizations controlled by people with disabilities themselves and their struggle against segregation resulted in a careful re-working of the set of definitions - similar to those of the WHO and these is seen as a direct challenge by people with disabilities:

*Impairment:*

Lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

*Disability:* The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.

The political significance of these definitions lies in the fact that they are a statement coming out of the direct experience of the people with disability; that they place the cause of disability fairly and squarely with society; that they separate and sharpen the distinction between the individual and the environment with which he or she interacts; that they are a tool for measuring the role and relevance of existing service systems; that they pose disability positively as a phenomenon which can be overcome; and that they lift the veil which obscures the ugly face of discrimination against people with disabilities in contemporary society.

In the Ecumenical circles, descriptions have moved from theological reflection to practical questions of inclusiveness within churches and

church communities. Terms such as "persons with handicaps" and "the differently abled" and "persons with a disability" have been used at different times and have been usually designed to reflect inclusiveness and each replaced the other. The term "the differently abled" was used over a long time at a certain stage of the World Council of Churches (WCC) work on disability. It had to be discarded because it was only understood within the ecumenical family and especially in churches and organizations closely related to WCC. It is a term that is resented by the people it refers to as they argue, who is in this case not differently abled in the entire world population and if we all are, who then does the term refer to. There is still a lot of hung over on it among some groups within the ecumenical family. However, the terms in current use at the WCC since 1997 are "persons with disabilities" or "people with disabilities". With the unfolding interpretation and understanding of disability by different sets of players, these terms will already be considered inappropriate if not controversial among some circles. Perhaps this is as it should be in order to encourage the on-going discourse which could lead to deeper understanding of the essence behind different meanings.

In Kenya, the term disability has two important definitions. The Persons with Disability Act, 2003, defines disability as

> *A physical, sensory, mental or other impairment, including any visual, hearing, learning or physical incapability, which impacts on social, economic and environmental participation.*

The Draft Constitution of Kenya 2004, however, defines disability as including

> *any physical, sensory, mental, psychological or other impairment, condition or illness that has, or is perceived by significant sectors of the community to have, a sustainable or long-term effect on an individual's ability to carry out day-to-day activities.*

The difficulties in defining the term disability in the recent past has greatly intensified with promulgation of various statutes in different countries where such legislations are used to determine who receives services provided under such statutes. The difficulty lies in taking care to ensure that a definition adopted does not leave out a section of people that it should otherwise cater for. The process of the promulgation of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities was greatly

influenced by the quest to ensure that no one who should be included is left out. In the process, the Ad Hoc committee which worked on the convention chose to play safe by avoiding a definition but instead, they provided in article one on the purposes of the convention that:

> "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

**Historical Background**

The historical path towards the understanding, acceptance and integration of people with disabilities in church and society has been a long one. We still cannot say with certainty that much has been achieved in regard to their spiritual and social emancipation. However, after virtually centuries of misunderstanding, discrimination and downright paternalistic care, a dim light through the dark tunnel has begun to bring about a sign of hope in form of the prevailing good will. Churches have begun to be sensitized to view people with disabilities not just as people who only need physical and material help but as full members of the human family who like all God's people also require spiritual care and nourishment.

In the early days of human history on earth when they lived on hunting and gathering, there was no place for people with disabilities in the society. Life was based on survival for the fittest. When farming was discovered, there was surplus food to be shared and this is when the welfare for people with disabilities begun. Subsequently, the extended largely agricultural families that were common until the Industrial Revolution raised a good number of people with disabilities. Others were taken into convents and monastic infirmaries where their bodily survival needs and care were met though with no reference to their spiritual needs. Obviously, some of the less fortunate ones were treated inhumanly and often abandoned in streets where they were objects of ridicule.

Even in the later part of the human history, situation remained different in different cultures. In some, infanticide was widely spread. Plato stressed the association of disease with moral imperfection and evil. Among the Greek City states like Athens and Sparta, the common practice was that everybody in the society had to train to be a soldier.

To them, a healthy spirit deserved a healthy body. There was no room for weaklings and the people with disabilities were therefore rarely allowed to survive. At some pointing history, to early Greeks and Romans and on into the Middle Ages, people with disabilities were a source of humor. People with mental impairments were kept by the royal courts for entertainment. Court jesters might have had a physical deformation, yet could perform feats such as acrobatics and juggling. Entertainment was a rare path to independence for a person with a disability, at a time when the only other options were to be a beggar or a burden to one's family. Some entertainers even gained privileged household positions. The Roman Empire proved to be a short-lived period of employment opportunity for someone with a disability. In 235 A.D. Emperor Alexander Severus banished all such individuals from Rome. Onetime court fools wandered the empire, resorting to performing or begging on the streets of the cities for survival.

For much of human history in Western society, a person with a disability was considered a burden on others—a drain on resources who put nothing back. A family's sense of honor was thought to be compromised by the presence of a person with a disability. They would be spurned by the community. The expense and time of providing for a disabled member would reduce the family's ability to live up to community standards. There was great pressure to institutionalize a person with a disability (once this option even existed), to allow death from an illness, or even end his life by euthanasia.

Such perceptions of disability and attitudes to persons with disabilities are by no means unique to any parts of the World. Many ancient cultures even endorsed methods of infanticide to deal with the 'problem' faced by having children born with disabilities. Ndurumo (1993) has shown how depending on the ancient cultural beliefs and practices, the fate of disabled children in African societies could be adverse! Life could be short-lived and in many cases, at best, inhospitable. In some of the societies, the presence of disability at birth was often been considered to be reflective of a broken relationship between the family and God. Often "the child was killed and sent back to God so that He might send another child without disability. Such children were killed with the full approval of the community and the question of infanticide never arose".[1]

Suffices to mention that cultural responses to people with perceived

impairments are by no means universal. Whilst there are several examples of cultures which accommodate the needs of the so-called disabled people, there are others which do not. Moreover, although infanticide for children with visible impairments has consistently characterized western and African cultural development, it is evident that such people have existed throughout recorded history. There are several reasons for this. Notably, human beings are not simply cultural dupes. It is likely, therefore, that many parents rejected such practices and supported their disabled offspring. Also, the overwhelming majority of impairments are acquired rather than congenital; either through accident, illness or, simply, old age. Thus, ensuring that the experience of impairment was and is a common rather than an exceptional occurrence. This was certainly the case in the Greco-Roman world where life was extremely harsh for all but the most privileged - high born, well-to-do males in perfect health.

However, in contrast to those who would problematize that which it is not necessarily problematic, it is an attempt to provide a clear and understandable focus on that which can and should be changed: specifically, a value system which is rooted in a particular type of society, which is clustered around a particular view of the human condition, and which, in one way or another, oppresses all those who are unwilling or unable to conform to its requirements.

It needs to be noted that historical accounts of disability are rare and those that exist are written from different viewpoints. Those written by persons with disabilities especially in the recent past make clear the fact that the social environment in which persons with disabilities live is the major problem in making their lives difficult rather than the impairments that have brought about their perceived disabilities. The quest for participation underlies such writings. Vic Finkelstein (1980) argued that disability is the direct result of the development of western industrial society. Using a largely materialist analysis Finkelstein divides history into three distinct sequential phases. The first, Phase One, broadly corresponds to the feudal period which preceded European industrialization. Here economic activity consisted primarily of agrarian or cottage based industries, a 'mode of production', he maintains, which does not preclude people with perceived impairments from participation. But in Phase Two, round about the nineteenth century, when industrialization took hold, people with impairments

were excluded from employment on the grounds that they were unable to keep pace with the new factory based work system. Hence, they were segregated from the mainstream of economic and social activity into a variety of residential institutions. Finkelstein's Third Phase, which he maintains is only just beginning, will see the eventual liberation of disabled people from such oppression through the development and use of technology, and their working together with helpers and allies toward commonly held goals.

For Finkelstein, therefore, disability is a paradox emerging out to the development of western capitalist society. On the one hand, disability implies 'a personal tragedy, passivity and dependence'.[2] On the other, it can be seen a societal restriction and discrimination. In Phase One, people with impairments were dispersed throughout the community; but in Phase Two due to the emergence of large scale industry with production lines geared to 'able bodied norms' and 'hospital based medicine'. They were separated from their social origins into a clearly defined devalued group. Phase Three will witness the end of the paradox as disability will be recognized a social restriction only.

Although intended as an aid to understand rather than an accurate historical statement, Finkelstein's analysis has been criticized for being over-optimistic. It is over-simplistic in that it assumes a simple relationship between the mode of production and perceptions and experiences of disability. It is too optimistic in its assumption that technological development and professional involvement will integrate disabled people back into society.

**Early Church's Experience**

Throughout history, disabilities have been commonly seen as acts of a vengeful God. In a world in which real or imagined sin abound, the emergence of a child with a disability in a family was regarded as a punishment for sin. This common social belief clearly manifests itself in the Jewish cultures as expressed in the Old Testament, depicting disability as divine retribution for sinful behavior as expressed in Leviticus 21:17, "Whosoever that hath any blemish, let him not approach the altar to offer the bread of his God." We see the same belief in the Gospel according to Saint John 9:1-3. In this passage, Jesus was faced with a question from his disciples in connection with a man who was blind since birth; "Teacher, who sinned this man or his

parents that he was born blind?" In his answer, Jesus exonerated both the blind man and his parents as we read in verse 3. "It is not that this man sinned, or his parents but that the works of God might be made manifest in him". This message is as yet to reach the majority of those concerned, their families and a great section of the church. It has also not been given enough impetus to sink into the thinking and theology of the church. All the same, in Judeo-Christian culture, children with disabilities were at least permitted to live.

During the Middle Ages, another notion about disability was considered. Perhaps a disability was not punishment from God but an expression of evil through the Devil. At the same time the Christian church developed some charitable motives, in particular for the blind and amputees. The Crusades (beginning in 1096) ensured a steady supply of these victims—the only kinds of disability likely to survive the traumatic injuries of war. Traumatic injury such as spinal cord compression, birth defect, polio and other diseases were far more likely to be fatal, so did not add to the population of the disabled. *The most visible and feared of medieval cripples were lepers, perhaps because the concept of contagion attached itself to the disease early on, or because it can cause blindness, amputation, and other conditions.*

Lepers were kept out of city walls, and forced to gather in isolated colonies. Leprosy reached epidemic proportions in the 13th and 14th centuries, with 19,000 leprosariums in Europe by the year 1200. In 1321 in France a rumor spread that lepers plotted to poison the waters. This was never proven, but King Philip V ordered that:

> *To cleanse the earth of the criminal and superstitious leprous fester, lepers and Jews alike should die in purifying flames.*

This was possibly the worst mass murder prior to Adolph Hitler. Life with disability got worse as Europe, North Africa, and the Near East were ravaged by plagues. In response, statutes evolved in mid-14th century England regarding vagrants and beggars who were feared as plague carriers.

A person's value at this time was based on his ability to work. A 1349 English law read:

> *Because many beggars, as long as they may live of begging, do refuse to labor, giving themselves to idleness and vice, and sometimes to theft and other abominations; none shall under*

> *the color of pity or alms, give anything to such, which may labor so that thereby they may be compelled to labor for their necessary living.*

What had just become a matter of Christian charity was now forbidden in the interest of wage labor, a system just emerging at the time. In effect, those who were disabled were branded as thieves and wastrels. Society would not bear the burden of caring for them. Those thought able to work might easily have been sent off to the galleys as slaves.

Other laws defined boundaries within which beggars would be allowed to function. In 1531 England, Henry VIII's parliament segregated people with disabilities in separate districts, and later attempted to restrict alms-giving to undesirable vagrants while allowing "lepers and bedridden creatures" to receive of the public good will.

Monasteries in medieval Europe were willing to accept a number of needy souls within their walls as servants or even as monks. In one case, Pope Gregory XIII charged the Arch Confraternity of the Holy Trinity for the Care of Pilgrims and Convalescents with clearing all beggars from the city. Those truly able-bodied were sent away to work for their livelihood; the truly crippled and unable to work were to be maintained in the monastery of Saint Sistro. But when 850 cripples were quickly collected and taken to the monastery, Gregory's plan was swiftly canceled, and Rome was again filled with "importunate and clamorous beggars" according to Compton.

Charity hospitals were also invented in the Middle Ages. Hardly a place of treatment, much less rehabilitation, they functioned as nightmarish storehouses. The number of beggars continued to rise. The numbers on the streets in 17th century Paris became so severe—as many as 40,000—that the founding of a general hospital to deal with them barely made a dent. Other ideas began to take form. One creative suggestion was to locate deformed persons near the blind who would not be offended by them.

**The Church in Modern Time**

Measured against the standards of the time, the church was a virtual pioneer in the care of people with disabilities. It has continued to play this role alongside the governments and other modern charities. However, there still remains a big question as to how the church has treated people with disabilities in regard to spiritual care as compared

to other needs. Too many assumptions have been made about people with disabilities' spiritual state based on an attitude, which can be referred to as "a spread phenomenon". This is characterized by the tendency to draw inferences about a person based on the loss of an obvious functional ability. For instance, the fact that a person does not either see, walk or hear leading to the assumption that he is not capable of committing sin. Disability is in this case assumed to play down not only on one's general health but also his/her natural emotions. Whereas a weak body, a feeble mind or a sensory disability is easily noticeable, this is not so with a weak spirit. Measures are usually attempted to compensate these other physical or sensory disabilities but the soul which might even be easier to put right is either forgotten or ignored all together. The emphasis on the physical dysfunction has often erroneously made people with disabilities feel that their state of being will cause them remission of sin. In the past, the lives of people with disabilities have been spent within conditions of regulated care, mistaken theology and misguided notion of charity. This has been characterized by "caging" them especially in their formative stage in segregated institutions for a long time, bringing about the idea that they are special and different from the rest of society.

The result has been spiritual and social alienation of these from the rest of society. The evidence to this situation is the fact that up to the present time, very few churches are accessible to people with disabilities. Those that permit entry deny further accessibility. A fully accessible church should permit the people with disabilities access to the sanctuary so that they are able to participate in all aspects of the church activities. Fully accessible churches should have programmes for intellectually impaired, some sign language interpreters for the deaf, sitting that can permit wheelchair users to sit with their families and should also assign Sunday readings to blind readers who can read Braille and are willing to do so as a way of encouraging participation. It may be rightly argued that not all congregations can afford these facilities but at least the majority of churches should feel challenged about it.

The situation up to now is that pastors and evangelists do not see the people with disabilities because they do not go to the churches and congregational meetings. The reason why they do not go to these places is either because they cannot get in or cannot participate if they

get there. I am reminded of a hearing impaired friend who approached a pastor after a church service and said: "Pastor, I understood nothing of what you said". The pastor retorted, "Do not worry, God knows that you are deaf". My friend left the church very disappointed as he expected a better solution to this problem but which he realized that he could not get. The deaf are not an exception when the Bible says in Roman 10:13-15: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard and how shall they hear without a preacher?".

For reasons like the example of my friend above and many others, the people with disabilities stay away from the church and pastors think that they do not have disabled people in their parishes. It is an established fact that 10% of the population within a catchment area of any parish is made up of people with disabilities of one type or other. Very often their families do not go to church either. The preparation for eternal life in which our bodily infirmities and other forms of suffering shall be no more calls for opening of doors for all souls by reaching them with the word of God. It does not matter the cost at which this has to be done. Faith has to be created in the hearts of people irrespective of their bodily infirmities since these have no relevance to eternal life. The Bible says again in Romans 10:17, "So then, faith cometh by hearing and preaching the word of God". The church therefore has a duty to reach the people with disabilities as well as their entire families lest their souls should be lost on account of having not been reached with the gospel.

**Social Participation**

It has to be borne in mind that it is not just in realm of spiritual needs that the people with disabilities have received discouragingly separate treatment. They have also not been involved in other social development activities within the church and community in general. The spiritual negligence is only a part of this trend. It is common knowledge that people with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalized and impoverished groups within the society, a fact that most organizations agree in principle. People with disabilities are more likely to be uneducated, unemployed, lack access to health care, vulnerable to abuse and socially marginalized. The church should see itself as the most authentic institution to champion the course of

forging an equal partnership with the persons with disabilities. It is the most legitimate door to participation of people with disabilities in spiritual, social and developmental activities in the community. Equal partnership has to be based on the fact that people with disabilities are not an exception in the society. Rather they are the rule as they have always been. Jesus defined his mission on earth by reference to the people with disabilities. When asked by John's disciples if he was the Messiah, he said "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Mt. 11:4-5 ). This inclusion of all people by Jesus in his work is a sign of his special message to restore the human condition to wholeness. The church is expected to follow this example and to do all that is within its means, not as an option but as a commission by Jesus Christ.

People with disabilities have been misunderstood, overlooked and sometimes discriminated for too long. The biggest obstacle to their meaningful inclusion into mainstream community life is negative public attitudes. These range from overt prejudice and hostility, condescension and pity to ignorance and indifference, and in these diverse ways they influence how we think about both ourselves and other people. In the broadest sense there are two explanations for this phenomenon. The first, and the older of the two, suggests that cultural perceptions of impairment are shaped by deep rooted psychological fears of the abnormal and the unknown. The second, explains disabled people's oppression in terms of material considerations such as the economy and the way that it is organized or what is sometimes termed the mode of production.

In the recent past, the secular World has slowly been taking up the concept of mainstreaming disability as one way to combat the old age tradition of separate treatment of disability concerns. Broadly, Mainstreaming refers to a strategy through which concerns, needs and experiences of disabled people are made an integral part/dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that disabled people benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.[3] The hitherto residual treatment of disability as only a social welfare issue, it was realized, would not lead to emancipation or equality; it was perceived that mainstreaming issues of disability within the broader

development agenda was the only viable/useful way forward.

Though the call for mainstreaming (from Disabled People's Organizations [DPOs]) is not a new one, the last ten years has witnessed significant efforts by Development Agencies and various Governments adopting principles of mainstreaming atleast within its policies. Subsequent to the adoption of the UN Standard Rules in 1993, the USAID formulated its disability policy in 1997 and the same was further given teeth in 2005. Since 2000 the DFID has also been attempting to mainstream disability into its policies. The EU, in 2003, came out with detailed guidelines encouraging its member states to mainstream disability in their international development agenda. The World Bank too demonstrated its commitment in this regard by setting up Disability and Development team to encourage research and networking.[4] The UN through its "Disability Dimension in Development Action: Manual on Inclusive Planning" lays out in detail how issues of disability can be addressed in mainstream development planning and programming.

The World Council of Churches through the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network is moving this direction by advocating for the inclusion, participation and active involvement of persons with disabilities in spiritual, social, developmental and structural life of the church and society.

Despite such an impressive array of efforts, which undoubtedly demonstrates the novel intentions and realization on the part of Development Agencies and Governments regarding the approach to be embraced, studies and experiences on ground continue to bring out a degree of disconnect between policy and practice. This is; therefore, an area in which a lot of work will need to be done especially by the churches since they wield a huge influence in the society.

Three main concerns in realm of cultural perceptions that have so far worked negatively in respect to inclusion and participation in the church life with consequences in the affairs of the general society may be seen as paternalistic and patronizing attitudes, exclusion from participation and an unjustified emphasis on physical healing. These need to be elaborated.

**Paternalistic and Patronizing Attitude**

Quite often, pastors and evangelists are heard eulogizing people with disabilities at church functions, telling other individuals or sometimes

the whole congregation how cheerful the particular person is in spite of his or her disability. Sometimes there may not even be reasonable cause for such eulogy. The utterances only serve to magnify the presence of the disability ignoring other attributes of the person's characteristics. What the people with disabilities want is for the pastor to let them be human, they want him/her not just to choose such single unique attributes to endow them with a special place, rather, they would be much happier if the pastors were to help the parishioners to get over the discomfort with people with disabilities and cut off their exclusion. Closely related to this problem is the general assumption that disabled people are the same in their social behavior, emotional maturity and sometimes even beliefs. Disability has very little, if at all, to do with individual's cognitive or affective processes. People with disabilities are therefore very different in personality from each other and there should not be any reason to believe that one is religious just because you know another one that is religious. There should equally be no reason to take it that one is a Christian because he or she is among a congregation unless there is a personal confession to that effect. This is a tendency that has at times made the disabled people complaisant about their state of being. Burdens of sins are not physical or sensory and cannot therefore be eliminated or even made less by physical or sensory disability. There should be no exception when the Lord says, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I shall give you rest" (Mt. 11:28).

**Exclusion from Participation**

Church ministers, pastors and evangelists want to fulfill the Lord's commission "Go ye therefore and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Mt. 28:19). There is however, more often than not an inadvertent omission of adequately reaching and teaching the majority of the world's 10% population which is disabled. There are various reasons for this state of affairs. Some of this can be identified as emanating from the human affective process. They include among others pity, fear and uneasiness. How do these interplay with our thinking? In general sense, pity has the idea of desperation and contempt. The person being pitied usually rejects it. In our case, it occurs when the pastors and evangelists equate people with disabilities with either general inferiority or general inability of the person. There is often evidence insinuations where these teachers

of the Word of God justify their failure to extend their invitation to the people with disabilities to evangelical or church gathering on the assumption that they cannot, or will find it difficult to get to places of gathering, which is not always the case. In a family situation, the pastor will want to pray "for" the people with disabilities at home while s/he invites the rest of the family members to the gatherings. The negative aspect of pity becomes apparent when the teachers of the Word find themselves as insecure as to seek satisfaction by expressing feeling of being superior all-knowing and all-caring.

Fear manifests itself in different ways. For instance, disabilities are seen by some as works of the devil and the presence of people with disabilities within the congregation is seen to reflect the inability of that church to combat the devil. One finds her/him in an approach avoidance. S/he wants to be seen to invite everybody in the church, as closing the doors to anyone may not be generally acceptable. Yet, the pastor would like to avoid any sign that would manifest spiritual weakness such as the evidence of the works of the devil as might be construed through the presence of people with infirmities in the congregation. The avoidance aspect, which is usually hidden from the conscious, is fought indirectly in various ways. This may sometimes be expressed by desperately invoking healing powers and designating as faithless those on who so desired outcome is not seen to be forth coming. Another dimension of fear is that of shying away from responsibility under the assumption or the perception that limitations of disability may make the anticipated relationship appear to carry with it an overwhelming burden which the church may be unwilling or unable to assume.

Uneasiness mainly emanates from the failure in the first place to have contact with the people with disabilities. The basis of uneasiness is usually uncertainty as to how to treat and to behave with a disabled person. Church ministers and others are often unable to act naturally with people with disabilities because of their own complex about disabilities, their lack of understanding and because their attention gets dominated with the idea of the presence of disability and the imagined limitations it imposes on that person. They remain in the awkward position of wanting to help but being reluctant to ask the concerned person lest they are thought ignorant. It will be necessary to overcome these shortcomings in order to establish full understanding, fellowship and participation of people with disabilities in our churches.

**Emphasis on Physical Healing**

The Bible says: " For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). Presence or absence of physical healing is no exception to these words of Paul, people with disabilities are no less created in the image of God and the state of their physical bodies does not in any way make them less deserving in terms of grace, honor and spiritual nourishment. It is alright if their physical suffering can be healed while they are yet on earth but this should not be made the principle purpose for presenting them before God. A good number of people with disabilities reject the church on the basis of embarrassment by preachers who assume that whenever a person with disability appears in a congregational gathering, he or she is seeking physical healing. In many charismatic meetings, people with disability will even be literally forced in front for prayers and will be designated faithless when such prayers do not take effect. This attitude downplays the people with disability and their spiritual needs. The person is rarely seen as being in need of listening to the Word of God and is merely used to demonstrate individual preacher's power of prayer. We need not in this respect lose sight of Paul's experience when he testified in 2Corinthians 12:7-9 , "Unless I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me lest I should be exalted above measure (v. 8). For this thing I sought the Lord thrice that it might depart from me. (v. 9). And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: then for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore, will I rather glory in infirmities but the power of Christ may rest upon me".

As stated in the WCC Interim statement on Disability, at the beginning of the 21st century, as was the case before the Christian era, sectors of the population who are unable to compete or to perform at the levels that society demands are vitiated, despised or, in more contemporary terms, discarded. Among them, we find a high proportion of people with sensorial, motor and mental disabilities. We will find them living in any of the great cities of the world: men and women of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, colours, cultures and religions who, because they have a disability, live in abject poverty, hunger,

dependence, preventable disease and maltreatment by those who are "able".

It is the role of the church in this new century to face the reality of humanity in the image of a disabled Jesus on the cross; the reality of people with disabilities who are rejected and abandoned. It is painful that the churches throughout the world have not addressed more vigorously the sufferings of marginalized, poor, blind, deaf, and physically and mentally limited people. We do not need pity, or mercy, but compassionate understanding and opportunities to develop our vocations, possibilities and abilities.

In their efforts to attain peace, preserve the environment, ensure the equality of women and the rights of the child, care for the aged, churches and Christians should also include the struggle for the full realization of disabled persons in their agenda.

**Conclusion**

Prejudice and discrimination create a cycle of disability, poverty and marginalization which is broken only when the issues are confronted as issues of justice and when conscientized activists are prepared to challenge the status quo in the spirit of disinterested love. This is the example of true living so eloquently spoken and demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. A call to Christ-like living is a call to disinterested love and justice. It is a challenging call fraught with risk of opposition from the powerful and influential beneficiaries of the status quo. It is, however, not a call that can be considered as optional for anyone who would be faithful to the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ. "It has never been possible for Christian belief to remain a purely private, individualistic matter. From the very beginning and with roots going back to the prophets of ancient Israel, Christianity has always been close to critical conflict with the society in which it exists, championing the cause of the poor against the rich, the weak against the strong, the outcast against the socially successful."[5]

To champion such a cause is to champion the cause of liberation of persons with disabilities, towards their full inclusion and participation in all facets of life.

As the WCC Interim Statement concludes , in our attitudes and actions towards one another, at all times, the guiding principle must be the conviction that we are incomplete, we are less than whole, without

the gifts and talents of all people. We are not a full community without one another. Responding to and fully including people with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church's defining characteristic.

**Endnotes:**

1 (Ndurumo, 1993:3)
2 (Finkelstein, 1980)
3 (Albert, 2005)
4 (Albert, 2005)
5 (Campbell)

## Further Reading

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# Disability and Social Justice in Islamic Societies in Asia

Martin Adhikary

Out of more than 7 billion people in the world today approximately 1billion (c.15%) live with disabilities of one kind or the other. Apart from its social and humanitarian concern, it has also an obvious economic aspect to it. International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that the economic losses incurred due to exclusion of disabled person are 3-7% of global GDP. Today the largest section of the marginalized people in any country in Asia would perhaps be the people with disabilities of different kinds. South Asia region has the largest concentration of persons with disabilities. The disabled people have always been neglected not only by the society in general, but also by their own families and relatives. They are deprived of their human rights. Civil war in Syria during the last seven years rendered nearly 1.5 million people disabled. Accidents, malnutrition, birth-delivery complicacies, diseases, human-made conflicts, violence, wars, and various natural calamities render many disabled all over the world.

Persons with disabilities (PwDs) have been able to come a long way pushing for their genuine rights as a part of humanity. This is a very crucial movement in the history of humankind. One of the most significant achievements is the Convention of the Rights of the People with Disabilities (CRPD). On 3rd December, 2006 the 61st General Assembly of the UNO resolved to accept this first ever global charter of the human rights of people with disabilities. This has been taken as the universal human rights legal framework from 3rd May, 2008. This accepts disability as an accepted diversity in human society and as such emphasizes the need of the protection of the human dignity of the

people with disabilities ensuring their social and human development. One severe form of disability is due to the still-stigmatizing disease of leprosy. From my personal experience of ten years' of working with and for leprosy-affected people I can appreciate how lives of people can be devastated by leprosy and many other stigmatizing health conditions.

PwDs have been subject of society's misconceptions, stereotypes, labeling and prejudices in many ways. Such attitudes have led to neglect, exclusion, mistreatment and deprivation of their rights to equal opportunities for education, jobs and any other essential services. Inclusion means being included in life and participating using one's abilities in day to day activities as a member of the community. It is being a part of the community, and being welcomed and embraced as a member of the community. Inclusion can be experienced in schools, communities, religious activities, etc.

About three-fourth of the total global population lives in Asia. Vincent Smith called India 'an ethnological museum'. As the largest continent Asia it is more with diversities in every known sense of the term with its diversities in religions, cultures, climates, histories, ethnologies, politics, and economics and so on and so forth. It is the home of all the great living faith-systems including Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hard realities here include vulnerability to climate change and global warming, flooding, famine, rising sea-level, environmental pollution, overpopulation, malnutrition, child labor etc. no less mentionable are the problems of violations of human rights, human trafficking, sex-drug-arms trades, religious militancy, abuse of religious dictum and corruption. All of these, directly or indirectly, add to the causes of socio-economic disparities between the rich and the poor. The hydra-headed monster of poverty and deprivation has impact upon the disability issue. It should be noted here also that the Political and ideological problems in the Middle East seem to be perennial. This is a critical Asian problem.

More than 61 % of the total Muslim population in the world inhabits Asian countries, approximately one billion people. Each of about twenty countries has at least 50% of their respective total population who are Muslims. These populations represent a very diverse cultural and ethnic milieu. Some adhere to strict scriptural Islam and some believe in popular Islam. There are others who are in between.

Followers of Islam believe that their faith gives a complete code of

life for humankind for every aspects of life. They strongly believe that Islam furnishes them research-based findings in different aspects of life. Islam enjoins justice in all manners of human life and society. According to Islam 'Man' is the crown of creation (Ashraf-ul maklukath). Sufism teaches that human is created in God's image. Justice is integral to the basic outlook and philosophy of Islam. According to the Islamic teachings having their source in the Quran and the life and teachings of prophet Muhammad (*Hadith*), Muslims are supposed to respect and support all human persons. People with any disability are part of our society and have their rights to participate fully and equally in all kinds of activities. Education is the best place we can start because children who have been separated at school tend to be kept separate as adults through work and all fields of life. Through an inclusive education, children with disabilities remain on a route that leads to an adult life as an active member of society. Meeting all their needs together increases their ability to achieve academic and physical growth and potential, and ultimately it improves their overall quality of life and social status.

Recently I came in touch with three Islamic scholars in Bangladesh: Prof. Mufti Maulana S. M. Usman Goni, Janab Abdullah Al Mamun Al-Ajhari and Maulana Miraj Rahman. In their respective writes-ups they highlighted the noble teachings of Islam concerning the social care and justice for the protection and promotion of the human dignity of the people with any kind of disability. I have studied each of their articles where they talk of autism and disabilities in general with multiple quotations from the Qur'an and the Hadith. Prof. Goni mentions that Prophet Muhammad had appointed his follower Abdullah Ibn Maktum, who was blind, as the governor of Medina in his absence as the Muazzin and also as the Imam of a mosque in Medina. He was also appointed twice as the governor of Medina (Surah Baqara, verse 286; the Hadith: Bukhari and Islam). He also tells us that Allah does not give more burden on anyone than one can bear. Al-Azhari tells that right from the beginning 14 centuries ago Islam called for justice to people with disability and the same will continue till the day of the last Judgment!

It is perhaps useful to note what the paper by Al-Azhari says, "The mystery of unusual creation: Great Allah is the creator of everything. He is the creator of good and bad. But often we see in all his creation that there are things that are unusual and deformed. Many blame the

Creator for these; but He is absolutely holy and blameless; and many give the blame to those very creations." In fact there is a great purpose and mystery behind such creation. Only He knows what it is. However, some reasons like the following could be surmised:

a. That the servants of the Almighty Allah may know about the sovereign authority, that He is almighty in all things. As He is able to create things normal and beautiful so He is also able to do the opposite.

b. He who Allah has kept immune from such abnormalcy may remember Allah's kindness and compassion towards him, and as such expresses his gratefulness. For Allah could do to him likewise had he willed so.

c. Allah wills to grant the disabled person His grace, mercy, forgiveness and heaven in lieu of this condition. The prophet said,"When I take away his two loved (two eyes) and he put up with this in patience and expects reward for this I am not pleased at anything for him other than granting him heaven. (Tirmiji, 2401, Imam Tirmiji says that this Hadith is Hasan Sahih).

Modern Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gulen observes, "Islam promotes equality as the will of God Almighty and requires mutual respect of fellow human beings." Islam embraces every individual and every group with the same quality and warmth. It responds to the expectations and the needs of everyone in the same way. It is shouting at the top of its lungs that no one is superior to another human being. It frequently emphasizes equality and equal opportunities. In one Hadith the Prophet Muhammad says, "God, the Merciful shows mercy to the merciful. Show mercy to those on earth so that God shows mercy on you". (Abu Dauwud, great Scholar on Hadith).

Abdullah Ibn Umm Kaktum, a blind man was the first person to accept Islam. When Prophet Muhammad arrived in Medina he appointed him as one of the Muezzin. On one occasion he gave him the charge of overseeing his work in Medina in his absence. This shows the great value given to disabled person even so far as leadership position is concerned. Julayabib is another case of inclusion in Islamic history. He had a deformed face and he was also a poor man. Nobody wanted to give his daughter in marriage to him. But on Muhammad's request a noble family gave him their daughter in marriage. Later on when Julayabib was murdered in a battle Md. put his hand on his knee and

uttered these words: "This one is of me, and I am of him." This was an utterance of great advocacy for the people for inclusion in society.

During the Golden era of Islam many disabled persons: blind, deaf and otherwise played notable roles, as philologists, scribes, teachers, poets and etc. A black man by the name Atta Ibn Abi Rabah was a lame person. But he became the most reputed Mufti in Mecca.

The term 'Disability' is not used in the Quran and the Sunnah (Hadith). But the word 'disadvantaged' is used instead. Muslim's public view on disability is based on their faith in Allah, who is Creator and Sustainer of all and their destinies. Islam teaches: if a human does 'an atom's weight of God' he will be rewarded by Allah. Taking care of people in need will be rewarded in this world and in the next.

Sometimes parents feel guilty if they have children, who are not 'normal'. They feel that they are punished for some sin that they committed before. This superstitious belief delay seeking help. This guilt leads to a shame. Sometimes people think of 'an evil eye' or 'Hasad', or possession by jinni or of black magic for abnormality. This does not, however, have clear root in Islamic teaching. Islamic teaching is that we can protect ourselves from the evil eye by trusting Allah.

Disability is considered morally neutral. It is neither a punishment from God, nor a blessing. Physical deformity does not reflect spiritual deformity. A human's worth in the sight of God depends on spiritual development, and not on any physical and material possession or attributes. One saying of the prophet Muhammad in the Hadith is 'Verily Allah does not look to your bodies, nor to your faces, but He looks to your hearts." (Sahih Muslim 32:6220). "Although the Quran removes any stigma against people with disabilities and theoretically should remove all barriers to their inclusion, full inclusion for many Muslims with disabilities remains an unfulfilled reality. Muslims acknowledge the concept of free-will and its nuanced balance with fate. Advice by Prophet Muhammad from Hadith literature instructs people to 'Trust in God, but tie up your camel.' In other words human beings should be active rather than passive participants in the world, and at the same time they should realize that the ultimate outcome of the effort lies with Allah. The Islamic scripture says,

> After all, God has promised us that our lives are a test for us. Degrees and forms of our trials vary from person to person, even family to family. However, it is up to us to have fortitude,

> accept our fate, and then actively work to make the best out of them. Indeed, God has promised that 'With every hardship there is relief (94.5) and that 'No person shall have a burden laid on him greater than he can bear.'" (2.286).

In our modern days people with increased awareness about physical reasons behind disabilities do not believe in many such superstitions. Disabled people have now more access to religious places than before. Quran recitals are available for the blind persons in Braille (in Saudi and Malaysian versions). In some mosques sign language is used to interpret Khutbah on Fridays in mosques. In Hajj there are distinct 'Tawaf' around the Kaaba on wheel chairs with the help of volunteers. Now some Malaysian research groups are trying to devise ways how to teach autistic children how to pray.

Reputed Islamic scientists and physicians during the middle ages like Al-Hafez, Ibn Sina, and Avicenna made great contributions and wrote books on medicine and on disabilities. For medical care of disabilities the main Islamic law known as Islamic Jurisprudence or Fiqh primarily based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, overall medical care for disabilities has witnessed by now great development and changes.

In one of his many paper on 'Establishing Equalization: Rights of the people with disabilities'. A.H.M. Noman Khan, who received Ramon Magsaysay award for his dedicated service for the cause of the disabled people in Bangladesh said, "Social discrimination on people with disability is very common. They are often looked at with over sympathy or neglect. They are left out of social affairs and activities. They are associated with inactivity, divine curse, fear, hatred, etc. No one usually mix with them. They are mistreated and exploited in all spheres of social life. They are relatively invisible in social functions and gatherings."[2]

The paradigm shift from viewing children as having disabilities to viewing their abilities, and from a well fare approach to a rights-based approach is yet to be realized in the country. Social norms and cultural beliefs around disability are deeply rooted: For example, the belief that disability is a "curse" and a punishment for "sinful" behavior remains strong at all levels of society and affects access to adequate care, health, services, education and participation. Laws and policies continue to discriminate, are slow to be implemented and are often

not adequately funded" (UNICEF publication).[3] For a large number of children with disabilities, treatment at home is not equitable or supportive, since very poor families often see the child as a burden. With limited knowledge and support, families also may keep children with disabilities sequestered at home, in some cases to avoid shame, and many children are neglected or exploited (UNICEF publication). Women and girls with disabilities are more prone to such situations. They are usually subjected to problems like gender based violence, sexual exploitation, and they actually avoid pleading in order to avoid further denigration.

**Bangladesh**

Bangladesh ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on November 30, 2007 and its Optional Protocol on May 12, 2008. As for Article 12, persons with disabilities have equal right before law. Article [4] (1) (a) states that State Parties will formulate and implement law to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Article 12 (5) states that States Parties will take the necessary initiatives to ensure the equal right to own and inherit property, control their own financial affairs, and get loans like others. Article 13 states persons with disabilities have the right to access to justice. And articles 15, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 up to 30 are also relevant. Bangladesh had the new Act passed by the national Parliament in 2013 The Protection of the Rights of Disabled Persons in line with UN CRPD. If implemented this will prove to be a great blessings for the society at large, especially for the millions of people with disabilities in the country.

Educational institutes especially primary schools do not usually take disabled children. If a child with a disability is admitted in an educational institute, he or she doesn't get their facilities which are specifically needed for different types of disability. Children with psychosocial disabilities do not get many chances to be in inclusive education, as much as children with other disabilities have (which chances are already small), making the chances of children with psychosocial disabilities almost zero. It is very difficult to get permission for writers who write exams on behalf of visually impaired children. Braille text books and materials, including writing frames and stylus are too expensive.

In the society, women with disabilities are facing gang rape,

trafficking, kidnapping and murder after rape. Most of the cases are handled by DPOs or NGOs with the cooperation of legal services organizations. But most cases linger on. There is a law to protect women and girls from abuse and torture. But this Prevention of Cruelty against Woman and Children Acts 2000 and 2003 is hardly implemented for protecting women and girls with disabilities from being abused and neglected.

There should be stern monitoring of all of the issues mentioned by the government and this should be rigorous. All types of laws and policies should be amended in the light of the CRPD. Disability should be included as a cross-cutting issue in all relevant ministries. Resource allocation should be proportionate and should be increased in light of the CRPD. The rules of business of the ministries should be amended to include persons with disabilities.

In Bangladesh, the country is still at the level of learning the basics about the rights of persons with disabilities. Still we are learning about ramps, toilets, inclusive education, employment, etc. Persons with disabilities in Bangladesh believe that the process of change should be faster. Whenever they want to say about their rights, people say things will change, have patience, but nothing is changing as expected. There are more than 300 big or small organisations (GO and NGO) in Bangladesh working with disabilities of all kinds. Recently Government has started to work for the transgender (Hijra) people, who suffer from alienation and stigma.

**Other Asian Islamic Countries**

Discussing the Indonesian scenario Ro'fah Mudzakir[5] sees a paradigm shift that has taken place during the last decades from individual-medical model to a social model. This emergence of human rights approach has good impacts: socially, politically and academically. Mudzakir also points out that it is widely acknowledged in literature that people with disabilities in many cultures witness negative experiences of discrimination and marginalization from the mainstream society. Cultural, religious and social values are considered to be responsible for this negative treatment of people with disability. Disabilities are seen by some as caused by evil spirit, sin, parents' misconduct during pregnancy, conception on a holy day, that they are sexually hyperactive or even asexual.

In an analysis of the Qur'an and Hadith that looked specifically for references to disability, Bazna and Hatab (2005) found that the generic term was not used in the conventional sense, but the Qur'an does refer to disability in a progressive sense. For example, the Qur'an uses Arabic terms for descriptions of people with disabilities including blind, deaf, lame, mentally retarded, and leprosy. It also includes some broad terms for weak, lame, sick, orphaned, destitute/needy, wayfarer and disadvantaged (Bazna & Hatab, 2005); categories that in the current context is not associated with people with disability.

According to a Research Report the situation in Pakistan seems to be more or less the same as in Indonesia and Bangladesh. The prevailing negative attitude to the entire phenomena of disability needs to have a transformation. People need to move from a culture of sympathy and pity of medical or welfare approach to the right-based approach. Philippa Thomas, Expert on Disability says, "The discrimination that persons with disabilities face is severe and widespread, but it's largely based on ignorance, not on hatred. It is not like racial discrimination. People don't hate disabled people; they just don't know how to relate to them."[6]

Abia Akram observes, "Having a disabled daughter is a huge burden for the family. Culturally, women are to get married and get out of the homes. Even the siblings are not getting good proposals because people think that if a family member has a disability, they will later give birth to children with disabilities."[7]

**Broader Asian Situation**

We can understand all the negative thinking discussed above when we learn that great Christians like Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century indicated that mentally and physically disabled persons were demon-possessed and as such they subjected such people to mental and physical pain as a means of exorcising the spirits (from section 5.3 People's attitudes towards people with physical disabilities worldwide of People with physical disabilities and their working life (a case study about Finnish people with physical disabilities.)

History abounds with examples of people who took their predicaments and showed that disability can be conquered. Helen Keller lost her eye-sight, hearing and speech at the age of two. Nothing deterred her from becoming one of the most intelligent and famous

woman in history. Ata bin Abi Rabah, a lame, paralyzed man and one having only one eye to see was the best Imam in his time. Double amputees Mark Inglis (NZ), and Chinese Xia Boyu (at the age of 69) climbed up Mount Everest. Australian Steve Plain climbed the highest mountains of all the seven continents. Professor Stephen Hawking, a wheel chair-bound severely disabled person for most of his life turned out to be the greatest physicist and cosmologist in our time. Examples of this kind can be multiplied.

In Israel today Muslim clergy find it of immense value for transforming the mind-set of people specially those of the disabled people the teaching and preaching the message that disability is not a thing to hinder in any pursuit in life.[8]

Many Muslim majority countries in Asia are poor and also are developing; many are rich and technologically and scientifically very advanced. In such countries from Arabians region there are local features that contribute to higher disability rate: higher maternal and paternal age, familial marriage, poverty, illiteracy, etc. In rich countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, care-giving institutions for the intellectually handicapped are providing remarkable jobs. In Malaysia now researchers are trying to devise ways for teaching people with autism how to pray. There is obvious gap between developed and the poor countries. Poor ones lack in resources of different kinds. Naturally they lag behind in providing PwD with things that ensure inclusion and mainstreaming. There is a dearth of research on disability.

Fatalism in Islamic countries combined with poverty, religious and cultural superstitions play a big negative role in dealing with the disability issues. Millions of disabled people in our countries live by begging and are made to beg for survival. Many children are maimed for begging. These horrendous crimes must be dealt with by governments and societies. There is no alternative to raising social awareness and doing advocacy with the policy makers about disability. People in general need awareness, education and information. The government authority needs to sincerely do their best for the adequate implementation of policies and protocols. In societies like that in Asia, religious leaders have a great role to play in disseminating the lofty ideals that they believe for transforming the attitude of people.

A jointly prepared Status Report by National Grass-roots Disabilities Organizations (106 DPOs), National Council of Disabled Women (111

Grass-root organizations of women and girls) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) on the implementation of the CRPD in Bangladesh had this to say: "Key study findings suggest that PwDs? face particular vulnerabilities to violence and injustice, due to financial incapacity and lack of safe and secure environment. Low levels of knowledge regarding legal rights and remedies among PwDs? together with discriminatory societal attitudes and negligent and insensitive attitudes of the police and justice sector actors exacerbate their vulnerabilities."[9]

**Positive Developments**

Recently Bangladesh Wheel Chair Cricket Team has won championship in a bilateral three-match T20 series. The captain of this cricket team Mohammad Mohsin and the other players have physical limitations but still they are able to play cricket and enjoy the taste of life from a wheelchair.

The following quote from a Bangladesh national daily (*The Daily Sun*, 29 April, 2018) speaks a lot about the sure hope for great improvement in the disability problem in spite of all the hurdles in question:

"Time has changed and so our perception needs to change. No one in society is a burden even if he/she is a person with disability. Our care, love and support can always encourage talent like Mohsin and Misti who has been able to change mindset towards those who are confined by their physical limitations. Mohsin, Ibrahim and Misti are evidence of how differently abled people are no less than those without any disabilities. If we do our moral and ethical duties towards them, care for them with regard to their rights, their wellbeing and their desires, they will bloom like flowers to achieve excellence in different fields.

If we are sincere in our duties in own places that would be enough, as a student if we are supportive to our differently enabled friends, as a colleague if we move for inclusiveness and right of persons with disabilities, as established women if we support girls suffering from family and social obstacles, as a human being if we support whenever we see someone with disabilities facing difficulties in their life. With such positive perceptions we can become an inclusive society – a society where every disabled person will have proper care, rights,

dignity, support for personal and professional excellence and growth."

The 3rd Asia-Pacific Community Based Congress was held in 2015 in Tokyo around the significant theme 'Poverty reduction through Community-based Inclusive Development (CBID) and Sustainable Development Goals'. At the inaugural ceremony Ms. Tulika Das, the former Acting chair aptly commented, "We all are witnessing lots of positive developments and steps forward to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream society with dignity."

I partly attended the Second International Conference on Disability and Disaster Risk Management held in Dhaka during 15-18 May, 2018. A 9-point Action Plan was announced at that conference attended by more than 100 official delegates from 35 countries. The aim of the Action Plan is the improvement of the life of the PwDs as well as enhancing disaster risk management around the world.

In his thesis 'Towards a Theology for Christian Mission and development work with socially excluded people' Dr. Steve Withington, former Country Director of The Leprosy Mission International Bangladesh comments on the radical inclusivity of Jesus, in his life, teaching and table fellowship, and his call to honor diversity and respect but also promote societal unity: "The transformation of society, according to the gospel values. . . is seen as a valid overarching goal in mission and evangelism alongside the challenge to call out and build community of God in which diversity is valued, but also in some measure subordinated to a higher call to unity through grace in the shadow of the cross."[10]

**Conclusion**

Disabled people are differently abled people. They construct a diversity, which needs to be accepted in love and empathy. They are a part of the creation, the human family. There are a plethora of Charters and Conventions, protocols, plans and papers for the cause of a human society that will be empathetic and pragmatic for ensuring inclusive growth, human dignity and genuine rights for the people with disabilities. Scriptures and religious dictums or Fatwas abound. But nothing will avail without empathy and justice. Our depraved will, intelligence and emotion -- all need to change and be galvanized by genuine ecumenical vision, love and compassion for changing the scenario. Especially in the poor and developing nations there is no

alternative to political commitment on the part of the governments, continued social awareness, goodwill and good governance. Einstein remarked, "The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." "Any-one, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17).

**Endnotes**

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2 Noman was also the Secretary General of National Forum of Organisations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD) for many years. NFOWD is the Apex body of around 300 suc NGOs. He is the Executive Director of Centre for Disability in Development, Bangladesh.

3 UNICEF Bangladesh: Analysis of the situation of Children and Women in Bangladesh 2015 ( 2.5: 2.5.1: Disability).

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6 Philippa Thomas quoted in Mainstreaming persons with disabilities in Pakistan: A custom research report produced for the British Council, August 2014

7 Abia Akram of National Forum of Women with Disabilities (as above), Pakistan.

8 *From Translating disability in a Muslim community: A case study of Modular translation*. by Nissim Mizrachi.

9 BLAST Status Report (March, 2015), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

10 In his thesis 'Towards a Theology for Christian Mission and development work with socially excluded people' Steve J. Withington, former Country Director of The Leprosy Mission International Bangladesh made the statement in the Conclusion section..

# Challenges Faced by Women with Disabilities in Pakistani Religious and Cultural Context

Rufus Kamran

## Introduction

Women with Disabilities (WwDs) is one of the most marginalized groups in Pakistani society as they are disadvantaged through their status as women in patriarchal society, as persons with disabilities and living in abject poverty. Women and girls with disabilities, to a greater extent than boys and men with disabilities, face discrimination within the family, and are denied access to health care, education, vocational training, employment and income generation opportunities. They are also excluded from community activities. They live in the most vulnerable conditions. In Pakistani culture, women are discriminated since from the time of their birth. They are denied of nutrition, immunization and medical interventions. Even if women are qualified and skilled, they are paid less than their male counterparts at work, given fewer loans for education or self-employment, and they have to face stronger barriers in accessing vocational training, leisure facilities and justice.

It is not surprising that in Pakistan where being female itself is debilitating, women with disabilities live at the very peripheries of society, differentiated and unequaled by a culture that is patriarchal religiously obscurantist and anti-women. The family, community, institutions and the state - the touch stones of human civilization - are all against them. Seventy per cent of population live in rural areas in the most appalling conditions where even provision of rehabilitation services and assistive devices is discriminatory, making everyday living

a challenge. In Pakistan, there is social stigma attached to persons with disabilities. Disabilities are concealed within families so as not to limit the marriage prospects of relatives who might otherwise be suspected of carrying defective genes. Religion perpetuates superstitions about the disabled. Families bear an extra expense in caring for a disabled member, due to loss of additional labor, increased demands on resources for taking care of the disabled member, and increased need to compensate with higher fertility. There is a lack of social institutional support for care of the disabled.

**My personal experience of interaction with a blind woman**

On October 16, 2018, I got a chance to meet with a blind woman of about 35 to 40 years old at Shuttle Service Center in Islamabad. As we were sitting on the same bench waiting for our turn to collect our bags and mobile phones, I had a brief conversation with her. During my conversation, I came to know that she has done her Masters in International Relations. She wanted to go to India for her treatment of her blindness. She is unmarried and dependent on her brother's family. She was a teacher for the last eight years in a private school and has raised some money for her treatment. She came to know that in India, there is a surgical operation facility available for this type of blindness. She was hopeful that after the surgical operation, she would be able to see. However, all her hopes shattered when she came to know that her visa was turned down. This blind woman came to Indian Embassy with her teenager male nephew to collect her passport. When I inquired about the reason of her visa rejection, she told me that "being a Muslim woman, they might have suspected that I am involved in some terrorist activity in India". I was shocked. Why no sympathy towards such a blind lady? She also shared a poem, *Unseem* with me, written by Saima Ammar, the innermost feeling of a blind person. This poem explains the pain and suffering of many blind and disable people in our society.

**Unseen**

The thought that from my sightless eyes
May drip sight when I blink next time
Saddens me
Saddens me to the core of my heart
For long I stand and think, think of precious things
That the sight thus bestowed will snatch, snatch forever.

I think of reading, reading and writing by touch,
Climbing stairs, climbing stairs with measured steps,
Colors forever revealing and concealing colors,
Rain, falling rain and the music of falling rain drops,
Leaves and the feel of my fallen leaves collection,
Of these things, and many more, I think as I stand for long.
As I stand for long, I think, I think
Of muted protests and perseverance shown
Against all odds, all odds tiny and great.
I think, think of the tapping sound, tapping sound of my white cane,
I think, think of the state of mind lost, lost after having lost the way,
I think, I think of his thoughts, mind-blowing thoughts,
Flying me on their wings, higher, higher still
And taking me to distant lands, lands unseen, unseen by human eyes,
I think, I think of a voice, his voice,
And the way it makes me turn, turn to him,
Of these things, I mourn, as I stand for long
Yes, with the bestowed sight, I will be able to see flowers,
Oh yes beautiful flowers, and with them dust also.
Oh yes the bestowed sight will make me see things,
All the things and all of my near and dear ones
That all my life I have seen with sightless eyes,
The bestowed sight will make me see, see them all,
And shake and break my very being to its core,
For long, I stand and think, I think of precious things,
That the sight thus bestowed will snatch, snatch forever.

The poem reflects the feeling and longing of disabled people. They need our solidarity and love. Do we support them? Do we care for them? We need our religion and culture treat our fellow disabled brother and sisters.

**Religion and Culture in Pakistani Society**

Islam is the dominant religion of Pakistan. Religion is the fundamental characteristics of Pakistani society. Few people dare to call themselves secular in public. Seculars also pretend to be religious in order to avoid the wrath of society and attacks by extremists. In Pakistani society, individuals start learning about religion literally, as soon as they are born. In the laps of their mothers, children listen to parents and other family members reciting the Quran (the Holy Scripture of Muslims). In

schools, Islamic Studies is a compulsory subject from the beginning to the graduation level. Most children receive daily lessons from Islamic religious teachers who visit their houses, or attend classes at mosques and madrassas (Islamic religious teaching based schools) on how to recite the Quran and read other Arabic texts. Mosques are spread across the country; almost all of them are equipped with loudspeakers. *Aazan* (call to prayer in Islam),Friday sermons and prayers, and sermons on other religious occasions are delivered using the loudspeaker. Clerics and students at madrassa use loudspeakers whenever they want to recite Quranic verses, or sing praise of God and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or to deliver a speech to convey or remind people of the religious commandments. In everyday social interaction, individuals are keen to teach others on how to follow the religion and conform to the injunctions ordained by God, His prophets and religious authorities and leaders. Against this backdrop, one can imagine the extent of influence religion has on people's lives and behaviors.

In recent years, a visible transformation has taken place in religious environment of Pakistan with the emphasis on continuity of religious conservatism. Violent religious behavior has emerged with full force. Pakistani society is moving from spiritual Islam to a violent version of Islam propagated by individuals and groups that subscribe to a militant ideology. As religious tolerance has waned, intolerant religious behavior is on the rise. With a few exceptions, various interpretations of Islam are getting more rigid day by day, making the religious behavior more inflexible and extremist as well.

The overwhelming majority of people in Pakistan accept the righteousness of the religious authorities (clerics, preachers, prayer leaders, etc.) and follow their advice and interpretation of religion. Many people believe that clerics, religious teachers and scholars and prayer leaders are actively serving Islam and society. Whereas the fact of the matter is that figures of religious authority do not allow change to take place in certain social institutions. The institution of 'honor' of men and women and violence in the name of 'honor' is one example. The woman, in general, is not seen as an entity in her own right, but as the honor of her male relatives, including father, brother, husband and son. Male family members take the life of a female relative if they feel that her actions or even her existence has slighted their 'honor' and consider that murdering such a woman would redeem their 'honor'. Frequently, women are married, despite their objections, to men chosen by the

women's male relatives. The majority of the clerics delivering sermons in mosques or religious congregations condone crimes committed in the name of 'honor' or act as if they do not negate the principles of Islamic or human rights. This has serious implications for social development as well as for women's rights and their empowerment. Many deem a woman working outside her house to earn money for the family is bringing dishonor to her family. If a man is unemployed and his wife or sister is employed, he is called "*bayghairat*," (one who has no honor) for living off money earned by female relatives. Most men do not tolerate female family members working to earn a livelihood in order to 'maintain family honor'. As a consequence, a huge number of women are unable to grow personally, socially, economically, and politically. On the one hand, such restrictions deprive them of the right to realize their potential, while on the other hand, the process of social development does not gain its full momentum because half of the population is not allowed to work outside the house.

Many Muslims believe that educating girls might encourage them to go astray. Parents either do not allow their daughters to join a school at all or discontinue their education after they reach the age of puberty, around the middle or matriculation level. Some of them argue that if a girl learns to read and write, she may engage in un-Islamic romantic affairs by writing letters to men.

**Cultural Norms and Traditions associated with Birth of Disable Children**

In Pakistani society, the disabilities of any household members are a sensitive issue and it is always hidden. Mental retardation, physical deformities and mental ailments are considered as a stigma for the families due to which the family name is considered at risk. The handicap members of the family, who are suffering from inborn problems such as psychological concerns, consider a threat to the family social status. Majority families in the country hide the person with disabilities from others and they feel shy to introduce persons with disabilities in the society. Some poor families in villages consider disabling persons as a sign of religious symbols; they think the people with disability, are spiritual persons that are sent their families for good blessings, some families consider them curse for their selves. However, they use disabled people to generate extra income in the form of "Nazranna" (a type of donation/charity).

In the context of Pakistani culture, having a child with a disability is often perceived negatively and such children are stigmatized. If a baby girl is disabled, it is always seen as curse and burden in terms of finding a suitable partner for her marriage. Often superstitious beliefs are associated with such individuals and considered as divine punishment due to sins committed by the parents during their lifetime. Parents feel ashamed, embarrassed and guilty. Consequently, while attempting to keep the matter in private, parents fail to seek assistance to treat their disabled children. The presence of any disability whether congenital problems or psychological is considered a threat to the family's social status.

The stigma associated with the disability originates from the fear of discriminatory behavior from others. The dependence of such individuals on their family members to perform their functions and duties becomes another fear of stigma and alienation for these disable persons. The absence of social norms that accommodate disabled person's roles intensifies fear of stigma especially when the disability is congenital. Disabled individuals who are able to perform their roles later in life gradually adjust in the main course of daily life. The presence of a disable Person in the household is made known when such an individual is not considered a threat to the family's name and social status or when the family feels appropriate to provide socialization to handicapped persons beyond their own family.

Pakistan is a poverty-stricken society; where additional hands are always needed to become part of family's labor and are expected to supplement family income, the presence of disability is considered a curse and a part of fate of the family.

The role-played by faith healers and 'Pirs' (Islamic spiritual leaders) strengthen the desire of the family to have extra hands as part of family's labor. The assumed pressure of having additional children leads towards reproduction within a short span of time. These continuous pregnancies create more chance of congenital disabilities and it also becomes a dangerous risk for maternal health.

**Sexual Health of Disabled Persons in Pakistani Cultural Context**

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Pakistan is closely enmeshed within larger cultural frameworks like marriage and is regulated through socio-cultural discourses like stigma and shame. Marriage is

the primary gateway for accessing mainstream sexual and reproductive health services for most women in Pakistan. Unmarried women who are sexually active (illegal sex/prostitutes) often have to claim that they are married in order to access services.

The Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) of a disable woman are also denied, as she is considered incompatible for married life and to produce children. In some particular areas of Sindh province, the disable women are married with Quran (The holy book of Muslims) by the male members of the family to keep and grab the share of land of their disabled sisters and daughters.

The women with disabilities have no or little access to health facilities in most of the rural areas in Pakistan. For deaf women, the provision of quality healthcare services and health education programs are often compromised due to language barriers.

Disability is seen as a stigma which leads to undermining of status and social disapproval. Marrying a disabled woman leads to stigmatization and devaluation of the husband and his family, which acts as a deterrence to such marriages. These beliefs render disabled women "unmarriageable" in popular view. This is one of the key reasons why disabled women are automatically omitted from mainstream reproductive health discourses and legal rights. In the case of psychosocial disabilities, there are accounts of women who have been viewed as hypersexual or unfit to perform their marital duties and were forcibly incarcerated by families.

The reduced marriage's ability of disabled women in Pakistan is a manifestation of systematic oppression of patriarchal system. The marriage, which is the primary avenue for sexual validation and the sanctum of reproduction in Pakistan, is denied for disable women, hence, these disable women are again automatically denied socially from their valued gendered roles like wife and mother. This has a significant impact on their ability to exercise their Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR).

Even those who become pregnant within wedlock are viewed with suspicion. There is a biomedical hysteria regarding the potential transmission of undesirable impairments through the reproductive bodies of disabled women. The genetic perpetuation of impairments in families compounds shame and stigma. There are concerns regarding disabled women's fitness and capacity to become mothers. Hence, the

pregnant disabled woman is viewed as adding burden to the family.

Most facilities, including private SRH clinics, remain inaccessible to those with physical impairments. Communication becomes the key barrier for hearing-impaired individuals when accessing SRH-related information and services.

There is a lack of sign language interpreters in Pakistan and most healthcare facilities either in hospitals or in private clinics for deaf people remain inaccessible on that basis. The deaf woman does not know about death of her baby after giving birth, as the medical staff cannot communicate about the case of her high blood pressure symptoms and other alarming situations during their pregnancies. In Pakistan, the cultural barriers also affect the health issues of deaf women. If the pregnant woman is deaf and observe purdah (full veil), the male is not allowed to interpret her language even in a serious condition due to strict purdah practice.

**Marriage and Parenting of Motherhood of Disabled Women in Pakistani Cultural Context**

In Pakistan, the marriage market is segmented by many parameters. The most important ones are religion, caste, ethnicity and disability,which determine the criteria of selection or exclusion. For finding a good marriage match, if the person fulfills all the other criteria (for example, same religion and faith, good education, good looking, sound financial background, well known and well reputed in the area) but do not have the desired caste and ethnicity, most of the people are ready to compromise on caste and ethnicity, but they do not compromise if the matching partner is disable. The reason is that caste, ethnicity do not directly affect the lives of husband and wife, and they believe that if they choose a partner with disability, they will become stigmatized in the society and disability will become an obstacle for their smooth life. The parents of the normal person never want to marry their son with a disable woman, in exceptional case if the normal person and disable woman fell in love, and they became successful in marrying with each other, it will bring a bad repute for the man's family.

Moreover, parenting, and in particular motherhood, is linked to the dominant narrative of being a protector and caregiver. In the case of women with disabilities, the need to address their right to parenting and reproduction needs to be looked at as a continuum. Mostly in rural

areas, the decisions about the right to parent for those with disabilities take place in childhood (at the time of puberty) often as part of a series of protectionist measures and can often take the extreme form such as sterilization and hysterectomy. Judging the quality of the fetus remains strongly embedded within a medical discourse. Even as access to abortion remains restricted, (abortion without the consent of the husband is an illegal act in Pakistan) and abortion itself stigmatized, access to disability-selective abortions remains normalized and encouraged by service providers.

The idea that a woman with disability cannot be a "good mother" and caregiver remains strongly entrenched as a societal norm. Families and caregivers deploy a raft of protectionist measures, from the more benign confinement within the home to the extreme hysterectomy and sterilization, based on a belief that women with disabilities are incapable of providing consent and pregnancy can only be the result of non-consensual sex, an act of violence. It is worth pointing out that this can vary depending on the type of disability. It is important to note that not all women, including women with disabilities, want to reproduce and embrace motherhood.

Women's choice to undergo an abortion, be a surrogate, or hand over newborn children for adoption, reflect the complex ways women view reproduction and motherhood. The continuum of experiences of women with disabilities through childhood and adulthood as mediated by society, law and institutions remains both a complex and contested domain that mediates the experience of reproduction and parenting of women with disabilities.

**Sexual Violence with Women and Girls with Disability**

In Pakistan, girls and women with disabilities are considered soft targets of rape and sexual harassment and are more vulnerable to exploitation compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Recently, on August 11, 2018 a minor deaf and dumb girl was raped at Chak No. 562/GB, Lundianwala, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. The girl was playing in a bazaar when accused Attaullah took her to fields where he allegedly raped her. Later, some passersby caught the accused and handed over to the police after beating him up.

Most such incidents go unreported to the police. With victims already stigmatized because of their disability, refraining from doing so

for fear of further stigmatization. Women and girls with disabilities in Pakistan who survive sexual violence face serious challenges and high barriers in access to justice system. They lack equal access to justice, and remain invisible victims of sexual violence.

**National Legislation and Policy for Disable People of Pakistan**

*The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973*: The Constitution is greatly silent about the rights of the persons with disability. In one sense, their rights can be seen as equals to all other citizens who are without any disability. However, Article 38 (d) talks about the promotion of social and economic well-being of the people by the state. It says that the State has to "provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, education and medical relief, for all such citizens, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race, as are permanently or temporarily unable to earn their livelihood on account of infirmity, sickness or unemployment." The Article provides protection to all persons with disabilities including women and girls.

*Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) 1860*: In Section 332 (1) of the PPC, the act of disabling the organ of the body of someone is considered hurt, which carries around 10 years imprisonment.

*The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2002*: It is a comprehensive document that has a vision, guiding principles and strategies to achieve the objectives leading to the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Since the disability is crosscutting, over-arching, multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary subject, therefore, the policy was prepared in consultation with the relevant ministries including health, labor & human power, housing & works, science and technology and departments and prominent NGOs. The policy included administrative, legal and other measures for providing facilities to persons with disabilities from prenatal to postnatal period through proper assessment education, vocational training and employment.

In Pakistan, there are no updated statistics on the number of persons with disabilities, and in specific, there are no updated statistics on women and girls with disabilities, and what types of disabilities they are affected of. Disability has been recognized and included in the census; however, statistics on disability suffer from inadequacies such as lack of standardized definitions. Recently, the government of

Punjab, Pakistan has issued Khidmat cards scheme for persons with disabilities. The purpose of this scheme is to benefit the persons with disabilities with financial assistance. Each registered person with disability will receive round about 10 US Dollar every month.

**Ministerial challenges for Church in Pakistan**

Danger of imposing blasphemy law on Christian ministers: The state religion in Pakistan is Islam, which is practiced by 96% of the population. Although the constitution of Pakistan gives the Freedom of religion, evangelism among Muslims is a difficult task as there is always a danger of imposing blasphemy law on Christians. The Pastors cannot take the message of good news to Muslim disable persons. The Muslims would consider it as a tool of conversion from Islam to Christianity and preaching Gospel. There is always a risk of implicating blaming blasphemy laws (295 A, B, and C) on Christians. So most of the pastors and ordained Christian ministers in Pakistan avoid contacting with Muslim disable people.

**Non-existence of disability discourse in theological education:** In Pakistan, there are a few theological schools, but the schools are not disabled accessible and subject on disability discourse is not taught in seminary. Due to absence of disability curriculum, students are not taught on how to interpret the Bible from disability perspective.

**Lack of leadership for social transformation:** Churches lack leadership on social transformation. The disabled people suffer due to lack of disabling social structure. There is also social and religious hierarchy in churches which alienate people on the basis of their ability. Social transformation needs to be trickled down at grass root level's leadership.

**Lack of compassion and commitment among church workers:** Due to lack of theological awareness, there is a lack of compassion and commitment among church workers towards disable persons. Most of the church workers are not motivated to serve among the least privileged people. They are unable to deliver the love of Christ to disable people and their families. One will also notice that many church workers have no experience to deal with disable persons in their congregations and to share God's love with the disabled community.

**Lack of financial assistance from Church:** The disable people seek and expect some financial assistance from the Church, but unfortunately, in Pakistan most of the congregations and churches are poor and have very limited financial resources. They are not in position to help the disable people in their respective communities. Second, due to limited financial resources, pastors have limited outreach access to these disable persons in their congregations particularly in rural areas.

**Church buildings are inaccessible:** Most of the church buildings have no stairs and no ramps for disable persons in Pakistan. The narrow doorways of the church also create hurdle for persons who come with wheelchairs to enter in the Church. There is also no volunteers among its congregation members to help and facilitate the disable persons during worship service.

**Church has no sign language interpreters for deaf people:** Unfortunately, no church has sign language interpreters for deaf people. Consequently, the deaf people are unable to attend the church service and thus they are isolated from the other congregation. The church has to devise communication strategies to bridge the gap between the deaf and normal people.

**Recommendations**

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) are needed for investigating cases of sexual assault on women with disabilities. There is need to set up monitoring and regulatory mechanisms for institutions where disabled women are lodged, given the extensive neglect and abuse within these institutions. It is also important to maintain disaggregated data of sexual assaults on disabled women by the statistics department of Pakistan. Such data would help comprehend the scale of these crimes and promote support advocacy work.

It is important to highlight the issue of sexual assaults from the perspective of women with disabilities to the government. Sex education must be provided to disabled children and young people by trained teachers and caregivers to ensure their safety and holistic development and to address the needs of disabled victims of sexual assault.

Government should also upgrade policies and foster practices to ensure that health services including SRHR services are disable friendly.

Collaboration among stakeholders, including disability organizations and supporting partners, will promote access to information and services related to SRHR.

The government needs to initiate compilation of gender-disaggregated disability data, include the disability dimension in all policy-making and budgeting exercises, and encourage the private sector to promote disability-inclusive business practices.

The relevant authorities need to ensure that accessibility codes are incorporated in the design of footpaths and building in Pakistan. Both federal and provincial governments need to establish mobility-training centers for the blind. Furthermore, there is urgent need for establishing national helpline service to provide counselling service to persons with disabilities and their families.

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# Disability and Education: Current Educational Challenges Faced by Children with Disabilities

Tha Uke

## Introduction

In the most recent Myanmar census which is done in 2014, reported that among 51 million country population 4.6% of the population are persons with disabilities, around 2.37 million. Among them 1.7% are children with disabilities. Regarding access to education by children with disabilities, according to the census report, 63% of children with disabilities never attend school throughout their life.

Myanmar is a signatory to the 'Education for All' (EFA) Declarations as well as UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) and also ratified United Nation's Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) in 7 December, 2011. In July 2018 Myanmar has also committed for Inclusive education during Global Disability Summit, which was held in London. Myanmar is a country which is undergoing significant political and economic changes since election took place in 2010. Today Myanmar government has committed to widespread reformation in every sector. Among these transforming processes education for children with disabilities is also one of the focus areas by the government. Myanmar government enacted "The Disability Rights Law" in June 2015 and 'By Law of Disability Rights Law" in December, 2017.

Although rights to education of children with disabilities are protected in both international instruments and domestic legislations

the significant gaps in the ways in which these commitments have been translated in the everyday practice in the schools is still remained in Yangon, Myanmar. In Myanmar, throughout the history, rights to education of children with disabilities were neglected. During those periods, access of education was totally depended on the decree of class teacher and principal.

In this article, I would like to share the findings of recent inclusive education research, '*A space to learn for all children? Inclusive Education and children with disabilities in Yangon, Myanmar.*", which is done by my organization, Eden Centre for Disabled Children (ECDC), in 2015. Based up on this research finding a recommendation will make for future action towards rights to education of children with disabilities not only in secular education system but also in theological education.

**Background**

According to 2014 census report, 4.6% of the country population are persons with disabilities, around 2.37 million. This estimate however is much lower than international figures which suggest that in any country people with disabilities usually make up 10-15% of the general population. Around the world, the disabled people prevalence is not the same and it differs from country to country. It depends on how disability is defined and also in developed countries care services is good and life-span of persons with disabilities is equal to non-disabled people while in developed countries the life-span of children and persons with disabilities are much shorter than other people.

Regarding access to education by children with disabilities, according to that census report, 63% of children with disabilities never attend school. Moreover, of those who did attend school, only 33.5% progressed beyond primary level, which translates to a net secondary enrolment rate of 15.8% which is well below the national average of 38%.[1] Furthermore, evidence suggests that pass rates at matriculation, a national exam which enables students to enroll in graduate level degree course as well as gain entry to University, for children with disabilities is much lower than that of children without disabilities.[2] Data from the Ministry of Education (2014) suggests that there are

21,321 children with disabilities in regular government schools and 1450 in special schools.[3]

In National Education Law Amendment (2015) and the by-law of the disability rights law (2017) have defined "Inclusive Education (IE)". Moreover, National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021) has emphasized and set simple policies and action plan within the education transforming processes which is currently focused by Ministry of Education (MOE).

According to the disability rights law (2015), 'Myanmar Federation of Persons with Disabilities (MFPD)' was formed at national level as functioning body to ensure and strengthen inclusive policy across the sectors. Rights to Education sub-committee was formed and collaborated with other disabled people organizations to advocate for the right to education, promote awareness on inclusive education and support children with disabilities at the grass-root community. There is a dearth of evidence in Myanmar about the needs and experiences of children with disabilities in education to inform the development of policy and practice.

**Why Disability and Education?**

All human beings need fresh air and sun light. In the same ways, all human beings need quality education services. Education is a fundamental human right, it is not a privilege. Persons with disabilities are one of the most benefited groups by education but this truth is not made aware by many people around the globe today. In fact, children with disabilities are the most hungry for education and can be best benefited.

Education transforms lives and is vital for building peace, eradication of poverty and driving sustainable development. In the Netherlands, education is seen as an important tool to combat poverty, social exclusion and marginalization.[4] Former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan has said,

> "Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family." (Kofi Annan)

The right of all children to education is asserted in numerous international treaties and texts, and has been affirmed by both legally

binding and non-binding instruments. The States, therefore, have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right of all learners to education.[5] Inclusion is a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners. Even more important is translating this recognition into concrete reforms, seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for democratizing and enriching learning process. Differences can act as a catalyst for innovation that can benefit all learners, whatever their personal characteristics and home circumstances. In summary, education is vital for children with disabilities to have dignified lives.

> *"The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."*
> (Rabindranath Tagore)

Children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and excluded groups of children; routinely, they are denied their right to quality education.[6] Moving to more inclusive and equitable ways of working requires changes in the culture throughout an education system.[7] It is true that the presence, participation and achievement of learners are among the most important factors for success. Therefore, accepted, and clearly stated definitions of inclusion and equity should be the starting point for deciding what to monitor. In other words, there is a need to 'measure what we value', rather than 'value what we can measure', which is often what happens.[8]

**Purpose of education**

There is no broad consensus as to what education's chief aim or aims are or should be. Some authors stress its value to the individual, emphasizing its potential for positively influencing students' personal development, promoting autonomy, forming a cultural identity or establishing a career or occupation. Other authors emphasize education's contributions to societal purposes, including good citizenship, shaping students into productive members of society, thereby promoting society's general economic development, and preserving cultural values.

The foundation and purpose of education include: respect for life and human dignity; equal rights and social justice; respect for cultural diversity, as well as a sense of shared responsibility and a commitment to international solidarity and share responsibility for our common future.[9]

In such a vision, the fundamental purpose of education should be to sustain and enhance the dignity, capacity and welfare of the human person in relation to others and to nature.

**International Obligations**

There are many international agreements and obligations related to education. This includes,

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),
- The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951),
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1960),
- The Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960),
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979),
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989),
- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006),
- The UN General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Education in Emergency Situations,
- Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and
- Framework for Action. Paris.

Global movement to ensure quality basic education for all children, youth and adults, has been started since many decades ago. Current 'Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG-4)' calls for countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

All these stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization. It specifically calls for addressing inequalities related to access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes, paying particular attention to gender equality. This includes efforts to enable education systems to serve all learners, with a particular focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities. Excluded learners include those from the poorest households, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous people, and persons with special needs and disabilities.

**Education for Children with Disabilities**

When we look back the history of education for children with disabilities it was started in first half of 20th century in the West, developed countries. Generally, we can see that there are three types of education for children with disabilities in the world.

**1. *Special Education System***

*Special* school is the most prevalent agency for educating students with disabilities, especially difficulties in learning. It is assumed that there is a separate group of children who have 'special education need (SEN)'. Here, students with specific disabilities are brought together and taught special academic or vocational skills. The special school may be a residential or a day school.

In this education system the impaired child has been seen as a problem, not the system or the teacher. (Sue Stubbs, 2008). Instead of respecting their own particular strength and characteristics they are trying to make the child 'normal'. Basically, it is segregated and isolated from the family and community.

**2. *Integrated Education System***

*Integration Education System* is most commonly used to describe the process of bringing children with disabilities into mainstream school. In this system children with disabilities are placed in separate room, taught by special trained teacher with special methods and teaching aids. This system was still criticized for seeing the children with disabilities as a problem, the child needs to fit the existing education system, must be made 'ready' by himself for integration and focusing on individual children with disabilities instead of focusing the system to suit the learner's need. Sometimes it seems only just referral to a geographical process – moving a child physically into mainstream school but still separates them out from their peers non-disabled students in the whole learning processes.

**3. *Inclusive Education System***

*Inclusion education system* is mainly focused on the education system which can fulfill and try to meet the needs of various learners effectively and efficiently. Assumes all children, including children with disabilities, can learn if the appropriate support is provided. All learners are of equal values. In inclusive education system teacher's

skill, accessible and friendly environment, education system, the active learning process of the child, children with disabilities are accepted and included in school life or not are important. In other words, inclusive education system involves modifying content, teaching methods, and structures to provide all students with an equal and participatory learning experience which meets their individual requirements.

Inclusive schools are schools where children with different learning styles and needs study together in the same class room as other children of their age. The teachers and school administrators try to address the unique learning needs, interests, and style of every student through the teaching process. Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without also making structural changes to, for example, curriculum or teaching strategies, does not constitute inclusion.

**A glance through previous Myanmar education system**

In Myanmar, the first school for the blind was established by Christian missionary, St. Michela in 1914 at Yangon. Mary Chapman Deaf School was established in 1921 by Missionary. During colonial period, there were six centers for marginalized people like blind, deaf and leprosy in the countries and all of those service provision centers were established by Christian missionaries. Among them two schools - Mary Chapman Deaf school which is still run by Anglican and Kyeemindaing Blind School which is now under the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) (formerly St. Michael Blind School), are providing education service for children with disabilities. During late 20th century few schools for children with disabilities were established by some charity organizations. During those periods, there was no official definition of disability, inclusive education, etc. and right to education of children with disabilities was not specifically protected within education system. There are some students with disabilities in the mainstream education system, not because of the policy or legislation, but because of the kindness of each individual teacher. In other words, the rights to education for children with disabilities were totally depended upon the decree of the teacher.

**Recent improvement**

As the political climate is changed during early 21st century from dictator junta government to democracy in Myanmar the situation

of rights to education of children with disabilities has made a huge change. Myanmar government ratified "United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)" in 7th December 2011. The first 'The Disabled Right Law" was approved in 5th June 2015 and after two years, the "By Law of The Disability Rights Law" was enacted in 27th December, 2017. In other words, the rights to education of children with disabilities were protected legally and clear policies established. Currently, Ministry of Education (MOE) is trying to make a transformation shift in education field through the implementation of "National Education Strategic Plan (NESP, 2016-2021)". In this NESP, an inclusive education system and rights to education of children with disabilities was mentioned clearly and strongly. This is the evidence of political will towards inclusive education system by the government which ensure the rights to education of children with disabilities.

The first "Myanmar National Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (MNCRPD)" was formed during late 2017 to ensure the inclusive policy and the rights of persons with disabilities in every sector according to the disability Rights Law (2015). As disability issue is cross-cutting issue vice-president (2) chaired this committee. Under this committee "Education Sub-Committee" was formed together with other sub-committees. This committee will focus on the right to education of persons with disabilities in coming days in Myanmar and collaborate with other stakeholders.

According to the Disabled Rights Law (2015), the first "Myanmar Federation for Persons with Disabilities (MFPD)" was formed and they act as an advocacy group for having strong inclusive policies by every sector in Myanmar. Disabled People Organizations (DPOs) are actively advocating for their right to education now in Myanmar. Some local and international organizations are paying more and more attention in disability concerns since 2010.

In late 2013 'Myanmar Special Education Association (MSEA)' was established with various special schools from Yangon. This association collaborate with 'University of Wolverhamlton' from United Kingdom, to support technically, to deliver basic special education teacher training. The certificate was endorsed by 'Department of Social Welfare (DSW)', a focal ministry for disability issue in Myanmar.

## Challenges faced by Children with Disabilities in Yangon, Myanmar

To know the challenges faced by children with disabilities in Yangon, Myanmar, Eden Centre for Disabled Children (ECDC), have done a research regarding inclusive education and that research paper, "A space to learn for all children? Inclusive Education and children with disabilities in Yangon, Myanmar", was published in March 2015. This research or evidence-based document was used for advocacy purposes to change the education policy in Myanmar. It advocated for having legislation and policies around inclusive education. This research was based upon more than seven years experiences on implementing inclusive education related project in Yangon by ECDC. This research work took more than seven months.

The research used a qualitative methodology. It explored the reality in the ground of education for children with disabilities through an in-depth interview. A total 222 participants including children and young people with disabilities, their peers without disabilities, parents, teachers and principals were interviewed. Individual interview, focus group discussions and observation methods were also used to collect qualitative data. Seven regular schools, two special schools, one monastic school and one international private school were included as a means of comparison.

## Research Findings

### *Perspective of children with disabilities*

The research found that children with disabilities felt most worried about examination, using toilets and travelling to and from school. Many of them aspired to become doctors and engineers. They were most helped by friends and teachers. Most children with disabilities who were out-of-school said that they are sad because they have no chance to go to school and expressed a desire to return to school. This may suggest that the 'knowledge-based' subjects which are the focus of the current school curriculum are a barrier to access education by children with disabilities.

### *Parents' attitude towards disability and education*

Parents saw education as a means for their children to gain independence, find employment and overcome stigma. Parents report

about the benefit of regular school included support from other children, social inclusion, school being close to their communities, continuity in education and affordability. Some parent believed that causes of impairment were related to 'fate' or '*karma*', physical illness and/or unsuccessful medical interventions. Furthermore, parents with more negative attitudes towards impairment were also more likely to be facing financial problems and to have children who had less positive experiences of formal education services and had faced discrimination.

***Children with disabilities who are out-of-school***

Today in Myanmar, poverty is still a significant barrier for children who were out-of-school for accessing education. Other factors such as lack of support, acceptance and understanding by teachers, being refused enrollment, peer discrimination and difficulty travelling to and from school are also reported as barriers to access.

***Enrolment***

The research found that enrolment of children with disabilities in regular school is dependent on the discretion of individual teachers and principals. The lack of guidance, clear and simple policy from national level about the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular school is also one of disabling barrier to access education.

***Assessment of disability***

There were no proper assessments of disability in regular schools. Regular schools mostly relied on parents for information about their child's disability. Without proper assessments and identifying children's needs, quality education service cannot be rendered to the students.

***Curriculum and Examination***

The research found that the current centralized nature of curriculum and examination system did not allow schools to readily make modifications based on student needs. There were only very limited adaptations outside of special schools and the international private school. Some teachers reported that an excessive national curriculum content was a key barrier. Difficult to meet the specific need of individual impaired child is also a barrier.

***Teaching practices***

In regular school, teacher-centered teaching and memorization as opposed to student-centred methods is still widely practiced. Limited time and high teacher-student ratios also contributed to less inclusive learning environments.

***Environment in and around the school***

The research found evidence that children with physical and visual impairment are affected by barriers related to physical accessibility, not only within the school site itself, but also in the environment surrounding the school. Common barrier around the school included the in accessibilities of road to school, lack of accessible mode of transport and/or assistive devices, steps, stair, inaccessible toilet, etc. There was no evidence of support from the government to assist regular school to make barrier free and friendly school.

***Social inclusion***

A supportive social network around children with disabilities including peers, teachers, parents and siblings was an important factor in enabling children with disabilities to participate in education. A significant finding from the research was that children with diverse needs learning together enhanced acceptance, understanding and social inclusion over time. It affirmed the Salamanca Statement of "combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (1994).

**Research Recommendation**

A summary of this research recommendations is as follow:

***Legal and policy framework***

- Protect the right to education of children with disabilities
- Define inclusive education

***Poverty and education of children with disabilities***

- Provide financial assistance to poor family of children with disabilities

***Parent education and services***

- Develop training on disability awareness and inclusive education

***Enrolment***

- Produce national guidance for school on the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular and special school.

***Assessment of disability***

- Develop national guidelines and training of school staff
- Develop education support plan in line with internationally recognized standard

***Curriculum and examination***

- Decentralization and greater flexibility in the school curriculum should empower schools and teachers to make adaptations based on the needs of individual students.

***Teaching practice and resources***

- Disability awareness, student-centred approach, inclusive pedagogy should be included in all pre-service and in-service teacher training
- Teaching materials should be produced in both Myanmar and ethnic languages

***Environment in and around school***

- Produce national guidelines based on internationally accepted standards on accessibility for children with disabilities in and around the school environment
- Provide financial and technical support in adapting the environment in existing and new school.

***Social inclusion***

- School should develop policies and train school staff on approaches to protect children with disabilities from bullying and abuse
- Opportunities for interaction between special and regular schools of children with disabilities and without disabilities should be enhanced.

**A glance on an accessibility of theological education by persons with disabilities**

In Myanmar theological education is not under any government

ministry. They can develop their curriculum independently. It is a blessing to have autonomy in this very important specific field. Most of these theological institutes are renewing their curriculum regularly but it is sad to say that all those theological educations are not paying attention to develop inclusive education policy for the rights to theological education of persons with disabilities in the past. There was no specific inclusive policy in theological education in Myanmar. In Myanmar, only a very few fortunate persons with disabilities can access theological education. Many disabled persons cannot access theological education due to both accessible and engagement related disabling barriers. In reality there is not much difference between secular and theology education system in terms of not practicing inclusive education policy for persons with disabilities.

**Challenges related to accessibility and engagement**

In most of the seminaries, there was no clear policy and practice in term of admission for student with disabilities, accessible school environment and infrastructure of the building, accessible information about the seminary and transportation system for disabled student, etc. Some theological institutions, in the past, even refused to admit persons with disabilities due to limited resources and inaccessible environment, lack of knowledge and skill to engage with student with disabilities and other specific resources.

**Does inclusion of persons with disabilities matter in theology education?**

It is very important to consider inclusive practice in theological education. Inclusion is the core message of Christ's mission to this world. If this message was not embedded or included in theological education, the congregation will miss the real message about disability. Theological education has a responsibility to train, nurture, build up, produce the servant of God who can meet the current demand of the Church or Christian society and be the salt and the light of the world. Today, there are many theological seminaries and schools in Myanmar, but most of these theological schools do not have clear policy in regard to inclusiveness of persons with disabilities.

As disability is now more and more acknowledged as a cross-cutting issue and has become an essential part for every sector, an inclusive policy is urgently needed even in theological education.

The discourses on disability theology is another subject and it is also very imperative that colleges offer the courses. At the same time, we should remove accessibilities related and other all disabling barriers for persons with disabilities so that they can participate actively and contribute meaningfully in doing disability theology.

**Disability Discourse for Theological Institutions in Myanmar**

I would like to share my own experience and involvement in disability discourse here: First, I have a chance of teaching 'Disability Studies' for one semester in final year Bachelor of Theology class at 'Tedim Christian College (TCC)' during 2008-09 academic year. From 2016-17 academic year, I have been teaching 'Social Work Diploma' course introduced by TCC instead of teaching final year theology student. The course for theology students has focused on the development of a "theology of human being" from person with disabilities perspective. Currently 'Social Model of Disability', is introduced so that the candidate can design disability related ministry and work according to the changing concept of disability.

ATEM is trying very hard to promote the disability discourse for theological institutions in Myanmar. The first workshop on Disability Discourse for Theological Institutions in Myanmar was hosted by ATEM on 28 November to 2 December, 2011 in Yangon. Within these few years ATEM has organized and hosted it more than three times already. There is much awareness on disability concerns now since that first workshop. Many people have been trained and/or given awareness on the importance of this course. Some institutions have already started to integrate disability subject and inclusive policy. This is a very positive initiative. The impact of the work of ATEM in promoting disability discourses is very unique and significant way in Myanmar theological education. Hope that disability discourse will be more available in Myanmar in future.

**Conclusion**

As education is a vital necessity for every person to maximize value of individual lives, to fulfill the purpose of GOD who created us in HIS own image. Only the sound education can help to build a healthy, peaceful and cohesive society.

If today's education cannot meet the demand of our existing society,

it is very difficult to expect a peaceful and cohesive society. When we say education, it includes various types of public and theological education. The curriculum of every types of education service should be carefully designed to meet the community's demand.

Today, in Myanmar, majority of the people would agree that the education system is very weak to tailor the requirement of the current society's needs. This is the reason why the existing and practicing education system in Myanmar cannot meet the demand of the community. The presence, participation and achievement of learners are among the most important factors for success.[10]

The Education 2030 Framework for Action has been adopted by the global education community to advance progress towards SDG4 and its targets. The Framework stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization. It specifically calls for addressing inequalities related to access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes, paying particular attention to gender equality. This includes efforts to enable education systems to serve all learners, with a particular focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities. Excluded learners include those from the poorest households, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous people, and persons with special needs and disabilities.

Inclusion and equality in educational policy demands that every learner matters equally. The complexity arises, however, when we try to put this message into practice. Implementing this message will likely require changes in thinking and practice at every level of an education system, from classroom teachers and others who provide educational experiences directly, to those responsible for national policy.

As it is mentioned in 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' education policy can influence and support inclusive thinking and practices by establishing the equal right of every individual to education, and by outlining the forms of teaching, support and leadership that lay the foundation for quality education for all.

To build inclusive society, inclusive Church and Christian community, we need to rethink our existing education from scratch. Sound and healthy inclusion of persons with disabilities in our community can only be reached through sound education system, that is carefully designed to meet the needs of all learners and also designed

according to the demand of our current society.

It is very important that this is a time to rethink about both public and theology education in Myanmar to have a better future for all of us. To build inclusive and cohesive society through inclusive education is one of the urgent and important agenda to tackle and focus.

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# The Link between Poverty and Disability: A Global Perspective

Swapan Mukhopadhyay

## Introduction

We all know Helen Keller, a mental prodigy and the wonder of the world. This celebrated woman, Helen Keller was herself sightless, deaf and almost dumb from the age of nineteen months but she is the greatest source of inspiration for self – confidence and will power for all the PwD of the world, and lighthouse for the blind. When Helen Keller got Bachelor's degree from Radcliffe of Harvard University on her twenty fourth birth anniversary, it was an unbelievable achievement for a blind and deaf and dumb girl. She immediately got congratulatory letters and accolades from most of the Head of the States of the world. Many renowned universities invited Helen to continue her studies in their institution but she did not want to continue her studies for achieving a higher degree only. She thought that she had a greater duty and responsibility to stand by the hapless poor physically challenged people of the world and she started visiting the slimy, dark slums of the black people of New York. She gathered harrowing experience about the black working people living in utter distress. It was revealed to her that the condition of the black women was miserable and number of persons with disability and multiple disabilities was astoundingly high in those slums. Helen understood that poverty and disability always go hand in hand because poverty is always cause and consequence of disability in most of the cases and there is a nexus between them. The condition of the black poor disabled women is the worst because each of the factors like, to become a black in the USA, to be a poor, to

be a woman and to be a disabled person contributes and multiplies impairments. Helen wrote:"Once disabled, such individuals constitute a class who as a rule are poor, cast aside and forgotten."

Helen started to write in different newspapers and journals about the inhuman living condition in the heart of the USA known for its affluence and democratic values. The report put emphasis on the obstinate problems of the poor disabled people living in the slums in a state of total neglect and indifference. Rich Americans were ashamed and anguished and there was a furor all over the country that such a miserable state of poverty and disability coexists in New York itself. A few leading newspapers fumed at the report and indirectly blamed Helen's severe disabilities. They were afraid of Helen's tremendous popularity so they remarked that innocent Helen was so severely handicapped that it was not possible for her to understand the problems of the slum people but propagandist socialists taking advantage of it put their words into her mouth and exploited her popularity unethically. Being severely shocked, Helen reacted very sharply and remarked that no one had any right to insult her disabilities. She unequivocally declared that she had visited the slums day after day and had conversations personally with the dwellers in her own ways; she gathered experience about the daily life of the slum dwellers particularly who had physical impairments. She was ready to accept the challenge if there was any shortcoming in her observations but her knowledge and experience about the slum life was better than any reporter of any newspaper. Reality is so stark, severe and unpleasant that it was difficult to accept by the bourgeois newspapers. Helen understood hundred years ago that poverty is the breeding ground of disability and she had a loud ambition: "One thing I would try to do would be to wipe out the slums, for it is there that sickness, disease and immorality are born."

What Helen observed more than hundred years ago is very much true even today and unfortunately even today we hesitate to admit the nexus between poverty and disability globally irrespective of poor and rich country of the world. Throughout her life she fought relentlessly for the protection of the disabled and found how disabled persons are deprived of education, health-care, nutrition, employment and social support and consequently drifted into poverty affecting quality of life. At the same time, a poor person has less access to education, healthcare, employment and social support. Thus disabled people living below the

poverty line are the most disadvantaged class of people in the society and their number is overwhelmingly high in the poorest strata of the social structure.

**Importance of Social Inclusion**

Social inclusion is an important factor to provide social support to the PwD. In India, sometimes disabled are marginalized in the society and social stigma stands in the way of gaining equal opportunities enshrined in the provisions of recent PwD Act 2016. In this respect, inclusive education for the disabled may go a long way in providing equity to the disabled. To deal with the obstinate problem of poverty and disability interrelationship, education and rehabilitation must be provided to the disabled on a priority basis.

Helen Keller was very vocal throughout her life about this vicious relationship between poverty and disability. She had a strong opinion that every government should include persons with disabilities in its poverty alleviation programmes. In 1955 when she visited India as a state guest and was under personal care of Smt. Indira Gandhi, she requested the government of India to include all persons with disabilities in all social support programmes in free India.

In 1935, President Roosevelt of the USA brought in the necessary legislation to deal with the problem of poverty. The Social Security Bill was a part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, a broad based attempt to protect low-income group people by changing the rules of the nation's economy. Social Security Bill created unemployment insurance and old age pension, there was also Federal assistance for dependent children but initially there was no protection for the blind. President Roosevelt had a high opinion of Helen and he wrote on a slip in a meeting, "Anything Helen Keller is for I am for." Helen appealed to the President who himself was a wheelchair-bound handicapped, to include the blind in the Social Security Act 1935. After a protracted battle, Helen was successful in her mission to include the blind in the poverty alleviation programme.

Significantly Helen reminded her sightless brothers and sisters not to be indifferent to the miseries of the seeing. She told, "We know now that the welfare of the whole people is essential to the welfare of each". Helen Keller knew better than many social scientists that poverty and extreme poverty are the principal breeding ground of disabled people.

**Integration of PwD in Society**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) promotes the full integration of persons with disabilities in society. It is found that PwD face barriers to full social and economic inclusion like accessibility to physical environment and transportation, assistive devices and technologies, means of communication service delivery etc. They encounter social barriers like discriminatory prejudice and stigma in the society. Poverty is the cause of disability and at the same time it increases the risk of disability due to increase of malnutrition, lack of access to education, health care, conducive working condition, equitable wages, protection of human rights, resilience to disaster etc. From the World Bank statistics, it is amply clear that poverty-stricken countries suffer more from disabilities than the affluent countries. About one billion people or 15% of world population are afflicted with disabilities. Only because of disabilities people in developing countries experience adverse socio-economic environment that worsen their predicaments. Since in a developing country, the opportunities of special education and inclusive education for the disabled children are less than those of the advanced countries, the employment opportunities for them are so low that ultimately it affects their quality of life.

**Avoidable Disability**

According to WHO, Blindness is a devastating cause of disability in developing world which has a profound impact on quality of life. Blindness is most prevalent in developing countries where malnutrition, inadequate health and education services, poor water quality and lack of sanitation lead to a high incidence of eye disease. 90% of the world's visually impaired live in low income society.

In the least developed countries and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa, Cataracts are responsible for half of all avoidable blindness. A simple, low cost one-time surgical intervention can restore full sight to patients with cataracts, but in too many places those procedures are not available. I like to call it poverty induced avoidable disability.

Screening of newborns for early intervention is essential to treat sensory defects. Early detection and treatment can prevent permanent impairment but once again poverty stands in the way. Poor people cannot go to the specialty hospitals which are all situated in the cities

and they do not have any awareness that early treatment may cure the deformities of their children. Even if they are aware, they cannot address cost barrier to treatment, transport and accommodation near the hospital for the child and the accompanied persons.

**Where Awareness not Money is Important**

Social stigma, prejudices, superstitions, and lack of awareness hinder to combat avoidable disabilities. Here poverty plays no role. More than hundred years ago, Helen Keller started a movement against the superstitious American society that had no courage to speak openly about venereal diseases and her solitary endeavor ultimately saved thousands of new-born babies from congenital blindness. According to a census during those days in America, a large number of children were born blind due to a disease known as *Opthalmia Neonatorum*– the blindness of newborn infants. The baby contracted the disease when the newborn moved through the birth canal of a mother infected with syphilis. At that time, words like syphilis or venereal disease were taboo in chaste social parlour and American mothers knew nothing about such blindness in newborn infants. Only a few drops of Silver Nitrate solutions into the eyes of every infant at birth could prevent the disease. But even elite society was so superstitious that no one had the courage to write about syphilis and VD. Helen in 1907 wrote an article in Ladies' Home Journal on this subject and appealed to the American mothers: "American women can accomplish almost anything that they set their hearts on, and the mothers of the land together with the physicians can abolish infantile opthalmia, yes, wipe it out of the civilized world."

Since it was a call from the miracle girl Helen Keller, their darling, mothers of America responded positively to her appeal and tens of thousands of newborn babies were saved from congenital blindness caused by Opthalmia Neonatorum.

Even today, there are many taboo and religious superstitions that hinder baby and childhood immunizations that prevent many diseases and future disabilities like Polio.

The roots of the physical deformities, mental disabilities, and learning and behavioural problems in infancy and childhood, sometimes generate from the womb of the mother during her pregnancy. Weak and anaemic mothers are vulnerable to giving birth to a deformed baby. A

healthy diet and right vitamins are important for the mother to prevent congenital deformity of the baby. For example folic acid, a type of B vitamin, has been found to help prevent *Neural Tube defects*, also called *Spina bifida. Neural Tube defects* are deformities of the spinal cord that can cause mental and physical disabilities. Research statistics by the scientists have revealed that 70 percent of Spina bifida is preventable by taking folic acid.

In remote villages where no medical or health-care assistance is available during entire period of pregnancy, there is none to supply vitamin supplements to a pregnant mother. Those who cannot manage to have a daily square meal cannot think of additional vitamins and assistive care during pregnancy and they are vulnerable to delivery of deformed child.

Persons with mental retardation suffer more than any person with physical impairment. Even sometimes money fails to provide a quality life to a MR person. It is found that persons with learning disability have difficulty in using healthcare services. A study in Britain reveals 40% of people in learning disability find difficulty in availing themselves of healthcare services. In developing country where healthcare services are scarce, the problems for them are more severe.

**Social Protection for the Disabled in India**

In India after independence, the government tried to provide some special benefits to the PwD through legislation. But those benefits were not only inadequate but also smacked of an attitude of charity of the society to the people with disability. Recently there was a paradigm shift in the attitude of the society and the potentiality of a disabled person was recognized with honour and respect. This is revealed even in defining a disabled person who is now called- a differently able person. On the 1st April 1999 with a target to ameliorate rural poverty, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yoyona (SGSY) was started and in this project, 3% reservation for the PwD had been incorporated. In the project under Self Help Group (SHG) to provide privileges to the underprivileged, special provision for the PwD had been incorporated. In National Old Age Pension Scheme, National Family Benefit Scheme, National Maternity Benefit Scheme and in many other such poverty alleviation schemes, PwD have been given special privileges. No doubt in our country, in all the PwD Acts, the entitlement support system to

the disabled has been emphasized. But mostly they were under social welfare activities. The Rights of Persons With Disabilities Act 2016, effective from 16 December 2016, has given them the legal rights as social and human rights. This unique act has given a disabled person the right to claim human rights like a normal person.

**Inclusive Education to Fight Disabilities**

In the Act PwD 2016 under Para (m), Inclusive Education has been defined as: "Inclusive education means a system of education where in students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities." It is an attempt to provide the Right to Education even to the poor disabled students of the society.

This new act no longer puts the disabled persons in a position of embarrassment to wait for charity and compassion from the society and now their dignity is guaranteed by legal rights. A path-breaking feature of the new act is the increase in number in reservation in government jobs from 3% to 4% for the PwD. Since 75% of the disabled persons live in rural areas, the development of the rural people is linked with the development of the disabled people in our country. About 2% of our population is victim of one or other kind of disability. To reduce poverty and vulnerability of this population, income protection is very important to help them to fight against disability.

In this new act, apart from covering 21 categories of disabilities instead of 9 of the previous act of 1995, total emphasis has been put on the rights of the disabled persons like- right to equality of opportunity, right to inherit and own property, right to home and family, and reproductive rights among others. The implementation of provisions of the law like accessibility has been marked by a deadline which is a very important step taken under this act.

**Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation**

Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate economist who is considered the messiah of the poor, in his book, *Development as Freedom*, points out that poverty alleviation is possible by guaranteeing universal protection of entitlements providing direct and unconditional support to everyone without distinction. By increasing the capabilities of a person, the entitlements to different functioning can be ensured. In his famous

Tanner Lecture, Amartya Sen has explained capabilities as follows:

> The Capabilities depend both on our physical and mental characteristics as well as on social opportunities and influences and can thus serve as the basis not only of personal advantage but also of efficiency and equity of social policies.

**Amartya Sen's Observations**

It is unfortunate that the issue of capabilities of disabled persons is not always included with the total development of the society. That is the reason why the question of inclusion of the disabled persons with the poverty alleviation programme arises. Amartya Sen in 1985 in his famous book, "Commodities and Capabilities" told about the utilization of hidden capabilities of the disabled to gain full benefits of the Poverty-alleviation programmes of the government.

Once Amartya Sen was ridiculed while he emphatically said that poverty can be eradicated from this world but now his arguments have been honorably accepted and all the states of the world are taking steps in their endeavour to remove hunger and poverty. Now it can be concluded that once poverty is eradicated, disability can be encountered very effectively. No doubt disability will be there but disability particularly physical disability without poverty can be tackled easily.

Women and girls with disabilities witness double discrimination and when they are poor discrimination enhances beyond limit. They are the worst sufferers in the society having least access to health care, opportunity of education and employment opportunity. Their sufferings start from their household since their disabilities are detected. In the marginalized rural areas, superstitions are prejudicial to the interest of the disabled girls and women.

**Ignorance, Lack of Awareness and Poverty**

Helen Keller warns that "Our worst foes are ignorance, poverty and the unconscious cruelty of our commercial society. These are the causes of blindness; these are the enemies that destroy the sight of our children and workmen and undermine the health of mankind."[1]

About hundred years ago, the miracle woman, Helen Keller delved into the problems of the disabled people of the world and stressed on their entitlements of opportunities by increasing their capabilities through a concept of inclusion of all the disabled persons with all the

non-disabled underprivileged persons of the society as a whole.

We should remember impairments are personal problems of an individual and with their will power and mental strength can effectively tackle it but when society restricts the rights and opportunities of an individual considering their impairments as disadvantages and excludes them from the society the persons become disabled. What makes one disabled is not their medical condition but the attitude and structures of the society. Helen Keller realized it more than hundred years ago and appealed to the members of the society to realize it. Sadly our society is a slow-learner.

**Endnote**

[1] Helen Keller, "Social Causes of Blindness." New York, Call, Feb. 15, 1911.

# Civil War, Refugees, Disability and Theology

Layang Seng Ja

## Introduction

Every tribe has its origins. Its present state is a blend of its perception of the past and its hopes for the future. Prior to independence from British colonial rule, the Kachin, like the other ethnic minorities, agreed to become part of the Union of Myanmar on the understanding that they would have some degree of autonomy. However, this part of the agreement was never honored. Ever since, successive military regimes have pursued their policy of Burmanization and exploitation of Kachin State's natural resources - jade, timber, gold, platinum and amber. The result has been endless war, and making thousands of innocent villagers homeless. However, it is not just the internally displaced who are its victims: the entire Kachin people and the ecosystem of the entire region are afflicted or, to use that metaphor, disabled. This essay studies the past and present sufferings of the Kachin Faith Community in order to offer a theology of disability as a way of promoting a better future.

## Defining Disability

What is disability and what is disability theology? Eiesland rightly points out that most people consider "disability [as] (a) a punishment; b) a test of faith; (c) the sins of the fathers visited upon the children; (d) an act of God; (or) all of above ".[1] According to Tom Shakespeare, disability studies are an interdisciplinary approach to the study of disability, which focuses on the particular ways in which people with disabilities are portrayed and treated within society.[2] Fundamental principles of disability in UPIAS is seen as,

> Disability is a situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that one aspect, such as incomes, mobility or institutions, is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their lives, and (c) that professionals, experts and others who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disable people.[3]

According to UPIAS then, disability is not limited to individual experience but disability is also shaped by a particular social context. Some may experience disability as a personal matter. However, it is not an essential feature of the individual but rather a product of social forces.[4] For instance, it is regarded as normal that to gain access you have to climb steps. Ramps and lifts for wheelchair-users are still the exception rather than the rule. When people meet a wheelchair-user, they often ignore the user, instead addressing whoever is pushing the wheelchair. It is a matter of attitudes towards those with visible handicap. It is contextual. Consequently, disability theology is contextual as it emerges from theological reflection on quite specific forms of human experience in society.

As for the Kachin people in Myanmar context, the cause of disability is neither the sins of the fore-parents visited upon the children nor the fault of the disabled individual. Rather it is the political forces of Burmanization that have disabled and disempowered the Kachin people and, indeed, threatened their very existence. It is the ruthless greed of the armed forces and their cronies that has impoverished the people and is destroying the environment. An appropriate disability theology would not just attempt to enable and empower those thus marginalized; it would also enable those Christians not afflicted to interpret the gospel of Jesus in this particular context.[5] For it is not just the oppressed that need liberating: the oppressors too need liberation from themselves, from their own greed and prejudices. The goal is to incite radical action to promote a better, more just and inclusive society in which the disabled, disempowered and impoverished are enabled, empowered and enriched.

## Our Context and Our Misery

There are various forms of disabilities and sufferings in Buddhist dominated country Myanmar. I shall focus on the disabilities of the

Kachin community, a minority ethnic group that live in the Northern part of upper Myanmar, close to China and Tibet. But first I shall sketch the overall situation in Myanmar to see how civil war create disability.

The misery of Myanmar began not with British colonization, but with the rise of the militarization after 1948. Myanmar declined so that, today, despite all its natural resources, the country is the poorest in Asia. Consequently, any Myanmar citizen who has to show his or her passport abroad risks being regarded with suspicion since the immigration official will probably have heard about the corruption of the Myanmar government and its military. For although the country is rich in resources, instead of being used to develop the country to the benefit of all its citizens, the wealth accruing from them only lands in the bank accounts of a few top military leaders and their "cronies".

Burma is the home to more than 135 ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Bama or Burmans, who comprise 60 percent of the population and are Buddhist. It is a country where the present National League Democracy (NLD) and the military collaborate and govern for their own benefit. Ever since the Thein Sein administration in 2010, the government has claimed to be moving toward a democratic system; in reality the military forces still exercise control behind the scenes. This has continued under Awng San Su Kyi's NLD government.

Therefore, we continue to have an intolerable, unsupportive situation under a Burmese military regime. We continue to experience religious and ethnic discrimination, economic stagnation, exploitation and civil wars. We continue to suffer arbitrary arrests, rape and sexual abuse and religious persecution. As a result, thousands of Burmese, people from all occupations, were and still are fleeing to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia, Thailand, in search of safety. Presently, thousands of Rohingya are fleeing the country because the Burmese government regards them as illegal immigrants, despite the fact that Rohingya have lived within the boundaries of present-day Myanmar for a long time. It is not only the Rohingy a who are the victims. The Burmese Army is also engaged in an aggressive war with the Kachin Independent Organization 'KIO'.[6] Kachin are caught in the crossfire either fleeing abroad or are internally displaced. Consequently, Myanmar remains a backward country and a symbol of disaster. This situation contributes to disability of many people.

## Disability in the Kachin Faith Community

### *The Disabled Land*

Disability and environment degradation are interrelated. For generations the Kachin's livelihood has been depended on the land, the forest and the rivers. Their land is full of natural resources so the people should be rich. Kachin state is covered with an abundant natural forest ecosystem. Before the British came, Kachin land had been a separate territory. We Kachin regard this as the happy time when our ancestors ruled themselves, free from the deceitful intervention of the Burmese military. Ever since the Kachin agreed to Kachin State becoming part of the Union of Myanmar, successive military regimes have pursued their policy of Burmanization and exploitation of Kachin land's natural resources - jade, timber, gold, platinum and amber. It became clearer and clearer that the military regimes had no intention of keeping the Panglong agreement.[7]

The Kachin people were "disabled" and made powerless in their own land, which was bled dry. The military and successive governments, including today's NLD, and elite companies colluded in this, because the government granted them mining and logging concessions to exploit Kachin natural resources, refine them and sell them both inside and outside the country. Jade, gold and teak have been the main attractions.

Jade mining activities have led to widespread environmental degradation air, ground and water pollution, massive soil erosion, sedimentation of rivers, increased flooding, and acute dry season, water shortages in some areas, and a considerable decrease in biodiversity. This also leads to low water levels in some areas and increases flooding in others. In addition, the water contains diesel and mercury that is harmful for drinking, bathing, washing clothes and fishing for food.

Commercial logging destroys forests, including various kinds of precious herbal plants. Because of deforestation, people living in the Kachin State suffer every year from disease, climate change, soil erosion, water and air pollution, flooding and many other natural disasters. In doing so, the Burmese government is killing our future generation. They are selling the future of our children.[8] The majority of Burmese invaders "disable" us by setting the mark of their ownership on our land by building their pagodas wherever there is a hill, big or small.

For instance, on a hill near Machanbaw, Putao, the northern most town of Kachin State has a natural rock formation that looks like giant dragon. A Kachin folk tale told a story about this dragon.[9] Then in 2016 the Bama put up a pagoda there and the stone dragon turned to the Burmese symbol. The presence of a Burmese army post makes the point even clearer. Our story is now replaced with theirs and the beauty of natural land has been insulted and abused by the military forces. The Kachin's beautiful hills, valleys, plains and mountains now bear the symbols of their domination.

Thus, Burmanization is at the expense of the Kachin minority, all those who are not Bama and not Buddhist. They have set Buddhism up as the state religion and are spending a considerable amount of the country's income on building and renovating Buddhist temples and images while neglecting the development of the country as a whole. Besides, Burmese (Bama) Buddhists are guaranteed advancement in government posts, whereas Christians, especially from minority ethnic groups, never gain promotion unless they convert to Buddhism. Whoever protests against the government, whether in speech or writing, risks ending up in prison or worse! Since the government uses physical force and bullying tactics to pacify all opposition, most people are forced to stay silent to survive. Consequently, Christian ethnic groups are oppressed.[10] The same Burmese troops that purged southwest Myanmar have moved north to another beleaguered religious and ethnic minority: the Christian Kachin.[11]

In addition, the Burmese military have a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing. The authorities allowed Chinese business persons to plant poppy fields in Kachin majority areas and to sell drugs very cheaply in Kachin villages, towns and nearby Kachin Theological College and Seminary, targeting Kachin youth. Destroying the future of the Kachin with drugs is one of their main ways to sustain their rule over the Kachin Land and their land. So far, there has been no change under the new NLD government. Therefore, the issue of disability needs to be located within this larger context of a disabled land.

### *The Disabled People*

As if this was not bad enough, since 2011 the armed forces have campaigned against our people. Many Kachin have been killed and injured, their villages and homes destroyed. In 2010, the military

demanded that all ethnic armies must disarm. Kachin leaders rejected this demand, knowing that, far from guaranteeing peace and democracy, it would leave their people defenseless. Thus, the KIO remained firm, stating that, unless the Burmese followed the promise agreed in the Panglung agreement of 1947 to give the Kachin a place in a federal union and ethnic rights, they would not disarm[12] Consequently, on June 9, 2011 the military broke a 17-year ceasefire, causing massive displacement of civilians by sending thousands of military troops to Kachin State to enforce a military solution. They burned the houses and churches, destroyed farms, took possessions, raped women, and killed innocent civilians. The fighting intensified from December 2012 to January 2013. The military has used cluster bombs, phosphorous bombs and helicopter gunships to attack civilians and the Kachin army as if the Kachin were a foreign enemy.[13] The government announced to the international media that there is peace in Myanmar, but there is no peace. Whenever they can, the Burmese government seizes new strategic sites and expands its military presence in Kachin areas.[14] Three hundred and fifty villages were affected. Inhabitants fled their homes. Many lost children, parents, husbands, wives and all their property while fleeing. Some people had makeshift dwellings in the jungle, while others managed to go to various local churches of Myitkyina and places where the Kachin army was in control in Kachin State and along the border with China.[15]

During 2018, the military not only targeted the Kachin Independence Army posts but also civilian areas, including religious centers and villagers working on their farms. For instances, in Bawmwang village, Northern Kachin State in May 2018, Burmese military jetfighters bombed the Kachin Baptist Mission School, destroying the two-storey wooden building once used by American Baptist missionaries as their office and clinic. The Kachin have come to realize that the military regime, in collusion with Awng San Suu Kyi's Government, aims to eliminate them from their own land.[16] The military, having displaced people from AwngLawt village in Tanai Township and residents of Injangyang Township by intensive fighting.[17] It then blocked relief supplies by directing aerial bombing and heavy artillery fire at civilians. Among those displaced are children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities. Some, after wandering for a month in the forest have managed to come out to safe areas while others are still stuck in the war zone. Now Kachin Land has been flooded with

more than 160,000 IDPs with 165 IDP camps spread across Kachin and Northern Shan.[18] While international attention has focused on the Rohingya of Rakhine State, the international community as well as other ethnic groups in Myanmar, with the exception of the Chin, have neglected the fate of the Kachin.[19] Some aid has trickled through from international organizations. Mostly, the Kachin have been left to look after their own with what few resources they have. In particular, local Christian congregations have done what they could.

The Bama majority, in contrast, just do not want to know. Though Awng San Su Kyi and her National League Democratic (NLD) party promised of change, in reality the new government seems to be collaborating with the military in the slow genocide of the Kachin people. Awng San Su Kyi has shielded the military by keeping silent about the genocide of the Rohingya and the actions of the army in the Kachin State. The Kachin have been disabled and are still being disabled by the Myanmar military, by past and present Myanmar governments, by the collusion of the mining and logging companies, by the Chinese opium barons, by the silence of the Bama Buddhist majority and the international community. What is the Kachin Churches' respond to such critical situation? What theology can meet the challenges of this situation?

## Disability Theology from a Kachin Perspective

### *Jesus as a Whetstone*

A whetstone is used to sharpen tools. Jesus may have been able-bodied but he was not privileged, powerful or rich. Jesus had been a refugee; he lived as a homeless person, was persecuted and killed like a common criminal, like a slave, by hanging on a cross, the ultimate humiliation. In this sense, he was disabled. In Matthew (Matt 2: 1) and Luke's accounts (Luke 2:4-7), he was born in a stable in Bethlehem far from home. According to Matthew (Matt 2:3-25), his parents fled with him to Egypt to avoid the life-threatening wrath of King Herod, so for a while he was a refugee.[20] During his mission, he and his disciples wandered from place to place and were dependent for board and lodgings on local supporters. Moreover, Jesus died and was buried in Jerusalem a place that was not his hometown. He came into the world with no fixed abode and left the world homeless. Thus, Jesus provides an example of the homeless exposed without shelter from the forces of evil.

Jesus does not save the Kachin from life-threatening war. He does not save our churches. He does not save our girls from being brutally raped by the Burmese soldiers even in the churchyard. He does not liberate our land from the Burmese rulers. He does not appear to be a Messiah or a God who saves. He does not liberate the Kachin people from the physical, spiritual and mental sufferings inflicted on them. Nor does he liberate them from the IDP camps and the bleeding land.

Although Jesus does not function as Savior, Messiah and Liberator for the present Kachin community, he does function as a sympathetic friend who is journeying with the Kachin people in their trials. Since he lived in a world where the chosen people lost their land and autonomy, Jesus understands what the Kachin are going through under the burdensome rule of the Bama majority. He is with the Kachin in various IPD camps for he too had been a refugee in his childhood and therefore sympathizes with them. He accompanies the homeless, for he himself was homeless on his journey to carry out the mission God had appointed him to do. He experienced death, not in his native hometown Nazareth, but was arrested, crucified and killed in Jerusalem, the land of Judea.

He also supports and empowers to those who are fighting for justice, who help the IDPs, and who engage in the work to eradicate drugs from the land. Since he himself was fatherless, abused and killed by the majority group of his opponents, he sympathizes with the Kachin who have become orphans, fatherless, motherless and childless during the war. He journeys with the Kachin people fighting the overwhelming forces of the government and military without help. The new Burmese government and the media keep silent as the Burmese military abuse, rape, displace and kill the Kachin people. While the international media widely publicize the fate of the Rohingya[21] but the fate of the Kachin is ignored.

Nonetheless, Jesus is their whetstone. In their struggle, they use the example of Christ to sharpen their motivation, hopes and ideals. He is the tool for their spiritual and moral survival. He experienced the humiliation of crucifixion but rose again. The Kachin also hope to rise as He did. If we study his life and teaching, we will have a better idea of how we can follow Him. Jesus is not with the powerful when they oppress the weak. He is with the weak in their sufferings. His life and his teachings show that. He also offers eternal life. But we must note

that when he heals the blind, the lame and the sick, he does it here and now and not in some where in-the-sky for future. Hence, any theology must take these things into consideration. For the right theology can offer to empowerment to the weak, the dispossessed and the disabled. Instead of trying to comfort them by saying all will be well in the life hereafter, we must work to give them dignity and a decent life here and now. Jesus never promises a happy-go-lucky life but reminds us from the beginning that "in the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33b)." Consequently, for the Kachin to conquer all kinds of tribulations, they draw strength from Jesus, the whetstone, who overcomes the world. Since disabled mindset and mentality of the Burmese oppressors cause disabilities in Kachin State, on this whetstone, Jesus, they take their position by standing firm on love, justice, and truth to encounter and to correct the disabilities inflicted by the oppressors. It is not just the victims who need to be enabled. The Burmese oppressors need liberating from their own mentality which is the cause of this misery. It is only by following the example set by Jesus that both the oppressed and their oppressors can be set free.

Jesus shares the tears of the oppressed and encourages the Kachin to stand firm in their struggle for justice and truth. He is out on the street with the IDPs, and engaged in the work of restoring humanity and hope, cleaning out the forces of evil to create a place where God's children can dwell.[22]

### *Compassion as a Way to Heal Misery and Disability*

Wati Longchar rightly points out that "Theology from the perspective of persons with disabilities is almost silent in the Christian tradition"[23] It may be the reason why many Christians believe only the blessed receive all the good things from God while sin brings misery and disability. Christians explained the disaster that befell the Jews AD 70 and the Great Plague, 1339-42, in the same way. There are passages in the OT that might be used to support this, but then again there is Job. And Jesus himself does not claim that those he healed were ill, blind, or lame because of their sins or the sins of their parents. Some Kachin Christians and other Christian minorities even say that Kachin land is flooding with refugees because God is punishing the sins the Kachin have committed.

The gospels show that there were many forms of disabilities in Israel at the time of Jesus. The majority of Palestinian Jews suffered crippling poverty. Most people depended on agriculture for their livelihood. Some owned and worked their own land while, in other cases, wealthy landholders with large estates rented out land to tenant farmers, who paid them with part of the produce. At the top of society, the ruling classes such as the Sadducees, High Priests, and a handful of the Herodian governing class made the decisions.[24] Beneath the ruling elite, there were a few classes that had some wealth and influence: retainers (scribes, bureaucrats, and generals who served the ruling elite), as well as merchants and priests. However, the bulk of the population, the common people, had little access to wealth or power. These consisted primarily of farmers, but also included artisans (weavers, builders, and potters) and even less reputable classes, such as prostitutes, outlaws, beggars, and underemployed itinerant workers.[25]

Another heavy burden was taxation to fund Herod the Great's building projects. Ever since the Jews lost their land to Gentile rulers, it was the vulnerable peasant community who paid a disproportionate share of taxes. After the death of Herod the Great, his son Herod Antipas continued the building projects. The building projects of Herod Antipas in Galilee were inevitably a drain on the resources of the region, material as well as human and had a serious impact on the economic, social and ecological life in Galilee. More important than the buildings was his introduction of a new element into the population. Herod Antipas replaced the old Hasmoneans, who had resisted Herod, with a new elite and retainer classes. Even though the majority of the inhabitants were Jewish, the new cities were alien to the surrounding territory and flooded with newcomers.[26] Moreover, Roman rule and urbanization introduced new types into the population – scribal administrators, military personnel, and others in various retainer roles, acting on behalf of the ruling elite and the native aristocracy. There were new demands for goods and services – therefore increasing the burden of taxation on the peasantry. This pressure from the top inevitably led to an increase in levels of poverty, and the slide from landowner to tenant farmer to day laborers, to beggars, all characters we hear of in Jesus' parables, was inexorable. As always in such situations, it is the poor who are most vulnerable. Exposed to the effects of disease and dispossession, they struggled simply to survive. Such conditions are the breeding ground for violent outbursts of hostility and pillaging, and

it is no surprise to find that one of the effects of Herodian rule was an increase in 'social banditry'.[27] Thus, the majority of Jewish peasants, supposedly the owners of the Promised Land as God's chosen people, were in reality oppressed and exploited, a conquered people. None of the parties of their own elite showed any interest in lifting their burdens or relieving their sufferings.

Unlike some authority-minded and party-affiliated Jews, compassion moves Jesus to be with the peasant community and whoever else might be considered outsiders – the sick, the disabled, the poor, prostitutes, tax collectors, even Roman officers. Matthew 6:34 writes, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus knew the heavy burdens, traumas and the sufferings of his fellow humans well, because he lived in a world where Gentiles ruled their land.

He respected the twofold laws - *the written and oral laws* - of the Pharisees but quarreled with them for neglecting the weightier matter that was the command to "love your neighbours".[28] In such circumstances, Jesus was also keen on keeping the Jewish commandments, yet he focused more on the core biblical demands and value of love, justice and mercy. Jesus' position on Mosaic Laws and the practices of Jewish oral traditions emphasizes the humanitarian side of Judaism.[29] For him, what counts is not so much ritual observance as the love of justice, mercy and faith that God desires (Hosea 6:6). The need to apply compassion as a means to heal the disability of the community is emphasized repeatedly. "But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7) "If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy, not sacrifice".[30] Jesus gives the Torah a humanitarian interpretation, taking the view that love and compassion are the greatest commands.[31] Jesus restores, saves disabled people and enlightens the nations with his compassion.[32]

The situation of Kachin faith community is similar to that of the peasant Jewish community of Jesus' time. Its identity itself is threatened. The land, its natural resources, wealth, education, health are crippled by the loss of the Kachin land and ethnic autonomy. As in Jesus' world, civilians get caught between Awng San Su Kyi's puppet government and the military, the real rulers. While the refugees and the Kachin internally displaced seek mercy and compassion, many Myanmar citizens are torn between various political and religious factions to

promote their own interests and leadership. Other Burmese refugees are fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia and Thailand, hoping to resettle in a third country or return to Burma to rebuild their lives. [33]

The refugee issue is not only a humanitarian concern and a matter of human rights. It is also a theological issue: we must attend to what God is calling us to do, since God's compassion calls on us to journey with the disabled. A world from which the disabled have been eliminated will be a poorer world, a world without compassion. All have a right to as full a life as possible. We are all God's children. Jesus cared. We should care too.[34] Therefore, their presence and disability challenge all of us – the Council of Churches in Asia, the Christian Conference of Asia and the international faith community. Can we follow the footsteps of Jesus? Can we remember to embrace our neighbours, the disabled, the refugees, the least among us?

**Endnotes**

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2 Tom Shakespeare, *The Disability Reader: Social Scientific Perspective* (London: Continuum, 1998), 273.

3 UPIAS, *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (London: Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976), 3.

4 John Swinton, "Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities," in *IJPT.* Vol.14: 279.

5 *Ibid*., 274.

6 Lian Hang Do, "Life as Refugees was not a Choice: The Burmese Refugees Plight," in *CTC Bulletin*, vol xxviii (No.1 December 2012), 76.

7 Layang Seng Ja, "The Aggressive Brothers versus the Victimized Orphan," in R.S. Sugitharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margins*, 25thedn. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2016), 482.

8 Layang Seng Ja, "Establishing a Peaceful Reign of God according to John 18:1-11," in *Conversations with Biblical Texts: In God's Image*, vol 33, No.2, December 2014, 44.

9 The locals tell two different versions about this story. In one version, while a grandmother was washing the clothes at the sea her grandson was playing nearby. But a dragon came out, lured her grandson and dragged him into the sea. Therefore, the grandmother beat her breast and called lord of the

thunder to save her grandson and to punish the dragon. The thunder then looked for dragon to kill it. While fleeing from its danger, the dragon tried to escape by taking shelter into the cave. However, before the dragon's whole body can go into a cave lord of thunder stroke dragon into seven pieces. As times passed, the remained body of dragon eventually turned into stone dragon. The only different in another version is that the victims were not a grandmother and grandson rather it was breast-feeding mother and her infant.

[10] Layang Seng Ja, "The Aggressive Brothers versus the Victimized Orphan," *op. cit*., 482.

[11] Lee Williams, "Burma's Beleaguered Baptists: Rohingya Muslims Aren't the Only Religious Minority Under Fire in Myanmar," in *Christian Today Safari* (Oct-22, 2018).

[12] (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kachin_State), accessed on 12.12.2018.

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# Transforming the Disabling Society in Myanmar

Pau Lian Mang

## Introduction

The Buddhist country Myanmar has only a limited number of services for persons with disabilities (PwD) – three leprosy hospitals and a few leprosy homes, seven schools for the blind, two schools for the deaf, two mental health hospitals, some care centers and rehabilitation centers, some NGO-run projects, etc. Ironically, some of the main services were started and are still operated by Christians, a religiously minority in the country. This is a phenomenon which may easily lead one to see Buddhists as less active in helping PwD, when compared to their Christian neighbors. But, is it all the story of Buddhists on their part? In fact, Buddhists are liberal givers, helping others and willingly donating what they have to religious and social sectors. What then is the main factor for their seeming weakness in this particular area – doing good to disabled people?

In the world, there have been historical and socio-cultural practices of rejecting and excluding PwD (persons with disabilities) from religious and spiritual life. This is true even today. According to popular understanding, disability is sin or the result of sin. The PwDs are seen as objects of pity or examples of strength or courage. However, over the last five decades a revolution occurred in the understanding of disability. *Disability Studies* has become a strong force within and outside the academy, challenging assumptions about social and cultural marginalization of disability issues and persons with disabilities. In the new paradigm of disability studies, the focus is given not only on the individual but on the society. The goal is to transform the society into

one which enables the disabled to become fully humans.

In this paper, a theological critique of the Buddhist society of Myanmar is made in order to invite all the people in Myanmar, regardless of religion and social standings, to cooperate in the task of transforming the society from disabling to enabling one. While recognizing Christian contributions and services in this area, the paper will also examine Christian attitude toward disability and suggest some recommendation. The purpose is not at all to compare the two religions, but to affirm and enhance their spirituality of helping others. The expected outcome is that all will become aware of the need, not only to help disabled people but to denounce the disabling elements in the society and transform them into enabling ones.

## The Situation of PwD in Myanmar

### 1. PwD in Statistics

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states that: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."[1]

For a national survey on disability, the Government of Myanmar used a definition which comes close to the international definitions: "Disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."[2]

The Department of Social Welfare currently classifies disability into four different types as shown below:

(1) Persons with visual impairments

(2) Persons with hearing impairments

(3) Persons with physical (mobility) impairments

(4) Persons with intellectual impairments

According to the 2014 Census which used the above four components for classifying disabilities, the total population of Myanmar is 51.4 million, and out of this, persons with disabilities (PwD) are 2,311,250

(that is, 2.3 million or 4.6 percent of the total population). Persons living with a moderate or higher level of disability are 559,880, or 1.11 percent of the population. Again, persons living with severe disabilities are 216,062, or 0.43 percent. To put it another way, more than a quarter of the PwD population have multiple disabilities.[3] Among those with a severe disability, 55 thousand individuals were blind; 43 thousand people were deaf; 99 thousand could not walk at all; and 90 thousand did not have the capability to remember or concentrate.[4]

Experts see that the observed prevalence of 4.6 percent seriously underestimates the true prevalence level of disability in Myanmar. International indicators for the South-East Asia region estimate the prevalence rate at 3.0 percent for severe and 16.4 percent for moderate disabilities. Compared to this, the Census figures are too low. Nevertheless, the 2014 Census remains an important source to describe the characteristics of persons with disabilities.

Among the 2.3 million PwD, 1.06 million are males and 1.25 million are females. Both males and females with a disability have much lower probabilities of being in a marital union at all ages. In regards to residence, 1.8 million live in rural areas and 532 thousand live in urban areas. There are also considerable regional disparities: Chin State and Ayeyawady Region have the highest prevalence rates, 2.5 and 1.8 respectively. The three States/Regions with the largest urban centres (Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Mandalay) are the most populated, but they have the lowest prevalence rates with 0.72, 0.82 and 0.85. At the same time, however, most of the amenities to assist PwD are present in large, urban settings, thus leaving those living in rural areas increasingly vulnerable.

Nearly one half of all persons with a disability live in extended households. This shows that the traditional system in which the family takes care of an ailing or a relative with a disability is still largely in place. Disability Prevalence Rate in Myanmar can be seen as shown below:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Total population | 51.4 million | |
| 2 | PWD population (seeing, hearing, walking, concentrating) | 2.3 million | Prevalence Rate 4.6% |
| | | Rural 1.8 million<br>Urban 0.5 million | Moderate/high 1.11%;<br>Severe 0.43% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | PWD in South East Asia | | Moderate 16.4; Severe 3.0<br>This indicates that prevalence rate of Myanmar would be much higher than 4.6 |

**2. Life of PwDs in the Society**

Since last decade, the Government of Myanmar took important steps to protect and support PwDs. First, the 2008 Constitution has a significant description in its Article 32 which reads, "The Union shall care for mothers and children, orphans, fallen Defence Services personnel's children, the aged and the disabled."[5] Second, the first ever survey of PwDs in Myanmar was carried out in 2009 and 2010 with a large sample size of 108,000 households across the country.

In the years that follow, Myanmar started taking part in the regional and national level efforts for the good of PwDs. These include:

(1) In 2011, the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of the PwDs in ASEAN Community and Mobilization Framework of the ASEAN Decade of PwDs 2011-2020;

(2) in 2011, the Asia and Pacific Decade of PwDs, 2013-2020

(3) in 2012, the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real"

(4) the inclusion of PwDs statistics in the 2014 Census

(5) in 2014, the launch of "National Social Protection Strategic Plan"

(6) in 2015, the enactment of "Law on Rights of PwDs"

Despite all these positive efforts, it must be admitted that the situation of PwDs in Myanmar is not getting better. The 2014 Census provides clear evidence that the population with disabilities lag behind in the achievement of national, regional, and global development goals. Myanmar has achieved several educational development goals, but PwDs are still far behind. Literacy rates, school attendance of primary and secondary school children, and education completion rates of PwDs are all much lower than for persons without disabilities. Similarly, labour force participation rates and the employment-to-population ratios were lower among PwDs compared to persons without disabilities.[6]

To be specific, a recent survey exposes the fact that PwDs in

Myanmar suffer from government neglect and discrimination. According to the findings of a joint two-year study by the Myanmar Federation of Persons with Disabilities and Myanmar Disabled People Organizations, 52 percent of PwDs do not attend school, and only 1 percent have access to higher education. With limited or no education, many PwDs have little privilege to participate in the labour market.[7]

Moreover, PwDs in Myanmar are not given tax breaks and discounts in public services and are not provided with the opportunities and services accorded to normal people. The study also says that PwDs cannot get equal opportunities, hence there is no accessibility to public transportation, public buildings and places. The problem is that the country still lacks disabled-friendly infrastructure. Even in the cities like Yangon, congested roads and dilapidated pavements pose a serious hazard, making it impossible for many disabled people to leave their homes without the help of an assistant. Bus conductors often prevent disabled people from boarding buses, and the majority of schools and buildings are inaccessible to wheelchair users.

The findings of the above-mentioned survey are to be presented to the UN by end of 2018. Prior to this, in 2015 the government already submitted its initial report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The committee will compare the two reports and produce recommendations for the government. In the meantime, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, the focal ministry for the people with disabilities, says it has already set strategic plans and is ready to come out with the implementing rules and regulations for the 2015 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Law.

### 3. Services for PwDs

In 2011 and 2012, a researcher met 29 organizations providing services for PwDs in Myanmar. These organizations are located in Yangon, Mandalay, and Taungyi. The service providers include: 5 government institutions or organizations, 14 national non-government organizations, 7 international non-government organizations, and 3 private organizations.[8] The type of services provided and their locations are as follows:

1. Health services – providing assistive devices, physical rehabilitation, psychological support, limited financial aids, awareness programs, sports programs. Of all the health services, 13 are in Yangon, 2 in Mandalay, and 3 in Taunggyi.

2. Educational services – providing institutional and inclusive education in Yangon alone. For institutional education, there are 2 government schools under the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), 5 private schools and 5 NGOs. Two educational institutions for people with visual impairment and one for people with hearing impairments are available in Yangon through NGO and GO providers, and another service for people with hearing impairments is available through a GO provider in Mandalay. Inclusive education is provided to mainstream schools in Yangon by GOs and NGOs through educational grants and creation of physical barrier-free environment.
3. Livelihoods programs – providing basic vocational training and financial support to begin small businesses. Most of these services are based in Yangon.

The above researcher says that someone with disabilities in Myanmar might face discrimination on many levels, within their families and communities, at the regional level and also at the national level. Disabled children and women are particularly vulnerable. A further problem impacting upon the lives of PwD is that there is hardly any partnership, cooperation or information sharing between service providers such as INGOs, NGOs, GOs and CBOs. The result is that service providers and organizations have underdeveloped conceptualizations on disability and thus are ill-equipped to support the disabled.[9]

While the number of service providers are relatively small in comparison with the number of PwD who need social services, many of PwDs are not aware of the existence of the organizations that provide social services. Myanmar National Disability Survey, the first ever survey of PwDs in Myanmar, finds that only a quarter of PwDs are aware of existing social services and only a few of them ever contacted those services.[10] This reveals the fact that a lot more of things have to be done in order to ensure a better situation of PwDs in Myanmar. For this, we will now turn to religious views of the matter.

**Religious influence towards PwDs**

**1. A Shallow Understanding of *Karma***

Myanmar has the world's four major religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. The Constitution does not endorse such a thing as a state religion, but gives a special status to Buddhism due to the

fact that it is the religion adhered by the majority, approximately 80% of the total population. In fact, the country has been long influenced by Buddhist teachings and practices. Accordingly, the concept of karma plays a substantial role in the lives of the majority.

The meaning of *karma* in its depth and complexity cannot be comprehensively covered in this short paper. In a simple summary, *karma* is the sum of a person's actions in this previous states of existence, viewed as deciding their fate in future existence. This means that the fate in this present life is the result of the deeds in the previous life.

Buddhists in Myanmar, like their fellow Buddhists in other countries, are influenced some way or another by this concept. Common people simply understand the concept of *karma* this way: "You must accept the bad things you are faced with, because that is the result of what you did in the previous life. If you don't want bad things in the next life, do good in this life as much as you can." [11]

To many, this interpretation of *karma* seems to be one of the guiding principles for the kind of attitude they have to PwDs. M. Miles states that almost all practicing Buddhists, at some time or other, are likely to think about disability as a part of the natural change and decay of the human body to which they are already subject, or will soon be subject, and some Buddhists articulate the view that disability experienced by a person in the present life is an outcome of action in an earlier life.[12] Megan Smith, a volunteer with UNICEF's Local Governance for Child Rights program, recounts what she heard from a Cambodian Buddhist young woman with a physical disability who said, "I have accepted that I am disabled because of my karma. And so I am to suffer."[13]

It is not PwDs alone that have this kind of "just to accept" understanding. Many people without disability also have it and thus they see PwDs as hopeless persons who are to suffer in this life. The attitude they have towards PwDs is pity at best, and many a time, blame and discrimination at worst. Ma Nge Nge Aye Maung, Chair of the Association of Myanmar Disabled Women Affairs, says,

> In Buddhism, a common belief is that if a man [sic] is disabled, he brings bad luck. Socially, some people hold condescending attitudes toward disabled people. Worst of all, disabled children are sometimes abandoned because their parents are ashamed of them. People with disabilities have had enough of being

treated like second-class citizens.[14]

The experience of the above is in fact the result of a very poor understanding and practice of Buddhist teaching. Lynne M. Bejoian argues that it is completely contradictory to Buddhist philosophy and practice to view PwDs as of lesser value and deserving of poor fate.[15] First, causality (cause and effect) is the basis for *karmic* understanding, but karma is a most mysterious and complex entity. Only enlightened beings (Buddhas) can accurately perceive *karma* and fathom *karmic* realities. Thus, the commonly held belief about disability is that there is an obvious and linear causality which is extremely inadequate. Second, over-emphasis on past life presumes that one had a human form. But there are six realms into which one can be born, and human form is only one of them. Therefore, the possibility of taking human form is incredibly low. Third, the common interpretation of *karma* focuses much on the past, but Buddha focused more on the present and potentiality for the future. Lastly, Buddhism is inherently non-punitive in nature. Considering disability as punishment presumes blame. While Buddhism is all about responsibility, it is not at all about blame.

In fact, Buddhism is all about compassion, skillful means, wisdom and responding to all phenomena in the most constructive way possible. One would therefore expect that a country with the deep-rooted Buddhist teaching is able to offer its people a loving, just and peaceful society. Unfortunately, the Buddhist Myanmar in the past never enjoyed such thing as civil society, owing to the dictatorship in various forms for half a century. Under the iron grip, "human rights" was a strange vocabulary to the citizens, "rule of law" was like a castle in the air, and Buddhism itself became a useful political tool for the power that be. In such a situation, people in all walks of life suffered from poverty, corruption, injustice, inequality, forced labour, oppression, poor education, poor transportation, and many more. In such a time all people suffered, even persons without disability, the most vulnerable victims were women, children, and of course the disabled persons.

Considering this, the shallow understanding of *karma* is not the only cause for being unsupportive to or being unable to care for PwDs. Poverty, or the ignorance caused by poverty, is also a destructive culprit. Given the influence of Buddhist teaching about charity and compassion, there will be numerous individuals who have a desire to do something good for PwDs, but fail to do so due to lack of fund

or lack of knowledge about what and how to implement. If all the charitable people are well-informed and well-organized, the existing organizations and groups that have been providing social service will become much more effective and many more organizations will arise as well.

## 2. Christian Social Services for PwDs

*The Myanmar Time* in its issue of 12th January 2015 posts an article that includes the following information:

> In Yangon, there are only two state-run schools that offer inclusive education. As a result, many disabled children are forced to seek places at non-government schools such as the Myanmar Christian Fellowship of the Blind, the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf and the Eden Center – a school for disabled children.[16]

The three non-government schools mentioned above are founded and run by Christians. It is glad to know that Christians with such a small number in the country are willing and able to do such big things. In addition to the above-mentioned schools, there are a few other significant services for PwDs run by Christians. The Mawlamyine Christian Leprosy Hospital is for one, being the oldest and the biggest among the very few leprosy hospitals in the country. Glory be to God!

However, it is also sad to know that the biggest city of Myanmar has only two state-run schools for PwDs and that many disabled children have the problem of finding schools for their education. Besides, Yangon is one of the three cities having the lowest prevalence rates of PwDs. If disabled children in Yangon hardly find schools for their education, how much more will be for disabled children in rural areas. This is a signal to both the government and all the people to respond to the demand of doing more social services for PwDs in Myanmar.

As for Christians, to love God and fellow people is the greatest commandment given by Lord Jesus Christ, "Love your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt.22:37-39; Mk.12:30-21 NRSV). Likewise, the motivation of serving others comes from the same Lord who claims, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt.20:28; Mk.10:45 NRSV).

The detail of this service can be more fully understood by the instruction

in Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV), known as the Nazareth Manifesto that goes:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and the recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The instruction "to proclaim good news" is also found in two other texts. One is Matthew 28:18 (NRSV) that reads:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
> in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
> And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

A shorter and a more clear-cut instruction is in Mark 16:15 (NRSV) that goes "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

The instruction in both texts is known as "the Great Commission." With these two instructions, namely, the Great Commission and the Nazareth Manifesto, Christians at all times are active in proclaiming the gospel and providing social services. But when it comes to balance between the two, it is almost impossible for many to focus on both simultaneously. This is true to Christians in Myanmar as well. While it is good to see many who are active and strong in spreading the good news, it is sad to see the many more who are not interested in helping ministries and not involved in social services. Therefore, Christians who are obediently carrying out the Great Commission need as well to rethink the meaning of "gospel" and make greater effort to fulfill the Nazareth Manifesto.

Actualizing the Nazareth Manifesto is indeed part and parcel of Christian mission to the world full of wounds and suffering. The image of the Crucified God was presented long ago by Jürgen Moltmann to the suffering people. Now, Nancy L. Eiesland, a PwDs herself, takes up the Disabled God for reaching and embracing PwDs.[17] The resurrected Christ in His first meeting with the startled disciples told them to look at him and touch His hands and feet (Lk.24:36-39). And His hands and feet had wounds from the nail and His side had wounds from the spear (Jn.20:25-27). Many Christians have attempted many times to deny or

negate this image, presenting many other alternatives. But the Disabled God alone is representative of full personhood and fully compatible with the experience of disability. While working in the power of the resurrected Christ, Christians in Myanmar must take the image of the Disabled God to work for and with PwDs.

## Towards an Enabling Society

### 1. Religions as Agents of Change

As stated earlier, both Buddhists and Christians, and of course Muslims and Hindus and all from different religions in Myanmar, need to rethink the teachings of their own religions and their practices especially in relation to others like PwDs. This is necessary, not to promote their own religions, nor to convert PwDs to their religions, but to stand against the disabling society and build together a society which enables, ensures, and empowers the full personhood of PwDs.

Religions, therefore, need not compete as to whether whose teaching is the best. To echo what Miles has voiced out, all the great religions and philosophies seem to have some admirable things to display from their historical treasury and current practice. At the same time, each also has some rather toxic stuff which they might usefully consider putting in storage or discarding. The truth from historical evidence is that none are in a strong position to claim that their teaching has all the right answers and all the best practice, when it comes to responding to disability and disabled people. So it may be in the interests of all, to hear and see what the neighbours or competitors have to show and tell, and to assist one another in updating and improving the activities, for the benefit of all.[18]

### 2. A New Model for Social Transformation

In dealing with PwDs, different approaches have been applied. One significant approach is "individual model." In this model, medicalization configures the individual with disability as sick or invalid. The recommended solution lies in curative and rehabilitative medical intervention, with the involvement of health practitioners, psychologists, and educationalists. These experts define an individual's needs and how these should be met. The aim is to overcome, or at least minimize, the negative consequence of the individual's disability. With this, the central thrust of individual model is to cast disability

as a personal tragedy where the individual concerned must depend on others for support. In summary, the individual model takes disability as a pathology and a social problem.[19]

As criticisms of individual, medical model increased, a new approach called social model comes to the fore. This model locates disability within the society rather than in an individual. While not denying the needs of specific bodies, the social model focuses on the innumerable ways that society constructs disabling environment for people who cannot conform to a prescribed norm. When it comes to defining impairment, this model is cautious not to make judgments from a mere observation of people because this model is fully aware that even what is presumed to be an impairment in a person it may depend more on social factors than on anatomical facts.[20]

## Conclusion

Myanmar does not have sufficient social services for the 2.3 million of persons with disabilities in the country. Much has to be done in this area and everyone in the country has the responsibility for it. More organizations, more schools, more hospitals, more centers, etc. are much needed for all regardless of religion. This itself is already enormous job, a thing easier to said than done.

But, what is more crucial is the attitude and the nature of society. Social services, however plentiful and proficient they may be, cannot work fruitfully if the society remains indifferent to persons with disabilities. The utmost need therefore is the transformation of society or community from its disabling nature into an enabling one. The government alone cannot achieve it and thus all religions in the country must act as agents of change and cooperate with the government in marching toward the goal – the enabling society.

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# Part II

# Disability, Scripture and Hermeneutics

# Person with Diability in the Hebrew Bible

John Samuel

## Introduction

The persons with disabilities have been living with us ever since the creation of humanity. The quantum of the disability varies from slightly disabled to completely disabled. The disabled persons raise many questions from their life. Answers have been searched by simple persons to great philosophers and the more we search, the more we are baffled. The difficulty in finding the answers is partly because they do not require a theoretical answer, but an answer to their problem of life. The answer must come from the experience of the disabled person if it has to be a real answer to the problem. The answers of the 'not disabled bodied person' cannot fathom the depth of the abyss from where these questions emerge. However may be on a basis of partnership between the 'disabled' and the 'not disabled', we can seek for a way forward.

There is a beautiful story regarding this. When Moses struck the rock with the scroll, the scroll broke into many pieces. Then God gave Moses a new copy of the scroll. However, God asked Moses to collect all the broken pieces of the scroll and asked him to keep it near the unbroken scroll in the golden Ark of the Covenant that is why the broken and wholesome are together in God's covenantal love in our world till today.

## Many Worlds within our World

There are many polarities within the human community. Divisions such as 'man-woman', 'rich-poor,' 'literate and illiterate' etc, are not just the opposites, but they reflect the unbridgeable gaps within the humanity. The chasm between a tribal girl and a Bollywood star, the

gap between the daily laborer and a big capitalist, the sheep rearing boy in the countryside and the research scientist in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, they all belong to very different worlds which are not close to each other. A person who is born as a 'man' is not near to the real world of a 'woman.' Although the 'disabled' and the 'able bodied' persons live side by side, still able bodied person will not be able to understand the world to which the disabled person belong to. Hence, we have to realize and accept the fact that we are in a multi-polar, multi-layered and multi-faceted world.

The person who is identified as 'blind' lives in a world of the blinds. The person who cannot hear live in the world of the hearing impaired. There are many worlds within our world and each world communicates within its world. It is also possible that there is a continuum of communications and relationships between distinct worlds. As this communication extends over a wide range of distinctions, both enabling of communications and hindrance in communications do happen simultaneously. Hundreds and thousands of such heterogeneous worlds within the one homogenous human community sends several circles of waves of reverberations.

**Cultural Views of the Disabled**

In ancient times, there were some geographic areas designated as having the maximum number of disabled persons. In such times, the disabled persons, so long as they contributed to the income of the family, were considered as normal people. People were valued on the basis of the ability to bring income to the family and not on the basis of health. May be one of the effects of the Enlightenment, people were divided into normal and healthy over against the sick and the disabled. People who were physically and mentally retarded were considered as lower in the order of evolution. The eugenic movement considered such people as a hindrance to the growth and perfection of the human community. People with disabilities were separated not only for eradication, but even to stop them in their procreation. The eugenic movement led to the development of an ideology that the functional impairment was inferior race and that they must be eradicated. Hereditary pathology was employed for forced sterilization and to serve as a ban on marriage. People with physical impairments were severely traumatized by excess of these eugenic ideologies. Hitler's Germany was a classic example of the eugenic ideologies. Disabled persons are aberrations in creation

and they can be subjected to mass destruction. Discriminations thus took to monstrous levels even to the extent of destroying them as sub-human beings and as a threat to the development for future humanity.

**Disabled in the Hebrew Bible**

Leviticus 21:16-23, is often seen as a basic text for the discussion of disability in the Hebrew Bible. The passage is a lengthy and pointed text which deals with the issue of disability. The priests who are blemished, who have one of the infirmities mentioned in the list, are prevented from attending the services of the temple. The reasons why they are not allowed to engage in the priestly duties are not mentioned. Even though this text deals exclusively about the exclusion of the priests due to their position as 'disabled', the 'disabled' among the non-priestly classes also did not escape the pain of 'exclusion'. Hence this text is held as a proof text for the subordinate position of the disabled in the ancient Israelite society.

The perception that the blemished person shall not do the priestly duties comes in between the several other requirements for the priestly eligibility. This belongs to the larger section called as the 'Holiness Code' in Leviticus. Holiness Code may have emerged either from the redactors of the P group or from the group engaged in the revision of the Deuteronomy. Since the material in Leviticus 21-22 differs from the other passages (17-26) there are also scholarly opinions that this actually does not belong to the larger Holiness Code. This passage is as follows:

> Behold, no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face, or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot, or a broken hand, or a hunch back, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes, or an itching disease, or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire.

The list begins with 'blind' and 'lame.' They occur together in many places although everyone would attain blindness due to age, it may refer to people who were blind from the childhood. Those who did not suffer from blindness even by age were praised. Moses was praised by saying: Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His sight was unimpaired and his vigor was not abated.

However, the Bible admonishes the one who is not kind to the blind. Leviticus reminds, "You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind." Deuteronomy warns, "Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road." Job claims as part of the virtue, "I was eyes to the blind." Sometimes, blindness was construed as God's punishment. It is YHWH who blinds the enemies. Thus blindness is a form of God's punishment. At the same time, YHWH is a God who heals the blind. Bible does not depict all the blind as negative. In fact, the five exemplary persons Isaac, Jacob, Eli, Ahijah and Samson became blind towards the end of their life. Prophet Jeremiah prophesied that the "blind and the lame will be brought back at the fullness of history".

Likewise the lame persons were offered an inferior place in the Bible. Mephibosheth was a lame man. He became lame at the age of five. In spite of King David's hatred for the 'blind and the lame,' he treated Mephibosheth very kindly. The person who has a mutilated face (*hrm*) was forbidden as impure. Some scholars explain this as 'disfigured.' Others claim a defect in the nose. 'One whose limb is too long' (*hrm*) belong to the disabled. It is explained as 'abnormally long' or 'one hip longer than the other.' It could have signified 'disfigured and deformed. The next disability is a pair, 'a broken leg or a broken arm' (*shabar ragal, shabar yad*). The following disability is hunch back. This is invariably explained as 'spinal curved.' The dwarf (*dak*) is a 'small' sized human being. Scab may mean a skin disease of a general kind. The last one is a very painful affliction, enlargement of testicle, obstruction of blood to the testicles etc.

The whole idea behind the exclusion of the disabled persons seem to be 'holiness.' The disabled persons do not qualify for the purity expected of in the service of the alter. The physical disability assumes a cultic dimension by calling it 'blemish'. The word 'blemish' occurs twenty one times in the Old Testament and five occurrences of this word happens in this section. However, in the later part of this chapter, the same twelve disabilities are mentioned with the animals as not worthy of offering to God. How do we understand this similarity of the disabled in the priests and in the animals? Various suggestions have been offered. It is also not clear why the common disabilities like 'deafness and 'mute' are omitted. May be 'wholeness' suggested holiness and any kind of brokenness denoted impurity. Or, it may have arisen to teach that the purity laws for the priestly people were stricter

than those of the ordinary people in Israel. Like the demand to offer the best among the flock to honour God, so may be the best among the people to serve God. Having said all these about the disabled in this passage, we must conclude with a critique, whatever may have been the cultural-cultic bonding be upon these texts, the given time frame of the text when there had not been so much of awareness of the liberation of the disabled, yet, we are not able to justify with the attitude shown towards these disabled persons during the Old Testament times.

**Rabbinic Guidance to the Disabled**

The Rabbinic dictum recognizes the difficulties of the disabled people and exempts them from the obligations of the Halaka so that they do not feel sad for not being able to fulfill the obligations of the Jewish life. It is worthwhile to mention how the Rabbis have deduced the laws for the disabled. A disabled person must follow Sabbath only if there is no danger to his/her life. A mechanical aid, like wheel chair, may be permitted to help a disabled person attend the synagogue on a Sabbath day. However, if a man is assisting him, since the man becomes like a mechanical aid, another mechanical aid, like a wheel chair, cannot be used. A disabled person can put on, remove the artificial limb during the service, because it is considered as a part of his body. Starting a motor in the mechanized wheel chair is not permitted. For medical purposes, one may wear an electronic device like 'electronic nerve stimulatory device' because it is considered as the cloth of the person. A blind person may be accompanied by a guide dog to the synagogue and it will not be considered as a desecration, because it is enabling its master to fulfill the commandments. A blind person cannot use a radio or a tape recorder, even if it is tuned before the beginning of the Sabbath. A hearing impaired person may wear ear aid since it is considered as his cloths. It is permissible to use the microphone to enable the hearing of a hearing impaired person on weekly services, but not on the Sabbath or the Yom Kippur. All these laws suggests the understanding and sympathy for the disabled persons on one side while on the other hand, the reluctance to free the disabled from the obligations made in the interests of the able bodied persons.

**'Disabled' responding to the Judeo – Christian Traditions**

Jacquline Kool was born with muscular dystrophy and was brought up in the Christian tradition. She says 'Leviticus 21:17-23 forbids

the person with disability to come near the holy altar, because he/she will profane the holy place. Even the sacrificial animal should be male, whole and without blemish. In a careful analysis of Jewish texts, not only the Jewish Bible, but also rabbinical writings like Talmud, physical and psychological perfection was seen as a prerequisite for a relationship with God. This perfection was embodied in the male, free and the learned priest without defect, who stood in a sharp contrast to the disabled, mentally ill, mentally retarded, physically disabled, deaf and blind.

Cyril Axelrod was born in a Jewish family in South Africa. He was profoundly deaf when he was born. He wanted to become a Jewish Rabbi. However he was turned down from becoming a Rabbi, because he was deaf. Later he became a Catholic and eventually a catholic priest. As a Catholic priest for forty years, he served the deaf people in Africa and Asia. He united the multiracial deaf community against the apartheid in South Africa. He organized the deaf and blind in the land of China. Later he himself became blind and invented the sign language for the Chinese blind people. He had always regretted for not being able to become a Jewish Rabbi all his life. He loved his Jewish family life and the Jewish spirituality till the end of his life. He became a living advocate to the Jewish reluctance in accepting the disable for the priesthood.

**Towards a Theology of the Disabled**

Nancy Eisland had done eleven surgeries in her hips before she attained her age of 13. Her character came to be formed by the physical and societal challenges of her disability. She later became a professor in a University in U.S. She became an active voice for the disabled until her death. She was a powerful voice in the World Council of Churches and United Nations speaking for the full recognition and freedom of the disabled in the world. She wrote her famous book, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of the Disabled.*

The Judeao-Christian tradition has always cherished in a powerful God. God can do anything and nothing is outside the power of God. The human able-ness was transposed to God as a God who can do all things. Isaiah says, “The Lord’s hand is not too short to save nor his ear too dull to hear.” God is perfect and without any blemish. Jesus is the archetype of this perfection. Peter writes, “With the precious blood of

Christ, like that of a lamb, without defect or blemish." Jesus' struggles with the disability was viewed as his struggle against the power of Satan. However, when the disabled people wanted to think of their God, they wanted to speak about a God who was disabled. Such a God talks, God who is disabled, collided against the God of the able bodied in the world.

Jesus in his early ministry often responded to the disabled with compassion. He healed many disabled bodied persons and restored their health. Thus it gave inspiration to the Christians to serve the disabled all over the world. However, Jesus towards the end of his life took the alternate path, not the healing of the disabled, but he himself became disabled by accepting the cross. He himself became blinded. He invited his friends to come and touch his unhealed body with the wounds, after his resurrection. Thus God became a disabled God, fully affirming with the disabled.

**Conclusion**

Feminists have done a major contribution when they questioned the 'male bodied God' in our Scripture and theology. God was metaphorically described in a male language. However, that sense of the metaphor was gradually lost and God was made as a male. Later the women came to the help of men for reminding them of the metaphorical sense in the God talk. Now, the disabled people come for the further correction in God talk. God has been described as an able-bodied person over the centuries. This is a metaphorical language. How can the blind, deaf and the dumb violate the perfection of the Heavenly Father? The language has to be revised. The metaphor must be revisited. God of the disabled, God as the disabled is waging a war against the God of the powerful. God is actively on the side of the 'disabled' in their liberation struggles against the able bodied people. Holy Spirit integrates and the evil disintegrates. Jesus gathers and the devil scatters. God unites and this world divides. When we say to the disabled, You will be made whole in the heaven, they are annoyed. They affirm to us, "We want to be disabled not only in this world, but also in the Heaven." The able bodied also have a natural cycle of becoming disabled as we grow in age. We are only 'temporarily able bodied.' We will grow and mature into 'disabled' in our bodies!

If a theology of the blindness should emerge, it should be a

theology of the world of the blind. It should put the negative view of the Blinded people by the sighted people into criticism. It must put the absolute world of the sighted people into perspective. It should show that the blind people are in the image of God, in their being blind. This theology must offer practical solutions in political and economic aspects from the experience of being blind in the world. It must deconstruct the dominant view on 'normality,' and insist on the inclusive view on normality. Rather than beginning our theology from 'created in the image of God,' why not we begin our theology with the 'bread broken for us' in a broken world around the table!

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# Retribution and Disability in Hinduism and Old Testament

Kartik Pal

## Introduction

Traditionally many Hindus give no regard to the persons with disabilities though some feel pity and compassionate for the disabled. People also regret having such a child in their family and feel highly ashamed of living in the midst of surrounding socio-cultural context of competition and aggressiveness to get success in the life. The attitude shown towards them does not give any hope or peace to the disabled and is quite discouraging and challenging to those who stand with them. Such attitudes have very much become part of the disabled in the Indian society. Sometimes disabled children are shunned and abandoned at birth. Moreover, people with disability have been traditionally seen as inauspicious in the Indian societies. Indeed, it is crucial to know the reason behind such attitude towards disability in Hinduism. The chief concern, therefore, in this paper will be to make a comprehensive study of the rational basis for their attitude towards disability which is very much rooted in the concept of retribution. Therefore, special attention will be given to study the concept of retribution according to Hinduism. Having done that, we will consider next retribution in Deuteronomy and see in what way retribution in Deuteronomy is different from retribution in Hinduism.

## The Law of *Karma and Sin*

The law of *karma* is one of the most popular doctrines that is strongly believed and exercised in Hinduism. In order to understand the retribution in Hinduism we will consider sin in connection with the

law of *karma*. For a long time, this belief has made a very profound influence on the lives of Hindus in India. The term *karma*, primarily, means action. It is a "noun-form" and has derived "from the root *kri* meaning to do or to make."[1] It includes actions of all kinds such as "mental, verbal, or physical."[2] So it covers a wide range of actions both seen and unseen, thoughts and actions. Generally, it is by such actions that we hurt or make someone happy, please or displease God, realize and feel our wrong doings or not. It is the law of *karma* which judges the *karma* or action of all kinds. The law of *karma* is the principle by which good deeds are rewarded and bad/sinful deeds are punished.

In the meantime, it is worth directing our minds to the Hindu scriptures to know their essential views about *karma*. Yuvraj Krishan states in *Vedic* literature and especially in "Samhitas and Brahmanas" *karma* is to perform "any religious act or rite" to get a better future.[3] Clear indication is assured for the better future on the basis of the *Vedic* ritual work. It helps us to understand that if no ritual work is performed than it is considered as bad *karma* and ultimately it will bring a very dark future. But it does not make the future clear in this present life or in subsequent life after death. Usually, when Hindu talks about future they refer to next birth. We get a clear picture that present performance can make a considerable amount of impact in one's future. Good works will bring a better future but bad work will bring a dark future. A bad work in this case is not performing the religious acts which actually plays the role of sin which will promise the upcoming worse future. This indicates that sinful work can bring an unpleasant future in life.

Moreover, *karma* in *Upanishads*, refers on one hand, to the moral law of "good and evil" and on the other hand to "bondage leading to transmigration and rebirth."[4] The reference to the moral law of right and wrong gives a clear idea of sin in which disability is a state of bondage. Without the concept of sin, it is hard to imagine the moral standard of right and wrong. According to *Upanishads* it is quite important to realize that the whole focus is to be free from the bondage by the work. The elements that can cause someone bondage gives a clear picture of sin. The bondage refers to the state of being slave which is often understood as the effect of sin.

In addition to this, it is good to observe Yuvraj's quotation from the famous teaching of *Bhagavad Gita* 2.47 "*Karmanye va adhikaraste ma phalesu kadacana*" meaning, just do the work and expect no

outcome from it.[5] Here the two key words (*karmanya*) *karma* or action and (*phalesu*) *Phala* or result are right at the center of our focus. This teaching of *Bhagavad Gita* can be better understood in the light of the principle of *karma*. It puts the emphasis on the work and suggests that human expectation should be away from the fruits of the work. But it still does not deny the importance of the results or the fruits based on the work. This is the way good work in Christianity is also performed. The benefit may happen but the doer should not use it as her/his motivation. The point is that whether you expect fruit or not, fruits of the work are inevitable. This principle of *Gita* also falls under the principle of *karma*. Whenever Hindus talk about the result of the work, they mostly refer to past sin. When someone does good work, s/he gets free from the bondage and ultimately, s/he will be united with the *Paramatman*. At that point, s/he will get her/his reward, end her/his cycle of rebirth and be free from the result or fruits of sin. Therefore, often people in Hinduism link the present consequences with the sin of the past. In this way *Gita* provides an idea of sin for which a person ultimately bears the consequences as fruits of her/his work.

Thus, *karma* is the principle by which both good and sinful deeds get their appropriate reward. However, it is significant to know at this point that mostly when Hinduism talks about *karma* the usage is in the negative sense. This is so popularly at any rate. When we understand sin in Hinduism connecting to the law of *karma*, we are clear that there is a punishment for the sinful work done intentionally and the soul of a person enters into a cycle of rebirth and will be in bondage until it unites with *Paramatman*. This is why Hindus connect disability with the sinful work of the previous birth.

*Karma* in Vedic literature emphasized the ritual work. Ritual work is primarily an invocation to solve the human problem. Ritual in Hinduism includes series of actions to get rid of evil. Often people do *Homa* (Religious offering made into fire). It is the source of the fulfillment of all the desires for material prosperity and physical wellbeing. A better future is assured on the basis of this ritual work. That means if ritual work is not performed dark future is inevitable. *Karma* in *Upanishads* addressed the moral law of good and bad, and bondage. If a person does something ethically wrong than s/he will enter the bondage as the punishment. The principle of *Gita* also falls under the law of *karma* and brings the most deserving fruits to the doer

though s/he should keep her/his expectation away from the fruits.

This suggests that it is the law of *karma* which relates to the present consequences with the sinful acts of the past birth. It is at this point people associate disability with sin assuming that disability is due to the sinful work of the past life. Now let us consider the relationship between the law of *karma* and disability.

**The Law of *Karma* and Disability**

Having studied the sin and the law of *karma* in Hinduism now we will focus on the connection between *karma* and disability, since the previous deeds have tremendous effect on present status of a person. O.P. Joshi asserts that the mystery of "suffering" and the "inequalities" which we see "among human in the world" are explained by the law of *karma*[6]. It suggests that people born with an able body or with disability are not just by accident but have been determined by the principle of *karma*. Viswanathan states that "the law of *karma*" gives knowledge and explanation about sin by the principle of "cause and effect."[7] It is the law of *karma* that promotes the idea of cause and effect. That is to say "wherever there is a cause, there is an effect."[8] So sin (*Papa*) is the cause and result (*Phala*) is the effect. There is then a clear indication of disability having connection with *Karma* because the law of *karma* connects the two. It is indeed significant to discover the way *karma* functions and relates to disability.

Firstly, in order to understand the relationship of karma and disability we must consider the concept of *samsara*. *Samsara* is the transmigration of the soul depending on the deeds done in the previous birth directed by the law of karma. The law of *karma* and the concept of *samsara* give reasons for the differences we see among the humans. *Samsara* helps us to understand the dispensation of retribution. It is a very complex phenomena of living beings since it deals with the transmigration of the souls and yet remains very central to the belief of people in Hinduism. Millions of Hindus in India strongly abide by this concept as the reasonable means to establish harmony and order in their past, present and future life. The way Arvind Sharma has defined *Samsara* is nothing but "the process of undergoing rebirths" regularly.[9] Rebirth indicates that the death of the person is not the end of the soul. The soul will take another body and be reborn. It is generally accepted that the "soul" continues to "live" in "another life" going through

a cycle of birth.[10] Actions of the previous birth are "attached to the soul,"[11] which play a significant role in determining the journey of the soul. According to the law of *karma* since soul must pay the wages of *karma* of the past life, its returning to the work is nominated.[12] It then becomes necessary for a person to take birth several times in this process of principle. More surprising is the fact that the "process" of *samsara* is "without a beginning and an end."[13] It clearly indicates that everyone in this life is set to pay the wages of the past life. In such cases, disability has the purpose to pay the wages of past life.

Secondly, to get the reasonable explanation of why a person is born with disability let us pay attention to the heart of the law of *karma* and rebirth. We must know the fact that it is during the age of *Upanishad* where the law of *Karma* was meaningfully developed and connected to the idea of rebirth.[14] Since it was developed during the age of "*Upanishad*" it is highly philosophical and considered to be the most classical to Hindus. Masih believes that there is a strong relationship between *Karma* and rebirth.[15] As "one sows, so he reaps", the person who performs the action gets the result.[16] This is the most fundamental principle of the law of *karma* which governs the whole system of rebirth. "Every action produces its necessary result and every cause produces an effect."[17] As per this principle all are born in this world because of their past deeds and their rebirth will take place again on the basis of work of present life. Present conditions and unique circumstances of a person are the consequences of his past deeds. There is no accident or even coincidences involved in it. It indicates that a person is born with disability due to their sinful work of the past life. The differences we see in the lives of the people with regard to their "classes or physical mental abilities" are due to their works of present as well as past life.[18] Classes here refers to the caste system and physical mental abilities refers to the disability. Sarah M. Whitman also asserts that mental and physical hardship of a person in this present life is considered to be "part of the unfolding *karma*."[19] It is the result of the improper actions "(mental, verbal, or physical)" of the past as well as present life.[20] The crucial point is, disability is not regarded as the "punishment but as a natural consequence of the moral law" in reaction to the actions of the past.[21] In this case the law of *karma* plays a vital role. God is not involved in judging the act and determining the subsequent consequences.

Thirdly, it is even more surprising to know that nobody is responsible for the work except the one who is actively involved in the work. A person's present status is neither accidental nor is fate involved in this complex. But the performer is absolutely responsible for their own future because they intentionally commit sin. However, people often associate the sin of family members behind disability or any tragedy that they encounter unexpectedly. It is also profound to remember that, "the soul continues" to carry the burden of *karma* being born several times "until it exhausts all *karmas*" going through "pain and pleasure sensations in the body" to form a single identity with "*Paramatman*" in the end."[22] Painful struggle is "part" of human life and it will continue to remain till one gets "*moksha*" (salvation).[23] Robin Boyd asserts that "man as pre-existent and eternal soul, the atman" is caught by the "world of *Maya*" and automatically gets involved in the "*karma samsara*" and will be finally united with "*paramatman*."[24] It is the journey of a single atman, which is temporarily attached with the body, to be united with supreme atman. In such cases, whether rich or poor, with ability or disability, all are on a special mission to accomplish the chief aim of their lives. In Hinduism "pain and suffering" are even not exclusively considered as unpleasant or unwelcomed since some of the people chose suffering in their "*spiritual*" journey,[25] because it helps a person to be detached from the worldly pleasure and suffering to be united with *Paramtman*. The ascetic life for some of the people becomes a way to live. Physical suffering therefore is not always seen as negative and it gives meaning and purpose to life. But looking at the people who are struggling with disability because of some greater sin still remains in the minds and hearts of the people in Hinduism.

In addition to that, when the misfortune befalls a certain individual the blame goes neither to God nor to any family members and neighbors. No external force, person and even God is involved in it. So deep is the "conviction of some of the adequacy of karma" that people even do not "need to acknowledge the existence of God, conceived as the creator of the world and as its controlling Judge."[26] Ram Gidoomal and Mike Fearon also state the significant point of the samsara is that "God is out of the picture".[27] In *Bhagavad Gita* 5:14 "*Krishna says*" God is not responsible for performing the actions as well as determining the fruits of the actions.[28] God is not going to be involved in this situation either to improve or control. Each and every person is "ultimately responsible" for their own performances.[29] The problem lies beneath

with regard to the judgment of the *karma*. Since God is not in the picture, the judgment of *karma* is done either by the universal force or an automatic response, as a result of which the future destination is determined. Even the execution of the law of *karma* is a mystery and not known to us with regard to why a particular person deserves disability more than others.

Moreover, Ed. Biswanathan asserts that the destination of the soul after death will solely depend upon the *karma* of the past. Whether a person becomes "rich or poor", or is "born with disease" are due to the "actions" of the "previous life."[30] He further explains that it is the law of *karma* which gives the ideology of the differences we see around us.[31] Generally stating the fact that *karma* of the past life is responsible for the present situation is just not enough since we know nothing about our previous birth. Even the present situation will not give details reason for the consequences. As Jagdhari states, the reason people are not the same will never be made clear by the facts, events and actions of the present life.[32] Though there is a general logic of the law of *karma* yet it is not entirely possible to establish a cause and effect equation between past and present life. It seems like the law of *karma* is the ultimate authority behind the people born with disability though our lack of knowledge of the past life disadvantages us from fuller and detailed explanation. While the other dimension is that it is hard to accept that a poor person will remain in the same state. The status of humans changes every now and then. They can be rich by their hard work in the present life and a person born with diseases can be healed by the help of the advanced medical technology.

To sum up: first, while studying carefully the law of *karma* and disability we looked at the concept of *samsara*. We found that the soul of the person never dies. It continues its journey by going through a cycle of rebirth, taking the burden of souls. Every soul has a special mission to pay its wages. In such case disability is also in the special mission to clear the wages of the past life. Then the effort was made to see the reasonable explanation behind such philosophy. We discovered that our work becomes the only crucial factor behind the cycle of rebirth. Cause and effect is the principle which determines the whole course of actions.

Secondly, we found that a person is absolutely responsible for the consequences which were not by accident or fate. Family members,

relatives or friends are not responsible for that. Even God is completely out of this picture. Since God is not involved in the law of *karma* exercising divine justice in determination of a soul's next birth is questionable.

Thirdly, it is important to know that in Hinduism pain and sufferings are not considered a punishment but they help people to experience a deep sense of meaning and purpose in the spiritual journey. But the mission of the soul is set to be united with *Paramatman* and that mission may involve suffering through disability.

It is clear that, though Hindus neither have a deep conviction about sin nor want to be called sinners yet the law of *karma* promotes the idea that there is an appropriate reward for righteous work and punishment for sinful work. They hold very strongly that all the situations of suffering or blessings of the present life are the consequences of the deeds of the past life. Disabilities or any struggles of life are therefore considered as cursing because of a person's bad work of the past. It is the law of *karma* which opens the way for the transmigration of a soul and leads it to be in bondage till it unites with the *Paramatman*. Though it is very difficult to relate our present life's struggle to the previous work since nobody is aware of what happened in the previous life yet the principle of *karma* connects the past sinful deeds with the present status of a person. It also promotes the idea that the doer is the one who is responsible for the consequences. Apart from the doer nobody is involved in the whole process of *karma*. So, disability is not because of sin of the parents. Even God is not in the whole picture of the law of *karma*. The judgment therefore is automatic or exercised by the universal power as per the principle of *karma*. It is then clear that the law of *karma* clearly revealed the ideology of retribution in Hinduism. Having studied disability and the law of *karma* we will now look at retribution and disability in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

**Retribution and Disability in Deuteronomy**

One of the emerging interests of Christians in India is to find the beliefs of other religions that correspond to Christian doctrine. Giving importance to such a quest, in this section we will devote our sincere effort to study retribution and disability in Deuteronomy since the notion of divine retribution is basic in this book. The divine retribution in the law of *karma* has been understood negatively where

the predominant factor is punishment due to sinful works of human beings. So, disability is seen as the consequence of previous deeds. It would be significant to know whether retribution in Deuteronomy emphasizes that ideology. Some key principles of divine retribution in Deuteronomy will be taken into consideration. In doing so we are developing a framework of sin-penalty as cause-effect, and that this work well in terms of parallel to Hinduism. This framework will not cover congenital disabilities to argue that these are the effect of a fallen world - this does not have any parallel within the concept of *karma*.

Firstly, Yahweh's relationship with his people is a significant part of retribution in Deuteronomy. In Yahweh's relationship to human justice and jealously, which are also very crucial in retribution, are integral. J. Gordon McConville asserts that Deuteronomy strongly holds the fact that God is a God of justice.[33] Bearing in mind the idea of "divine retribution in Deuteronomy", God standing against the evil is quite crucial.[34] In the context of manifold commandments in Deuteronomy, we can clearly see the maintenance of justice and jealousy of God. When we give our close attention to the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy we see the jealousy and punishment of God for evil to the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons have been declared (Deut.5:9). In the context of the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy dispenses the "essence of evil (*awon*) as idolatry"[35] Worshiping other gods than YAHWEH is something for which God is jealous. It is crucial to note the use of pronoun "I" and "you" which highlights the aspects of relationship. The "I"- "you" relationship is a very unique characteristic of the Ten Commandments.[36] It indicates that the jealousy of God has emerged out of this relationship. Divine acts of retribution in Deuteronomy are out of jealousy, and in divine action "justice" cannot be separated from God.[37] It seems that in the divine retribution of Deuteronomy, God is at work as the God of justice. God's action is not simply to justify the law code but to prove that God is a just God who loves His relationship with humans. It gives a clear picture of God's involvement in the retribution. In fact, Stephen B Chapman asserts that retribution in the "Old Testament theology" emphasizes the interaction "between human action and divine response."[38] It suggests that sin behind disability is not the purpose of the retribution in Deuteronomy. Relationship takes priority over ignoring or condemning people with disabilities.

Moreover, God's involvement in retribution in Deuteronomy helps us to understand that the whole process is not simply operated by an impersonal force but by a just God who is a person. It is not regulated by an automatic system where God is not in the picture. John G. Gammie is right in asserting that retribution in Deuteronomy is "personal, theocentric" through which Yahweh's active involvement of the past and present can be understood.[39] It is not operated by the philosophy or any impersonal principles, so that the consequences will not be determined by humans but by God, who takes personal interest in human life. God is at the center of the retribution. If "retribution is a function of justice" then punishment will never be imposed by the impersonal system, but by the "person and nature of Yahweh".[40] It suggests that people with disability need a personal touch at the point of their struggle.

In Deuteronomy 6: 4-5, the Israelites hear a call to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, with all their minds and with all their strength. In the following verses they are required to meditate on the commandments, teach them to their children, and tie them in their arms and foreheads. The significance of such requirements is mandatory because "a sense of rightness of things" remains very crucial at the back of all these commands in Deuteronomy.[41] God has given these commandments for human's good (Deut.10:12-13). It is important to note that according to Deuteronomy "the rightness of things is the origin of the "righteousness" (*sedaqa*) in God." Unlike the focus of the retribution on punishments, in maintaining the justice in retribution God is seeking for human's good. Therefore, in the retribution in Deuteronomy divine justice can be considered as a strong pillar which strongly stands in the way of evil for the benefits of humans. It encourages us to see the perspective of retribution where the goal is not on the penalties but the justice of God, and even in that justice, God wants to do what is good for humans.

Secondly, divine faithfulness is an indispensable part of divine retribution. We will consider divine retribution from Deuteronomy 7: 9-10. Chapter 7 of Deuteronomy exclusively deals with the conquest of the Canaan. This section chiefly addresses how people of Israel should trust God, destroy the other nations and their cultic installations completely and know the basis for their election. Joze Krasovec asserts that "the retribution formula" is the attestation that there is nothing but

God's choice as the basis of Israel's election out of rest of the people and God is "faithful" in keeping the divine "promises" which God gave to their ancestors.[42] The divine faithfulness was demonstrated in the way God brought the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. At this point God and the divine faithfulness is the "basis" of God's calling people to remain "faithful to their God" and therefore it is crucial to know the fact that there is a concept of "positive aspect" in the "divine retribution formula."[43] It indicates that the divine faithfulness towards God's people provides hope, comfort and victory in spite of retribution.

Thirdly, God's compassion is a significant part of Divine retribution in Deuteronomy. Often people relate God's anger and punishment in response to their sinful work when they think of retribution. There is a sense that receiving what is deserved is the appropriate act of God. However, retribution in Deuteronomy does not exclusively promote the idea of deserving as per the deeds of humans.[44] Though the divine anger is the appropriate response to the sinful work of humans yet they did not get the "full measure of judgment" from God which they actually deserve.[45] God's dealing is completely different than the way humans see, understand and expect. It goes beyond human imagination. The song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32 highlights the "judgment" of God in the setting of historical accounts "in which God has compassion" on Israelites.[46] As per the retribution formula the Israelites deserve nothing but utter destruction as a covenant breaking community. But the people of Israel did not get what they really deserved due to breaking the covenant; rather they were shown compassion by Yahweh. Beats referring to the phrase "I wound and I heal" from Deuteronomy 32:39 asserts that the "Judeo-Christian God" not only allows disability "in his sovereignty" but God also takes the responsibility to heal.[47] It is at this point we get a clear perspective of God "who is both the ultimate source and the ultimate solution."[48]

In Deuteronomy, there is a curse put on those who mislead a person with disability: Cursed is the one who misleads a blind person on the road. Then all the people will say, Amen (Deut.27:18). It shows "God's love and care for the people with disabilities."[49] That does not mean the formula of blessing and cursing in the covenant has no ultimate effect and the way covenant conditions blessing and cursing might express a certain moral order. "God's compassion" is the underlying factor and plays a significant role in retribution in Deuteronomy.[50] Here we can

clearly see God's compassion towards disability. The compassion of God plays a significant role in God's judgment and disability is not the punishment as per the sinful deeds. However, that does not mean the compassion of God is demonstrated in not allowing full measure of judgment. The judgment is so that repentance and restoration can take place. It is much more meaningful because it happens entirely within earthly life. This is revealed in Deuteronomy 27-28.

While studying retribution and disability in Deuteronomy we discovered three significant facts. Firstly, we get a clear indication that disability in retribution in Deuteronomy is not considered as something negative in the sight of God. It is not even seen as the punishment because of sin, as per the principle of retribution. Secondly, God keeps disability very much within the context of relationship where God has assured the divine faithfulness and compassion. God becomes the real source of encouragement for them. God's love, concern and care for the people with disability are truly evident in Deuteronomy. Thirdly, God encourages others to show the attitude of compassion towards people with disabilities by inserting laws. Since God stands with them, it provides a great hope for them. It shows that disabilities and the retribution in Deuteronomy is not seen as the consequence of sin. It is not even because of the anger of God. It is neither considered as a curse nor as a punishment from God.

However, the common assumption of retribution in Christian Theology is that disability is due to sin. In John 9:2, Jesus' disciples asked Him a question about whose sin was responsible for the blindness of man they encountered. It reveals the retribution mindset of Jewish people. But it is significant to note that in John 9:3, Jesus liberated them from such an interpretation and perspectives of Jewish people. Jesus' response to the question of disciples was very direct and clear: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Having made this thing clear, Jesus gave a purpose behind the blindness. Jesus said, "He was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). It indicates that disability is not a punishment because of sin in the past, rather a phenomenon where God's name will be glorified.

**Comparison of the Law of *Karma* and Retribution in Deuteronomy**

Having studied both the law of *karma* and retribution in Deuteronomy, we will do the comparison between the principle of *karma* and principle

of retribution in Deuteronomy. Three significant comparisons will be shown below.

First, it is crucial to note that the focus of the law of *karma* is on sin and punishment. It emphasizes the fact that sinful works deserves appropriate punishment. According to the law of *karma* infliction of pain, sorrow and suffering is the automatic response to the sinful work a person did in her/his previous birth. But sin and punishment is not at the center of retribution in Deuteronomy. God keeps retribution very much within the context of divine relationship with God's people in Deuteronomy. Divine relationship with humans is a very crucial part in the retribution in Deuteronomy. God brings blessings and cursing because God is jealous of the divine exclusive relationship with humans. God does not like to see the people going after other gods. Even in judgment God opposes evil and seeks the benefit of God's people. Humans, society or any circumstances are not the center of retribution in Deuteronomy. But it is the relationship of God and humans which remains at the heart of retribution.

Secondly, in the principle of karma God is not in the picture. God does not judge the *karma* of a person. The judgment is done either by an automatic principle or by an impersonal force which emphasizes the consequences as per the deeds of the past. In such a case, each individual is responsible for their present condition. Nobody else is responsible for that. A person's present status is the result of their past intentional deeds. But the judgment done in retribution in Deuteronomy is by personal God. It is bound up with the character of God. Divine justice, love and compassion are integral parts of retribution. Even in exercising justice, God opposes the evil for the good of humans.

Thirdly, the principle of *karma* emphasizes the cycle of rebirth. The soul of a person has to go through this cycle several times since salvation is not possible in one birth. According to the law of *karma* a soul will enter into *samsara* based on its deeds. It indicates that there is no restoration in this present life here on earth. But the retribution in Deuteronomy does not connect with the sinful deeds of the previous birth. In Deuteronomy God's judgment is done here in this earth and the divine compassion is shown towards God's people in order that they will repent and be restored in this present life. It is significant that both the law of *karma* and retribution in Deuteronomy oppose doing evil. But the law of *karma* links the present sinful deeds with the next

birth whereas the retribution in Deuteronomy deals with everything here in this life. We found three significant points to note.

Firstly, God's relationship with humans is an integral pillar of retribution in Deuteronomy. There is a unique function of the combination of divine jealousy and justice in maintaining the relationship with covenant people. God opposes the evil for the benefit of humans and at the same time God gives priority to the relationship. Retribution in Deuteronomy is therefore not controlled by any impersonal force but by God. It helps us to understand that disability is seen within the context of divine relationship rather than in the context of punishment. God is at the center of the retribution, not the punishment.

Secondly, a significant pillar of retribution in Deuteronomy is divine faithfulness. The divine faithfulness in keeping God's people is a predominant factor in spite of many difficulties. God has demonstrated the divine faithfulness in bringing people out of Egypt and that becomes fundamental in commanding the Israelites to walk in a right way. God's faithfulness provides a real strength to the people with disability.

Thirdly, God's compassion as a principle of retribution in Deuteronomy goes beyond expectation. We discovered that in God's judgment humans do not get what they deserve as per their deeds. God in judging the covenant community demonstrated the divine compassion. God did not punish them as per their deeds. It is done so that people would repent and be restored. In the context of such a judgment of God disability is not as per the sins of the past, but a cause for which God has compassion. On the whole retribution in Deuteronomy offers peace, comfort, promise and provision to the people with disability.

**Conclusion**

In studying the retribution in Hinduism and Old Testament, we gave our closer look to the law of *karma*. The law of *karma* is the principle where good works are rewarded and bad works are punished. We discovered that sin is very much connected to the idea of *karma* in Hinduism. The law of *karma* clearly provides explanation for disability through rebirth and *samsara*. It emphasizes that the disability is due to the *karma* of previous birth. It is seen as the punishment because of the sinful works of the previous birth. The law of *karma* is the ultimate judgment of all our actions. Therefore, the judgment is automatic or by impersonal force. God is not in the whole picture of the law of *karma*.

Each and every soul has to go through a time of bondage and finally be united with the *Paramathman*. Disability due to the deeds of previous birth is a strong ideology of the law of *karma*.

However, retribution in Deuteronomy does not emphasize the same ideology as the law of *karma*. Disabilities in retribution in Deuteronomy are not exclusively considered as the consequences of sin. It is not seen as the punishment from God. God does not ignore and condemn people with disabilities. Divine love, justice, faithfulness and compassion remain at the center of retribution in Deuteronomy. God stands with the people with disabilities assuring God's own presence and comfort. God's faithfulness towards people with disabilities provides a real comfort for them to live in this earth.

Even though God dealing with the retribution in Deuteronomy is very differently where link between the deeds of the past and the present consequences of humans is not a prominent factor, yet in popular Indian ideology disability is always caused by sin. It is because the karma ideology has tremendous influence upon the people of India including Christians.

**Endnotes**

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# Towards a Hermeneutic of (Dis)Ability

Roji T. George

## Introduction

The practice of Disability Hermeneutic in recent decades has shown greater intent in advocating resistance against Ableist Theology accusing the latter to be exclusionary in practice; thereby, it is termed biased, oppressive, and dehumanizing. However, the liberation oriented textual engagement in disability studies may be critiqued of "repetition-despite-dislocation," in the words of Boehmer.[1] Aiming at the emancipatory transformation, it appears to have fallen into the very trap of exclusivism and privileging of one's own experience over the other (i.e., the experience of persons with disability over "abled") in understanding God. Although the critique in no way intents to belittle the significance of a liberatory reading of the Christian scriptures for articulating dynamic selfhood of the persons with disability (PwD), the critical praxis does highlight its inherent tendency to alienate the abled bodies by constructing religious images and symbols in exclusive terms. Thus, the challenge is to advocate textual praxis in twin-forked tongue, that is equally – on the one hand, self-emancipatory, affirming complete humanity of a PwD, and non-exclusionary in terms, and on the other hand, subverting bi-polar theological frameworks, negating oppositional theological stance, and articulating theology in self-critical terms.

The paper, moving beyond and further elaborating my earlier work in the field,[2] intents to call the Disability Studies fraternity to intentionally pursue emancipation of the PwD at all levels avoiding the pitfall of ghettoizing tendencies. Probably, a more fruitful exercise in textual engagement with the scriptures would be to speak of God

as "(Dis)abled God" (unlike Eiesland's famous expression "Disabled God"). The expression implies to say, God, as known in Christ's incarnation, who is able-disable, simultaneously. Such an understanding while avoids the error of reductionism in speaking about God in either exclusive category of human experiences, it does allow both non-disabled and PwD to equally speak of, relate with, and experience God in one's own life situation.

Thus, the paper would seek to propose a working model for textual engagement lenient towards postmodern disability hermeneutic that defies bi-polarity while exhuming relevant insights from a text. At first, liberation hermeneutic oriented disability reading approach, especially the task spearheaded by Nancy L. Eiesland, shall be critically discussed. It would hopefully enable us to recognize the inherent possible tendency to ghettoize disability identity with an aim to articulate a liberatory disability theology. In the second section, at first, the general assumption of (dis)ability hermeneutic shall be delineated which may in turn pave the way to define the nature, direction, and characteristic tools of engaging in (dis)ability hermeneutic beyond polarity.

**Disability Discourse in Theological Engagement**

Diverse multidisciplinary approaches like Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism, have been used by the biblical scholars in responding to the issue of disability from a biblical point of view.[3] In recent years, many biblical scholars and theologians have resorted to liberation hermeneutical tools to engage with the biblical text. The approach is justified for two reasons: (i) the constant experience of marginalization of the PwD by the able bodies dominant church and her disability blind Ableist Theology, and (ii) the lack of self-affirmative disability theology affirming the complete humanity and dignity of a PwD.

So, a theology of disability driven by liberation hermeneutic, "questions the construction of human difference, exposing the categories 'able bodied' and 'disabled' as part of an ideology of ability that legitimates an ideal human embodiment".[4] Eiesland, a disability theologian, states that "a liberation theology of disability is a theology of coalition and struggle in which we identify our unique experiences while also struggling for recognition, inclusion, and acceptance from one another and from the able-bodied society and church".[5] She

argues that the key to articulate theological method for the theology of disability is accessibility i.e., a mutually fed "two way access"[6] to the respective social-symbolisms of life. On the one hand it must grant access to a PwD to fully participate in the life of the church by asserting differences and transformation,[7] on the other hand the church must "gain access to the social-symbolic life of persons with disability".[8] "Access" or "accessibility" is "both a rhetorical and a technical term" implying "the availability of the same choices accorded to able-bodied people. It also means opening the meaning of 'normal' to the ordinary lives of people with disabilities. Accessibility as used here refers to social-symbolic, physical, and legal inclusion in the common life".[9] To add, in line with libertory theological practices, disability theology articulates theology from the perspective of the PwD privileging their identity and experiences above other existential realities[10] with a goal to effect "emancipatory transformation".[11] Thereby, the clarion call to the church is to practice justice through a disavowal of her Abelist Theology, ecclesiastical institutions, etc. It is to affirm the nonconventional bodies by unraveling the hidden biblical themes, motifs, and images with liberatory significance in order to advocate a distinct model of wholeness.[12] In other words, the mission of the church as the community of justice must ensure that "people with disabilities be incorporated into all levels of participation and decision making"[13]

Towards this end, an important area of discussion in Eiesland's Christological reconstruction becomes valuable yet problematic. She discusses God in Crucified Christ merely as participating in the experiences of PwD, while fostering "transformation from this de-centered position"[14] is reductionist. For her, the mission and ministry of the able bodied man Jesus in the gospel narratives are forgotten at the behest of the Christ upon the cross who appears to be disabled. She rightly observes that "[t]he disabled God repudiates the conception of disability as a consequence of individual sin"[15] but fails to explain in relation to disability theology the vicarious nature of his brokenness in body as part of salvation from sin. Similarly, the compassionate, counter-cultural healer Jesus of the gospel narratives is absent in her liberation theology. The reason is that it appears to establish the traditional regressive attitude of some to see the PwD as "objects of charity" who cannot meet "other people in the churches on equal terms" for they may be often regarded as someone "less than fully human"[16] Perhaps, for this reason, Eiesland maintains that Jesus is neither "a

suffering servant [n]or a conquering lord" but a representative figure of the disabled ones. Thus, he is a "survivor" whose limits are never a tragedy but a mixed bundle of joy and pain simultaneously. Eiesland maintains that "[f]or people with disabilities who have grasped divine healing as the only liberatory image the traditional church has offered, relinquishing belief in an all-powerful God who could heal, if He would, is painful".[17] Thus, her Christological reconstruction of the disability theology is limited to the brokenness of Christ upon the cross and the celebration of Eucharist within the church.

Further, in doing so, Eiseland ideologically assumes an essentialist posture. It counters Ableist Theology but by ghettoizing the identity of PwD. The goal is to "alter the regular practices, ideas, and images of the able bodied."[18] The threat inherent to such a liberatory project despite its good intent is that it simply repeats the mistake of discrimination by the Abelist Theology. The exclusive religious images and symbols informed by the experience of the PwD alienate the non-disabled bodies. For example, the term "the disabled God" is polarizing and essensialist for it speaks of God in narrow contextual terms. Such a theological reconstruction in non-conciliatory terms makes the abled bodies incapable of comprehending God in unfamiliar terms. It obstructs the formation of an inclusive community of God although it rightly challenges the oppressive and marginalizing structures. It searches for "alternative structures and symbols of religious life that can effectively challenge oppressive beliefs and values".[19]

The (dis)ability hermeneutic constructs "a concept of God in non-essentialist terms which equally embraces both embodiments at once, affirms dignity, justice and wholeness, and fosters a dynamic self-critical harmonious coexistence of all in unity with differences celebrated."[20] It would enable both the abled bodies and PwD "to identify 'God-with-a-difference' as the one who embodies the two in Himself indistinguishably and completely, at once, without giving room to hierarchical relation based on able/disable ideological theology/ies. It would help restore the dignity of the marginalized discursively without capturing God in exclusive, fixed, and narrow term(s) of contextual theologies."[21]

**Hermeneutics of (Dis)ability beyond Polarity**

How then shall we articulate a disability theology in non-essentialist

terms? The fundamental assumption of the proposed new approach is to avoid articulating disability theology in essentialist terms because by calling God "disabled" one turns deaf ears to the experience of the able bodies. As a result, (dis)ability hermeneutic would avoid repeating the error already committed by the liberatory disability theology. The goal is to expunge the traditional Christian theology of its marginalizing and dehumanizing theological elements, while seeking to enrich the Christian theology with unique contributions of disability theology without polarizing humanity in abled/disabled bipolar. The Christian theology reconstructed ought to be reconciliatory in essence despite exposing and correcting the inherent able bodied biases in it, while restoring and reclaiming the dignity and rightful space of self-respect of the PwD in the body of Christ that is amiss in the present Abelist theological discourse.

**Some Preliminary Observations**

(Dis)ability Hermeneutics is contextual in nature. As it does not aim to produce the ultimate truth with universal significance hidden within the text, the interpretive task is to engage with the text within the local cultural context and the particular experiences of the PwD. The Asian religio-cultural realities are to be brought into conversation with the text to draw emancipatory insights beyond bi-polarity. The term "beyond" here must not be understood in spatial sense as transcending or crossing-over a boundary. Instead, it refers to a liminal space in-between the polar opposite essentialized spaces of self-articulation. In Bhabhaian terms, it would be the "Transcultural Hybrid" space of self-articulation in ambivalent terms[22] where neither "abled" nor "disabled" identities matter in their oppositional terms. In contrast, both the identities deconstruct each other constantly without valorization relationships in hierarchical terms.

Yong proposes "three basic elements that inform the disability hermeneutic at work" in his book which are helpful for our initial consideration:

(i) "People with disabilities are created in the image of God that is measured according to the person of Christ, not by any Mr. Universe or Ms. America".[23] They "should be appreciated as being uniquely different, even differently-abled. …it is to say that all people are challenged differently, and that the struggles of people with disabilities

shouldn't be aggravated by the biases and prejudices of non-disabled people".[24] Surely there are many more "hidden disabilities," to use Yong's expression,[25] which should not be used to generalize the plight of the suffering minority (disabled) – thereby diluting the gravity of the problem at hand. However, the "hidden disabilities" as universally shared reality, not unique to any particular person, must be broad canvas on which a (dis)ability theology must be drawn and re-drawn intentionally in non-essentialist terms. It must amplify the necessity of reading the Bible through the disability lens. Disability as a theological concern is much more deep-rooted in human life than it has ever been imagined. The experiences the persons with disability must gain equal space to the non-disabled one's experiences in the Christian theological discourse. It must also seek to assert how a person with disability is capable to perform many duties normally like any other able body. It is not enough to highlight PWD ability as "differently-abled" but we must also intentionally highlight how a person with disability could function like any other person despite any particular impairment causing 'partial' or limited ability. In other words, despite physical differences at times hampering 'normal' social function, the focus must move to a positive representation of the self as able-despite-disabled. If Paul, the apostle, had suffered physical challenges to which he makes repeated references, the defense of his own apostleship finds legitimacy in identifying with the suffering of Christ while focusing to defend his ability to function in the office like his opponents (1 Cor 15:8-11; 2 Cor 12:7-10).

(ii) They "shouldn't be defined solely by their disabilities.… People with disabilities should be allowed to define their own needs and wants, to the extent that such is possible, and should be consulted rather than cared for paternalistically as if they were completely helpless creatures".[26] Often, in India as also in other parts of the world, it is common to hear PwD addressed by their physical disabilities like *kānā* (one-eyed), *langadā* (lame), etc., overlooking the fact that they often do not require help from able bodies to function as independent individuals in the society. However, as part of virtues upheld within the society, charitable gestures towards such individuals, even without any request from a person with disability, are appreciated and admired. Thus, the PwD are often viewed less as capable individuals to fulfill their own needs but as opportunities to demonstrate goodness, magnanimity, and virtues of able bodied people. Discussing the flagrant negative attitude

towards the PwD in the society, Reynolds observes that the treatment of the PwD as incapable to do their own things prove "a disabling framework of attitudes and assumptions that often goes unexamined, hidden behind conventions presupposed as normative".[27]

(iii) Not all disabilities are to be healed!! While some physical disabilities do not make them fully dysfunctional, some others are "constitutive part of their identities" which cannot be repaired without destroying their very individuality.[28] In such cases, the differences must be accepted as integral to their individuality and the difference must be celebrated. Their differences must not be measured against the so called able bodies. Vanita's insightful analysis of a small but important figure in Hindu religious literature named "Ashtavakra, the sage who is bent in eight places, or, in modern times, is disabled".[29] Though disabled, he was wise man capable to bring back to life all former wise men including his father Kahoda (who cursed him while he was in his mother's womb) defeated in debate by Vandin, the scholar in the court of the famous King Janaka. Vanita points outs that after his father came back to life, Kahoda counseled him to take bath in Madhuvila. As a result, he was healed of all his disabilities. However, interestingly, "Ashtavakra remains in the popular imagination synonymous with crooked limbs, perhaps primarily because this crookedness is inscribed into his name".[30] The question is: Did Ashtavakra require healing to become one or more than one like an able bodied person? Surely not, the unanimous testimony of the Hindu scriptures is that he was unusually capable, intelligent, and victorious in moral uprightness despite his vulnerability to sexual pleasure, etc. In fact, his physical healing has not profited him in earning accolade as much as his identity as a (dis) abled exemplifies his ability more than any able bodies in the stories.[31]

These tentative preliminary observations enable us to discuss the tools of (dis)ability hermeneutic. (Dis)ability hermeneutic would refrain from delineating a set steps of interpretation with an aim to celebrate: (i) its ideological and subversive substructure, (ii) integrate a disabled person's specific experiences of alienation triggered by the hostile and unsympathetic cultural environment, and (iii) treat partial meanings of text with plurality of methods and tools beyond essentialization as also valid against the pretentious claim for discovering absolute truth embedded in a text with the help of certain fixed steps and principles of interpretation.

**Practice of (Dis)ability Hermeneutic**

The underlining principle to reconstruct an effective hermeneutical model of interpretation of a text in order to create an inclusive (dis) abled community of God is a commitment-with-critical-restrain. It requires a complete disavowal of the normate hermeneutics of the able bodies reinforcing hierarchical relation and naturalizing one's domination upon the PwD. Equally it would require disavowal of a polarized disability hermeneutic. According to Wynn, "[t]he 'normate hermeneutic' is the means by which scripture is interpreted so that it complies with and reinforces the socially constructed norms. This hermeneutic imposes a society's interpretation of disability on the text without due consideration to the text itself".[32] The disavowal of the normate hermeneutic would facilitate our interpretive engagement with the real experiences of both able and PwD. No more, the non-disabled peoples' experiences would be the measuring rod to assess the PwD's experiences as normal or abnormal/not normal for simple reason that they "do things differently, or who simply are different".[33]

It recognizes that the ideology operational liberatory disability hermeneutic is "ideology of ability [that] places 'disabled' and 'able bodied' at opposite ends of a spectrum—as if these are natural, self-explanatory categories".[34] It seeks to address the two (able and disable) at once, in one utterance, bracketing the negative prefix 'dis' implying "not" before "able." In other words, (dis)ability hermeneutic focuses on the differing degrees of ability in individuals to perform any act. In doing that the uniqueness of accomplishing the act of an individual without assigning it to any bi-polar perfect or imperfect categories is fruitful. Desirably, thereby, the focus remains on the ability to perform varied functions in one's own creative way, while reminding the able bodies about their own hidden disabilities. The task of re-enforcing the truth of hidden disabilities in every human, with a caution not to undermine the struggles and pain of the PwD by equating the two, is important. It creates a flux where "dis" in disability invariably deconstructs the normateableist discourse constantly reminding the inherent disability operational in all spheres of life.

***Exploring the Vulnerability of the Flesh***

The ideas such as preference for "flesh" over "body," and "temporally able bodies," time and again evoked in disability studies must be used

as the initial launch pads to articulate the concerns of the disabled people in non-essentialist, affiliative-disruptive terms, simultaneously. Both the concepts help dislodge the pretentious claim of domination by making any one type of body as a norm. According to Schumm, "[f]lesh in all of its messiness and imperfection—in its disability—shouts impermanence. The phrase 'temporarily abled' is nowhere more poignant than in a discussion of fleshly impermanence".[35] While "flesh," unlike "body," signifies the limitation, temporality, and frailty of human existence, the idea of "temporarily able bodies" rob the seemingly able bodies of their colonial claim to superiority. Then, the able bodies become as much vulnerable, dependent, and fragile as much as the disabled bodies seem wanting. In other words, "[t]here is, in the end, no hard-and-fast dualism between ability and disability, but rather a nexus of reciprocity that is based in our vulnerable humanity"[36] In short, initiating (dis)ability reading placing "flesh" at the centre of interpretation would celebrate physical differences, i.e. "fecund diversity"[37] as legitimate within the body of Christ, the *ekklesia*. Hence, the *ekklesia* will become a true life-affirming, mutually nurturing, and inclusive community according to God's original vision for her. It would be a non-essentialist and inclusive community of the (dis)abled.

It scuttles the foundation of the dominant ableist theological discourses which legitimize the marginalization, discrimination, and oppression of the disabled people.[38] In fact, it decentres the entire disability discourse from "able"/"disable" bi-polar pre-conception in favour of the vulnerability of all flesh including God in incarnation, the (dis)abled Jesus. Undoubtedly, in enfleshment (John 1:14), God shared in the vulnerability of humanity to defeat the dominant powers that ruled the cosmos through threat, coercion, and hegemony. Reynolds considers "vulnerability and interdependence" as "fundamental character of human wholeness".[39] He contends that such a relation oriented starting point enables us not only to recognize "what we share in our differences," but also, in the words of Stanley Hauerwas, to break the "the tyranny of normality".[40] In Hauerwas' terms, in a society where there is a fear of difference deep rooted, a deliberate disavowal of the tyrannical demand to be normal must lead to foster a "good community" were differences are accepted as fundamental and inevitable and the ability to see that "we would not be whole without the other being different than us".[41] As a result, it would facilitate mutually enriching locale of theological cross-fertilization that would

help us articulate a (Dis)abled Theology in 'familiar-yet-unfamiliar' terms both to the non-disabled and PwD alike.

### *Exposing the Cultural Bias against Disability within the Text and in the Reception History*

In articulating a constructive yet subversive interpretive framework for (dis)ability hermeneutic, the contextual particularity of the text must be firmly balanced with the universal message of God found in them. We need to recognize the nature of the origin and composition of the Bible. It is a single narrative of God's liberative dealing with the vulnerable/broken humanity beginning from corruption of the perfect world to the restoration of the perfect world in the eschatological time. The Bible is neither given at once as a finished product, nor is it God's revelation untouched by cultural particularities at the time of its composition. It is a witness to God's continuous activity in human history which includes cultural biases of the society and time in which they were composed. The primary task must be to separate and contrast the cultural biases against the people with disability (or the very negative understanding of disability) found in the Bible with other positive role ascribed to the people with disability in God's economy. The task of exposing the cultural bias against the disabled people within the text and in the reception history is to be carried out in twin pronged approach i.e. by both employing Cultural critical reading tools and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

The inadequacies of the enlightenment logic driven historical critical approach is proven beyond doubt. It is common today to acknowledge the value of identifying the originary cultural context of the text to understand it better. At first, the (dis)ability hermeneutic will seek to read the text through the cultural critical prism encouraging the multiplicity of meanings embedded within the text than intending to draw the universal truth and the authorial intent in the composition of a text.[42] It would help the disabled subjects too read the Scripture from their specific cultural locations. Their painful experiences of exclusion, dehumanization, and denial of access can be brought in to read and address the Bible. Unlike Cultural Criticism, (dis)ability hermeneutic values the historical cultural setting of the origin of the Scripture, while investigating the historical role of the Bible in shaping the cultures and culture's role in the formation of the text. At this we find Esler's contribution to (dis)ability hermeneutic via an intercultural three stages

critical analysis of the story of King Saul's madness in 1 Samuel is enlightening. The appropriation of Esler's three stages critical practice in (dis)ability hermeneutic may be stated as: (i) every biblical text needs to be read within its original context in order to understand the possible meaning(s) heard by the original readers. It must be carried out with a disability tuned ears of the interpreter which would help to critique the Bible with and against the culture. (ii) The biblical characters with disability must be cross-culturally studied "in relation to both emic and etic frameworks of health, illness and disease." (iii) The third, which is an experiential as much as a cognitive process, means acquiring an intercultural stance that mediates between the emic and etic positions and draws on each to create a new and enriched mode of understanding".[43]

Further, similar to the Cultural Criticism, (dis)ability hermeneutic must investigate dialogically the cultural elements of the text both in the interreligious and intrareligious contexts. Such an exercise will enable (dis)ability hermeneutic to unearth not only the ideological basis of the text, including the Asian socio-cultural realities, but highlight the liberative thrust of the Scripture. In other words, Cultural Criticism inspired (dis)ability hermeneutic concedes that in a context of disability blind religious-cultural discourses in Asia, it must be upheld that "culture and Bible both are constantly interacting, and cultural developments 're-invent' the Bible".[44] For example, the negative Jewish cultural attitude towards the plight of the disabled people reflecting in the words of the disciples in John 9 is often culturally read and justified in India because even in Hinduism the disability is the consequence of the bad *karma* from the previous birth.[45] Hence, unless the Indian textual reception history or the culture in Bible is not studied within the interreligious or intrareligious context, the oppressive cultural bias or the cultural blind spot in an Indian interpreter's reading cannot be identified. This also requires that the text be exposed of its hidden cultural biases through the aid of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

The (Dis)ability Hermeneutic views the text as a product of a culture in a particular time and its role and presence, obvious or hidden, in shaping the values, assumptions, and worldviews in the text. It assumes that the Bible is a means by which God reveals Himself through words and letters that are loaded with the particular socio-cultural meanings along with time specific prejudices, ideology, and elements

of oppression. Hence, the hermeneutical task includes unraveling the ideological thrust of the biblical text or its interpretative priorities naturalizing the able bodies, thereby, perpetuating the marginalization of the nonconventional bodies with the help of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. Ricoeur defines the Hermeneutics of Suspicion as "not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises".[46] It is a double edged sword in interpretation for there we "find a critique of both text and reader" i.e. the world of the reader including the prejudices, biases, pre-understandings, etc., are questions and "interpreted by the world of the text".[47] Appropriating the interpretive tool in disability studies, according to Yong,

> Part of the challenge of abelism as a worldview is that it is often difficult to distinguish what the Bible says about it, and how we have been taught to interpret it. This means that we'll often presume our normate understandings of the Bible are exactly what the biblical authors intended to communicate to us. The task before us, then, is to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion not necessarily to the biblical text but to our own traditions of interpretation that have taught us how to read it. The goal is to question our own presuppositions about disability in order to see afresh how the Bible is and can be good news not only for people with disabilities but also for societies with people across the spectrum of abilities. This won't be easy, but we have no choice except to make the effort.[48]

Moving beyond Yong's observation, the suspicion of promoting the oppressive cultural elements must be twin-forked: (i) the particular cultural bias circulated through the text and in the reception history of the biblical text as innocent, neutral, and spiritual must be critically examined and separated from the 'preferred' meaning of the text, and (ii) the biases and prejudices of the present reader in flesh and blood must be interrogated and interpreted by the text itself. Both the cultural biases embedded within the text as a product of a specific culture and time and the biases of both the past and present readers of the text through the centuries must be distinguished from the liberative and dignity restoring insights in the Bible. Theologically, it would mean that God is the God of both able bodies and PwD and the biblical text reveal God alike to the able bodies and PwD. The biblical text as the word of God reveals the heart of God for all, though the revelation given to us

is wrapped in human language colored by cultural worldviews. Hence, the object of suspicion is not God of the Bible and his attitude towards the (dis)abled but the role of culture in the process of the composition of a text and the reception history of the text.

***Exploring the New Possibilities of Understanding***

The use of hermeneutics of suspicion necessitates coinciding it with the hermeneutics of retrieval where suspicion is not just engaged for the re-valuation but being open to the new possibilities of meanings produced by the text. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics of retrieval is "a counterbalance to suspicion" where "we are able to judge and choose ethically, and thereby recover from the chaos included by being either too trusting or too suspicious".[49] In other words, both suspicion and trust (recovery or retrieval) are necessary counterparts in constant tension with each other in any act of interpretation.[50] What needs to be recovered in textual engagement is the life enriching contrapuntal images, symbols, and ideas subsumed within the biblical tradition(s), text(s), and the later ecclesiastical history. For example, Jesus refused to accord the disability of the man born visually impaired in John 9:3 to sin, whether of his parents or of his own, is a contrapuntal image to deconstruct the text. Similarly, Paul claims that Jesus appeared even to him, the "one untimely born" (1Cor 15:8), is evidential of God's impartiality. It would help imagining an emancipatory space of self-actualization for both the abled and disabled bodies, at the same time. Unlike, the liberatory disability theology's contention of projecting God's preferential option for the PwD, the (dis)ability hermeneutic would contend to anchor on God's impartiality. The merit of such an emancipatory textual meaning by the use of the hermeneutics of retrieval is non-exclusionary and non-valorizing.

According to Reynolds, "the Bible is ambiguous on the account of disability, this means becoming cautiously selective as interpreters, choosing certain themes over and/or against less favorable alternatives, explicit in providing warrants for our selections vis-à-vis their consistency with other biblical texts, themes, and norms as well as with our own present experience, sociocultural context, and general knowledge base".[51] The portrayal of the eschatological messianic figure in the book of Revelation as the Lamb (of God)-Lion (of Judah) (Rev 5:5-8) eternalized the marks of disability in his post-resurrected being. His vulnerability in human existence is preserved in his

powerful appearance to judge the world as the conquering messiah. It is the concrete symbolization of ability-disability, i.e. (dis)ability, in Godhead, at the same time. Interestingly, reading from the world in front of the text, the Lamb-Lion complex and ambivalent vulnerable-powerful image in the Christian apocalyptic thinking is the evidence of God eternalizing ability and disability as equally perfect, beautiful, and worthy of honor in a post-ascension narrative of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Similarly, often for the pride of the able bodied theology/ Christianity, Apostle Paul is portrayed as the conquering human who subdues the evil forces, heals people, and offers the gospel of Christ undeterred by the violent opposition. But the later early Christian tradition regarding his disabled body is generally silenced (cf. *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 2:3). The hermeneutics of retrieval must capitalize on the silenced story of Paul's life in order to reclaim the grand legacy of the (dis)abled apostle to affirm dignity and honor of the people with disability in the church today. The theme such as Paul's weakness in his apostolic mission as a means for self-identification with Christ's suffering and seeking to justify his apostolicity is vital for (dis)ability studies (Gal 4:13-14; 6:17 ; 2 Cor 1:5). Such potential liberatory themes facilitate restoring and redefining hope, dignity, and 'wholeness' embedded ambivalently within the biblical passages reflecting God's positive disposition towards the (dis)abled bodies.

**Conclusion**

The importance of disability perspective in biblical studies cannot be undermined as it affirms the right to equality of the minority of humanity who suffer both physically and socially due to their disability. The liberation oriented approach seeks to address the issue from a much polarized position despite speaking about an inclusive community. The proposed (dis)ability hermeneutic celebrates subjectivity in interpretation with an aim to articulate self-emancipation by subverting the disability blind ability. It attempts to unravel the oppressive cultural elements within the Bible and in the reception history of the text that unjustly alienated the people with disability. Such disentangling of disability affirming insights from the disability blind normate theological conclusions based on texts provide biblical foundation to the (dis)ability hermeneutic. While the Cultural criticism allows understanding the text with and against the culture in dialogue with the

Bible, the hermeneutics of retrieval enables to find new possibilities of understanding a text without any claim to objectivity of interpretation.

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# Postcolonial Hermeneutic of Disability: Mainstreaming Biblical Texts

Yusak B. Setyawan

## Introduction

The relationship between biblical hermeneutics and disability studies is very rarely explored by theologians or biblical scholars. The growing attention of Disability Studies that has been intensely elaborated in the 1990s[1] has hardly been responded to and acknowledged in theological discourses. For decades, theological studies have included disability issues on the concept of *imago Dei*, and corollary of PwD have been discoursed within dogmatical framework of thoughts. In systematic theology, the issue of PwD has been discussed in connection with that of theodicy,[2] although this has not given significant contribution to inclusive and just treatment to PwD. Meanwhile, in recent development, Biblical Studies have come to a new horizon that in any hermeneutical enterprise the element of experience, including the interpreter's, should be taken into account seriously in understanding biblical text.

The importance of using experience (that provides perspective)has been developed in biblical hermeneutics in connection with the concept of pre-understanding in hermeneutical circle. However, this concept primarily was conceived from Western contexts: white, educated, and middle class people in a developed country. Feminist theology, liberation theology and postcolonial studies, for examples, have been challenging biblical studies and hermeneutics in using experience in constructing preunderstanding and perspective by highlighting advocacy, identity and awareness of power domination. Unfortunately, this has not been discoursed with the issue of disability.[3]

The main argumentation of this research is that the biblical

hermeneutics of disability should be offered in the field of biblical study by integrating a new paradigm of reading the biblical text locating in the context of experience and perspective of persons with disabilities, and so reversing the situation in which they are categorized as object and the target of textual application. This will propose a biblical hermeneutic in intersection with postcolonial studies by highlighting PwDs' experiences, I call it as a postcolonial hermeneutic of disability. This paper will first discuss the concept of disability as "open minority." Secondly, the explication of the relationships between the Bible and disability will be discussed. Thirdly, an affirmation that reading biblical texts is an ethical activity. In the light of the discussion, I will propose the importance of postcolonial hermeneutics in locating the role of PwDs' experiences. In this connection it is significant to analyze some common experiences of the PwDs in Indonesian society before proposing a biblical reading from the perspective of disability.

**Disability as "*Open Minority*"**

It is important to clarify the definition of disability before continuing this discussion. This term has been debated by many scholars and used differently, for examples: difable(differently-able), impairment, handicap, deformed, mishap, invalid, defective, and retarded. I will use consistently the term of disability with its variations and persons with disabilities (PwD), putting aside other terms because of their inappropriateness according to Disability Studies. In Indonesian context, however, the term difable (or diffability) is often used in public sphere including in mass media and non-governmental organization, although this term is no longer used in Disability Studies.[4]

The term difable (and its derivation) is not used since this merely points to the reality that the person has different ability from the other "normal" one. Since the idea of "normalcy" is socially reconstructed determined by the dominant group, it is not a comprehensive term. In other words, disability is a socially constructed phenomenon of the dominant society.[5] The term difable does not give a comprehensive meaning of the most crucial experience of PwD as human as well as a critical social issue.

The difference of impairment from disability is that if the first concept focuses more on the personal/individual experience, the second one includes this experience in connection with social reality.[6] It is then, however, that disability is not merely a consequence of the

individual experience of impairment, but as one of human and social issues, hence it is basically an ideological and political issue.[7] As it is prevatent in all races, classes, and gender, disability is a social construct that is determined by the dominating power of the society.[8] This dominating power upholds an ideology, namely "normalcy ideology" that features the primacy of the "normal" people. Those who are not considered as normal are marginalized, discriminated, and ignored in society psychologically, culturally, politically, economically and architecturally. Thus, the use of the term "people in special needs" epitomizes marginalization of PwD.[9] Medical definition of disability that views disability as medical issue is thus connected with the idea of rehabilitation programs which is inadequate as well.

Beyond medical definition (*medical or functional-limitation model*) and social definition of disability (*social or minority group model*), Creamer recognizes that disability is social reconstruction, however, influenced by Sallie McFague,[10] she emphasizes on the reality that human body is always in its limits (embodied limits). While medical and social definitions of disability are important in some ways, disability as embodied limits can also include these two elements. Those who are categorized to be PwD experience some limitations of body, but those who are categorized to be non-disable bodied also experience some form of limitations and that at a certain state of time this limitation will bring them into the category of PwD. Aging, accidence, catastrophe, illness, genetic, and social condition are six primary causes that turn non-disable bodied into to PwD.[11] Hence all people will sooner or later enter to the category of PwD. Disability, then, is an open entity that includes the changing of non-PwD to PwD.[12] Even though, statistically, the percentage of the PwD world-wide is about 10%,[13] it will grow in number due to primary causes mentioned above. Thus, disability is a phenomenon of "*open minority*."

The understanding of disability as an "open minority" phenomenon is crucial in proposing a biblical reading from the perspective of disability. In Disability Studies, disability perspectives that will employ to outline the understandings of disability may include three circles of interest, namely professional-academic (can be either PwD or non-PwD), of PwD by themselves, and of non-PwD who may have some sorts of experience about disability. In the framework of understanding of disability as open-minority phenomenon, this can include those

three circles of interest at the same time as the non-PwD is heading toward the PwD category in a particular stage of life.

**The Bible and Disability**

There are three major challenges in reading the Bible from disability perspective. First, the biblical texts were written down in cultures that uphold the primacy of normalcy, thus, puts aside PwDs: Middle East, and then, Mediterranean (Greco-Roman) worlds. These cultures put "normal people" as the ideal of humanity, and at the same time, drew the binary of "normal" and "abnormal." This binary categorization impacts on determining the meaning of humanity, since it constitutes "a process of making meaning."[14] In this frame of thought, religious regulations as shown in Judaism were arranged in accordance to the ideology of normalcy, including that of the priesthood. This was cemented in a deeper level when Christianity grew in the Greco-Roman society that put the primacy of soul over body, and "normal body" over "abnormal body" in a hierarchical structure.

Such an ideology of normalcy in the culture that produced biblical texts is intertwined with patriarchalism, an ideology that centers on the male authority and subjugation of the rest of the community members. According to the disability and gender studies, in the intertwining of the ideology of normalcy and patriarhalism, women with disability are the most vulnerable group in society.[15] Moreover, men with disabilities do not meet the qualification of priesthood. The combination of patriarchalism (only male that meets the requirement to be a priest) and ideology of normalcy (only male without disabilities can be a priest) reinforces the behaviour pattern of people in the society and religion including regulation of sacrificial animal, the sacrificial animal should be male and without any deformity.

In such a backdrop of patriarchal culture and ideology of normalcy, the concept of human being as image of God (*imago Dei*) is viewed to be an ideal of human being that meets with the normalcy requirement. The first human being according to the creation narrative is imagined to be the normal human being without any disabilities. This human being is to name animals, meaning that only normal human being can have authority to determine another beings. The normalcy becomes power to subjugate another beings (objects). It is very clear that cultures that uphold the ideology of normalcy cannot imagine that *imago Dei* is

identical with person with disability. Likewise, biblical teaching on human being directly and indirectly has marginalized PwD.[16] Hence, religions, including Christianity, that teach human beings within the paradigm of normalcy are to be regarded as dangerous for the existence of PwDs.[17]

While understanding of biblical anthropology that emphasizes on the concept of image of God, upholding the ideology of normalcy is regarded as divine design of creation. Theology, then, is constructed within the framework of the ideology of normalcy. Almost all of metaphors used to portray the understanding of God employ imaginations that are depicted by the ideology of normalcy, or above-normalcy. God is never imagined as "deformed" or "disable" God. God who is Transcendent being becomes "father" (affirming the patriarchal culture) and normal or super-normal (affirming the ideology of normalcy).[18]

A strong flavor of the ideology of normalcy is seen in every single page of the biblical texts beginning from the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament. Judges, kings, and prophets are supposed to be "normal," mostly males. Consequently, biblical texts have marginalized PwDs in the cultic and societal lives. In Olyan's study, while differentiating the term of native (for example, deformed) from non-native (for example, disable), the Old Testament texts portray perfect (i.e. normal) humans are ones who are tall, clear skin, robust, strong, handsome, etc.[19] Those who are portrayed "deformed" are lame, blind, with skin disease, meanwhile mute and deaf are not considered as "deformed" probably because these are not unseen,[20] but still are marginalized. In the New Testament, Jesus the Messiah is portrayed as "normal/perfect" male without disability. "Abnormality" can be viewed to be serious problem in religious and social lives. Authors of the canonical gospels affirm that those who are "deformed" need to be "normalized." It is in this background that miracle narratives of the Gospel are to be understood. Jesus' followers, in the subsequence period called themselves as *ekklesia*, emphasized on the teaching of the importance of "without stain or wrinkle or any other blameless" (Ephesians 5:27, NIV).

Secondly, biblical interpretations have been articulated for the sake of and to protect the interest of the "normal" people. In the dominating culture that adores the ideology of normalcy, Justinus Martir, Papias,

Origen, Agustine and many more up to Rudolf Bultmann had interpreted biblical texts with "normal" people in mind, meaning that PwDs were not included in their hermeneutical enterprises. If PwDs are included in interpretative process, they are considered to be target of how the interpretations can be actualized. These approaches encourage non-PwDs to care for, be attentive to, and to rehabilitate the PwDs.

In some exegetical works of biblical texts, the exegetes often cement the understandings that disability is manifestation of God's curse making the PwDs need salvation and repentance. Some other exegetes understand that disability is a blessing inviting the PwDs to give thanks.This is to show that PwDs have not been the main concern in the hermeneutical enterprise of biblical texts. Related to these, when it is asserted that disability is a curse, then, the non-PwDs should take concrete initiatives toward PwDs, but if the disability is a blessing then, it will reinforce the non-PwDs of being the "normal" people. In fact, in every process of hermeneutical enterprises of the biblical texts, the PwDs are put to be objectified, marginalized, and ignored.

Thirdly, taking Indonesian society as a context in hermeneutical task, it should affirm that this society is one that adores the ideology of normalcy and at the sametime views PwDs to be "abnormal," a curse. In such a context, all aspects of social structure including politics, economics, law, education, health, and architecture are arranged in focusing on non-PwDs. It is always a requirement for securing a job such as "*tidak cacat lahir dan batin*" (not physically and mentally disabled). This requirement is also a part of Christian churches and institutions in Indonesia. Thus, in both society, in general, and religious/Christian communities in particular, PwDs are discriminated, excluded, marginalized, and ignored in non-PwDs dominated society.

Indonesian lawmakers and government have established the Law No. 8, 2016 as revision of the Law No. 4, 1997, it is, however, the formulation and implementation of these laws are not adequate on how PwDs should be treated. In fact, PwDs in Indonesia have been put in the bench watching the non-PwDs play their roles in the game of politics, economics, cultures, education and religion. Public facilities are set to serve the needs of non-PwDs. While by law, it is mandatory for factory to hire PwDs, but in fact, this is not implemented and there is no law enforcement agency on it.

A context in which biblical interpretation on disability is directly

connected is Christian communities. It is a common practice among churches in Indonesia to determine whether to have non-PwDs as their leaders including pastor or not. It is beyond imagination to have pastor of PwDs. PwDs are assumed not capable to be minister or leader, but those who are to serve. A very limited number of churches are concerned with issue of disability. Accessibility, facility, and ministry are all designed to serve the interest of the non-PwDs church members.

While affirming that the Bible was written and imbued in a culture that uphold the ideology of normalcy and patriarchy, we also find traces of liberative potentiality to propose a hermeneutical principle by affirming disability perspective. We cannot hold the argument that Bible is written and imbued in ideology of normalcy and that there is no way to read the biblical texts from the perspective of disability. Following the Asian "*yin-yang*" thought, there is a destructive element but also liberative sources of the biblical texts on disability. There are potential passages in the Bible that can enhance biblical reading from the perspective of disability. This can also serve as an effort to liberate the biblical text from the hegemony of the ideology of normalcy.

It is important to undergird the biblical affirmation that human being is created in her/his body. The idea of creation in the Book of Genesis, as a matter of fact, is constructed within the framework of normalcy culture. There are two undeniable salient elements in creation story, namely, that the human body is created from the dust making connection between *Adam and adamah* (dust). This is to affirm the mortality, vulnerability and fragility of human body and at the same time human is created in the image of God. We have been over-emphasizing on the latter while the former aspect of human creation was wittingly or unwittingly ignored.

Secondly, regarding the creation of male and female. This is seen as a very dangerous story for it affirms the idealization of patriarchal culture that focuses the creation of female is for the male's sake. This story says that female comes to her existence from male's rib. This also tells another hidden message that the first male experiences "deformity" epitomizing "abnormality." The first human, thus, can be included in the category of "open minority."

Thirdly, the understanding of salvation in the Bible is concerned and connected with the body. The concept of shalom of the Old Testament is not to be connected with the eschatological expectation,

but with the whole life in a real and current context including the understanding of body. While the Old Testament texts are imbued in the culture that upholds the ideology of normalcy, it is *shalom* that includes the sufficiency of food, health, and abundance of life. Illness situation and disability are circumstances of *non-shalom*. However, in the spiritualized and psychologicalzed concept of shalom, it also includes a circumstance of good social situation, a situation of absence of war, harmonious society that all are supposed to be experienced by both non-PwDs and PwDs.

In the New Testament, the concept of peace (*eirene*) is related to the understanding of body, which is mortal, vulnerable and fragile. This concept plays a crucial role in one of the most important theological convictions in Christianity: incarnation. Although the concept of incarnation is no longer the central debate in today's theological discourse, it has a strong potential to view the issue of disability.[21] This concept includes the idea that the mortality, vulnerability and fragility of God is manifested in human body that enables God to be in co-existence with human beings in their mortality, vulnerability and fragility bodies. Incarnation signifies the finite nature of God.

Fourthly, in the New Testament narratives, especially in the Gospels, it is mentioned that Jesus is the revelation or embodiment of God in human body that experiences disability providing his life for serving the others primarily PwDs. One thing needs to be highlighted is that it is not the miracle/healing stories Jesus performs that is relevant to this discussion. It is, however, his advocacy, concern and attitude towards PwDs which are more important. Miracle and healing narratives in the Gospel, in fact, could marginalize the PwDs especially when viewd as people in need of redemption/salvation and be transformed into normal people. The understanding of the PwDs in the Graeco-Roman society was that PwDs were viewed as sinners and damned people, who are in need of forgiveness and God's grace. Thus, healing miracle narratives of the New Testament should be read very carefully due to the fact that these emerged in a culture and ideology that glorified normalcy and is engrained into the biblical texts.

The most significant story on the issue of disability is recognition that Jesus is the Lord who was crucified, and the one who rose from death. Resurrected Lord, however, he is the Lord who is disabled. The Body of Christ that is torn apart, wounded, and bled is inherently part

of the *kerygma*, which is the core of faith affirmation of Christianity. It consists of narratives of crucifixion, resurrection and appearance of Jesus. Tradition of the disabled Jesus has been sustained and maintained in Christianity in the form of religious rite: the Holy Communion. The life, teachings and deeds of Jesus Christ have been upheld in many different ways bringing various streams of Christianity. The belief that Jesus is disabled Lord is an inseparable and integral part of the Christian faith.

**Reading the Bible as Ethical Praxis**

In my comprehension, reading the Bible from disability perspective is actually an ethical praxis. It is in opposition to the paradigm that stress on the idea of value-free and objective biblical reading demanded by historical-criticism methodologies. The "resurrection" of the role of reader/interpreter in biblical hermeneutics brings about the bankruptcy of the historical criticism. Walter Wink rightly stated that a hermeneutical enterprise of the biblical texts would never be an objective, value-free activity. Interpretative activity is always an effort that engages experience and perspective of the interpreter. Thus, objectivity in hermeneutics is always biased. The interpreter knowingly or unknowingly includes her/his social context, struggles, interests and ideologies. There is no sharp dividing line between exegesis and eisegesis for exegesis is eisegesis and eisegesis is exegesis: it is called hermeneutics.

It is crucial to reaffirm what Daniel Patte expounds *hermeneutical enterprise* as primarily an ethical activity or ethical praxis.[22] While the main goal of historical criticism which is to achieve objectivity in searching the meaning of the texts has become irrelevant, the subjectivity could drive to arbitrary in making meaning of the biblical texts. It is, however, the arbitrariness in hermeneutical enterprises that could not happen in it if it is put in the framework of ethical praxis.The hermeneutical enterprises suggest ethical dimension of the interpreter such as integrity, genuinity, identity, vision of life, interest, and ideology need to be engaged in hermeneutical process. The interpreter should be "flesh-and-blood" and the reader flesh-and-blood reader.[23]

As ethical praxis, hermeneutics consists of two main characters, namely *responsibility* and *accountability*. R*esponsibility* refers to the identity and integrity of the interpreter in hermeneutical enterprise that

is at the stake. The decision making of choosing methodology is part of responsibility. The interpreter is to undertake hermeneutical process un-arbitrarily. While ethical aspect of responsibility in hermeneutical enterprises focuses on ethical responsibility of the interpreter on how threatening the biblical texts are, the accountability has to do with how the interpreter accounts the impact of the interpretation to the people that might be affected with it. Accountability in biblical hermeneutics includes comprehension that interpretive activity is not primarily to satisfy the need of mind, but to meet the need of society, hence it should consider the social impact. Hermeneutical enterprises, then, can be viewed as accountability to the public that will be influenced by it.

Reading the Bible from the perspective of disability should include these two aspects of ethics: responsibility and accountability. While the identity and integrity of the interpreter in the hermeneutical enterprise should be taken into account seriously, the impact of the interpretation cannot be ignored. Experience and perspective of the PwDs, then, should be taken as inherently integral part of hermeneutical enterprises. It suggests the need of appropriate methodology that would help to embody in hermeneutics. The postcolonial hermeneutics with the support of reader-response criticism can become a crucial methodology that manifests in the construction of biblical hermeneutics that takes into account the PwDs' experiences seriously in the process.

**Experience of PwDs and Postcolonial Hermeneutics**

The contribution of postcolonial studies to biblical hermeneutics is important in mainstreaming the experiences of PwDs in reading biblical texts. In postcolonial hermeneutics, postcolonial context, the Third World, developing countries, which once were colonized by the European/West countries, is taken into account seriously in biblical interpretative process.[24] The colonization has ended after the colonized countries declared their independence, but colonization continues through different modes and forms. Postcolonial studies reveal the issues of colonization such as the dominating power of the colonizer, identity of colonized, dependency of the colonized on the colonizer still continues everthough colonization has legally ended. This situation continues till today in more systematic ways penetrating into all social fabric and mentality. In relation to the biblical interpretation, then, it is not the question of "*what it meant*" or "*what it means*", but "*how to interpret the text in a postcolonial context.*"

Informed by postcolonial studies, postcolonial hermeneutics takes the primacy of the interpreter's experience and perspective in the postcolonial context in reading biblical texts. It is the interpreter who determines the meaning of the text using her/his experience and perspective informed by her/his context. This means that the interpreter is viewed as inherent part of her/his social location. In other words, her/his experience and perspective are related to those of her/his context. Her/his individual experience is basically political in character. While the importance of experience and perspective is highlighted in postcolonial studies, the ideas of the reader-response criticism can be used for supporting the application of postcolonial studies in biblical interpretation as I articulated earlier.[25]

In reader-response criticism, text is viewed to be detached from the author. The text that once was created and constructed by its author in a particular socio-political context demands to be deciphered by the reader. The future of the text does not depend on its author, but to its interpreters.[26] The interpreter is a real person, flesh-and-blood reader.[27] Thus, it is to affirm that the reader of the biblical texts is individual and also socio-political person.[28] Thus, although a person individually conducts a hermeneutical enterprise, this is not separated from her/his socio-political context. Given the reality that socio-political context is always connected with ideological aspect, every interpretation becomes ideological.

In accordance to the role of the reader in hermeneutical enterprise, the meaning of the text is determined by the reader herself/himself. The meaning of the text is constructed by the interpreter who lives in her/his socio-political context with a particular interest and ideology. Experience and perspective of the interpreters are to be engaged in the process of interpretation. At this stage, hermeneutical enterprise is overlapped with ethical praxis: responsibility and accountability as explicated earlier.

In postcolonial hermeneutics, disability perspective is important in reading biblical text, however, it is also to be noted that this is a complicated entity comprising of the intersection between PwDs' experiences and neo-colonialism of global capitalism. Disability perspective in biblical interpretation involves taking PwDs' experiences in the postcolonial context and identifying with the PwDs' experiences all together would help the interpreter in constructing the meaning of

biblical texts.

Given this understanding, we can outline some significant aspects regarding PwDs' experiences in the postcolonial context in Indonesia for hermeneutical enterprise from the perspective of disability. First, disability should be viewed as social construct by the dominating power and interest intersected in between local, national and global spheres. As social construction, any stereotypes towards PwDs are not to be taken for granted as the reality, rather, these should be suspected: what ideology plays, which part of society takes the advantage, and what the interest behind these.

Secondly, in postcolonial studies PwDs are to be viewed as the ones colonized in various ways both in the very concrete and also absurd articulations.This leads to another level of idea in which that issue on disability needs liberation: that of PwDs, non-PwDs, and the community that have been colonized by the culture that uphold the ideology of normalcy. Signifcant to the postcolonial hermeneutic of disability is struggling for liberation of PwDs from marginalization, ignorance, exclusion and discrimination.

Thirdly, PwDs and non-PwDs in Indonesia share a common experience of colonization by global capitalism. This makes them objects of subjugation of capitalist culture. They share the same experience as colonized; therefore, they all need to work hand in hand in resisting and opposing the neo-colonization. In relation to this, one thing that needs to be considered is the concept of "open minority." This suggests that non-PwDs in a particular phase of time will enter into the category of PwDs.

Fourthly, postcolonial hermeneutics challenge the interpreter to deconstruct biblical texts so that they can give alternative perspective on liberation, advocacy and ethical praxis in ecclesial and socio-political spheres. It is not only PwDs and non-PwDs under the hegemony of colonization, but also the biblical texts themselves need to be liberated in order to provide inspiration and motivation towards achieving an inclusive society where PwDs will be an inherent part of society.

Although disability experiences in Indonesian context varies, yet they are intersected. Experiences of PwDs in the urban area would be different from that of PwDs who live in the rural district. These experiences are intersected with these of PwDs with different religious background, ethnicity, and cultural groups. However, these experiences

can be generalized carefully so that these can be used for the sake of interpretive process. First, cultural stigmatization towards PwDs in which that they are considered as abnormal, damned people, disgrace of family, burden to community, etc. Unfortunately, most of family in Indonesia reject its members who are PwDs. In the Javanese culture, for example, there are three qualities of human beings: genetical factor (*bibit*), position in society (*bebet*), and higher quality of life (*bobot*). These cultural values are not met by PWDs making them and considered to be a taint of family.

Secondly, PwDs in Indonesia have experienced being marginalized, excluded, and discriminated in policy making in many aspects of society: politics, laws, economics, social, culture and technology. It is very rare that the policy makers invite PwDs in decision-making. Generally speaking, public policies in Indonesia are inclined to "normalize" PwDs with the standard set for "normal" people. Moreover, PwDs are viewed as the burden of society since they are not able to contribute to the economy of the society.

Thirdly, PwDs in Indonesia experience obstacles in accessing public services, such as school facilities, traffic, hospital, place of worship, and entertainment. Buildings are built for the sake of non-PwDs, contributing towards alienation of the PwDs. In line with Winston Churchill's opinion that human builds buildings, and then these determine human beings,[29] so the building are built by the "normal" people to determine people in accordance to normalcy. In fact, the holy buildings are built to meet the ideology of normalcy and marginalizes the PwDs. In other words, in the holy place there is a deep root of the unholy ideology of normalcy.

Fourthly, the persons with disabilities have been marginalized, excluded and discriminated in interpreting the biblical texts. The first three experiences mentioned earlier are cemented ideologically by using religious texts. So, the biblical texts can be used for legitimizing marginalization, ignorization and discrimination of the PwDs. For the non-PwDs, healing miracle stories in the Bible could be entertaining ones; however, for PwDs these are evidences that the Bible puts them as objects of charity. When the PwDs cannot be "healed" then they are judged as those who do not have faith. Thus, the healing miracle narratives in the New Testament could give negative message/ demoralizing to PwDs, rather than being liberative stories.

**Proposing a Basic Framework of Reading the Bible in Disability Perspective**

As explicated, there is urgent need to develop an alternative reading of the Bible by placing disability perspective informed by postcolonial hermeneutics. This need is to be expounded within the framework of hermeneutical enterprise as I propose below. First, it should begin with constructing PwDs' experiences in a particular context in multiple contexts within postcolonial configuration. This effort will affirm the interpreter's identity and perspective that enable her/him to formulate a pre-understanding to the assigned biblical text.

While constructing the experiences of the PwDs, the interpreter should be informed about their identity and perspective. It is significant to construct the "experience" of the assigned text: in what context of life, culture, socio-politics and community it is. It is important to locate the existence of the ideology of normalcy in which the text is produced. The study of context of Ancient Israel, Jewish community and Graeco-Roman society would be relevant in this effort.

The third step is constructing meanings of the assigned text from the perspective of PwDs in a particular context formulated in the first step. While dialoguing critically between Text A (the interpreter with disability perspective informed by PwDs' experiences in postcolonial) and Text B (the biblical text), the interpreter should be careful that any findings in the hermeneutical process should not be perspectival, meaning that these should and must be applicable in our contemporary context. Understanding the text from the disability perspective is always a descriptive reconstruction giving possibility to the interpreter to be critical to either text A or text B especially when the existence of the ideology of normalcy is found. The interpreter should always remember that this kind of hermeneutic is engaged with the liberative ethical praxis both to the Bible and to the contemporary context in which the ideology of normalcy has been dominating.

Finally, the hermeneutical enterprises should encourage the interpreter to formulate statements (theological statements) that affirm the existence of the PwDs and the urgency to create an inclusive community in which PwDs and non-PwDs live in openness, hospitality, and togetherness. Related to this, the non-PwDs have to be fully aware of the reality of disability as "open minority" that in a particular stage of life the non-PwDs will surely enter to the category

of PwDs. In connection to that, reading the Bible from the disability perspective should always be ethical praxis consisting of responsibility and accountability. Reading the biblical text is basically an articulation for the formation of inclusive community. Praxis of faith informed by theological statements in hermeneutical enterprise should be manifested in real actions of advocacy for PwDs and initiative of building an inclusive society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to affirm that postcolonial hermeneutic of disability is ideological and political, which means reading the Bible in such a perspective includes social, political and ideological elements. Interpreting the Bible is thus praxis of faith but engaged with issues of humanity and society. For a long time, biblical texts are being used and misused to serve the interest of elite group of the society to dominate other groups including the PwDs. The time has come to deconstruct the biblical text by using postcolonial hermeneutic of disability affirming the existence of the PwDs and engage in construction of an inclusive society. The Bible should become a course for humanity's transformation, liberating and become a living force in sustaining and maintaining an inclusive society.

### Endnotes

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2 Samuel Joeckel, "A Christian Approach to Disability Studies: A Prolegomenon," in *Christian Scholar's Review*, (NA), 335.

3 Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), 55.

4 Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*; Ferguson & Nusbaum, "Disability Studies."; See also, Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*, (Cambridge: Cambrigde University Olyan, 2008).

5 Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 2.

6 Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 6.

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[8] John M. Hull, "A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as Both Problem and Potential" *Studies in Christian Ethics*, (2003), 21; See also, Samuel George, "God of Life, Justice and Peace: A Disability-informed Reading of Christology," *The Ecumenical Review*, (2012), 457.

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[12] Samuel George, "Persons with Disabilities in India," *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, edited by Wati Longchar & Gordon Cowans, (Manila: ATESEA, 2011), 30.

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[14] J. Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University, 1988), 45.

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[17] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 35.

[18] Hull, "A Spirituality of Disability," 28.

[19] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

[20] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 47.

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[22] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 10.

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[26] J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Towards a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1987), 39.

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# Deaf Hermeneutics: Engaging With The Other Human Variety "Eye-To-Eye"

Kristine C. Meneses

For many people, deafness and a Deaf is an abnormality, or a sort of auditory anomaly. In the numerous sphere of life and in our society, Deaf are often pitied, abused, exploited, stigmatized, discriminated and disqualified. Throughout history, we medicalize or pathologize deafness and galvanize a negative perspective of deafness, which all together negates the Deaf from the communal and Church equation. There must be something more and beyond what meets the eye in deafness, in order to welcome and engage the Deaf Other, this human variety "eye-to-eye".

At this point, I would like to raise questions such as: Is disability and therefore deafness a configured "reality"? Could it be that our society, culture, Church and religious perspectives have a share in disabling the Deaf? Is it possible to see deafness and being Deaf more from a perspective of a gain than a loss?

To answer these questions, first, I will present the prevailing perspective and representation of deafness in society. Second, I will present deafness in the Bible. Third, part of seeing the Deaf "eye-to-eye" is to include them in biblical conversations that prompts what I suggest a Deaf hermeneutic. Fourth, is an appeal for a reorientation of our perspective on deafness and on being Deaf and a challenge to our globalized and hegemonic audist-ableist ideology. This paper concludes with a theological reflection.

## I. Deafness' Dominant Perspective and Representation in Society

We treat Deaf people in varied modes, either we extend charity or simply pity them; at times, we avoid or are indifferent towards them. Such responses show that we really do not understand them. In a society that is predominantly an *audist-ableist*, that is, a world that values hearing-speech, physical performance, agility and capabilities, is a lifetime adjustment for the Deaf and disabled, because many of us still enforce normalcy upon them. A consequence of our limiting and negative view of deafness, we continue to marginalize and stigmatize them. Further, in this hegemonic *audist-ableist* world, Deaf people remain a minority who consistently are disqualified and disenfranchised. Our medical perspective on deafness continues to perpetuate and influence in ways we see and engage with the Deaf. Let us unravel the negative effects of the pathological and auditory sensorial perspective of deafness and of the Deaf.

### A. Retained Dominant Perspective: Deafness an Auditory Anomaly

The medical or pathological model views deafness an auditory malady, a deformity, a lack, an anomaly, a deficit that points to a loss. For many of us, deafness is a deformity/damage that needs correction or repair. We thought that those who fall short of normality, from the standards of society on an ideal body are incapable to perform or be effective in their task. In this sense, medical practitioners and scientists who work in a deficit-based understanding of deafness have uncritically pathologize deafness. Such internalized understanding encrypts discrimination, disenfranchisement and disqualification into our consciousness in the form of audism that harms and hurts Deaf people. In effect, *audism* devalues the Deaf and disqualifies their Deafhood, which are morally and ethically questionable.

In an *audist* society, believing that one must hear to participate with the hearing majority has a negative impact that penetrates the very marrow of Deafhood, their identity and esteem. An *audist* hegemonic society has compartmentalized Deaf people by measuring their worth on hearing (and speaking) that consequently excludes and estranges many of them. Deafness is not obvious to our sight until they show a gesture that they cannot hear. Deaf people remain invisible to an *audist* who ignores Deaf reality and their narrative. Rather than seeing deafness as a construct, construed and configured by society, many of

us still thought it to be an individual's problem. An evidence is the media representations of Deaf people whose portrayal revolves on a negative light. With such bias against Deaf people, it has become difficult to undo or shift an *audist* paradigm that remains a struggle for many Deaf throughout the centuries.

In the next section, let me present to you a couple of representation of Deaf in Philippine movie industry that proves of our society's failure to see deafness as a gain.

**B. To Be Deaf is a Tragedy: Prevalent Representation of Deaf in Philippine Cinema**

Often depicted negatively is deaf representations in films, where its primary focus revolves in their incapacities or the tragedy of deafness. A local (Filipino) independent film *Dinig Sana Kita*[1] (If I knew What You Said) is a love story played by Romalito Mallari, a real-life Deaf Filipino actor. The movie's title impresses the Deaf's wish to hear, and deafness seen as impediment to communicate and be intimate with his love interest. In the film, deafness is a negative reality, and to hear is essential for a relationship to flourish. His deafness hinders them to be together, which insinuates that deafness is a fault of the person and a condition that must be "altered" for a relationship with a hearing to be possible. Another Filipino independent film *Kubli*[2] (Hidden) is a story of a Deaf teenage girl, played by a real-life Deaf, Catherine Joy Patriarca. In the film, the father sexually abused his own daughter, and the story ends with an unresolved rape case of the Deaf girl.[3]

Deaf representations in these two films portray a situation of helplessness that impresses an image of being Deaf in a negative, frustrating and undesirable situation. Many still perceive that an auditory anomaly is abnormality. Deafness in a negative portrayal such as rejection, low-esteem, struggle to accept one's Deaf identity, and abuse underscores the consequences of being Deaf. However, there are other ways to show Deaf lives aside from being victims of abuse, or the negativity of deafness, because such disapproval leads to our unwelcoming reception and internalized *audist* bias against Deaf people. Such Deaf representations likewise influence our reading of Deaf characters and deafness in the bible. Let us examine our bias hermeneutics that disengage the Deaf in our Bible conversations.

## II. Deaf and Deafness in the Bible: Unconsciously *Audist* or Disqualified in Conversation?

The Bible presents to us a semblance of life's reality through stories and characters, who we consider heroes and heroines, and an exemplar of faith. Biblical scholars agree that history and culture has shaped the Bible from content to canon, and it survived because God's words are revelatory and liberative. However, an in-depth understanding of deafness in the Bible is quite opaque. Our Sunday Schools, the sermon from the pulpit, our Christian bible courses highlight the great faith or the shortcomings of some biblical characters, and fall short in being sensitive when deafness and the Deaf are metaphorized. Definitely, the authors of the books in the Bible do not mean to offend or degrade the Deaf people, yet today this is what many Deaf sense because of our prevailing misinterpretation about deafness.

Limiting to one dimension of deafness is likewise discounting other understanding of deafness and the Deaf in the Bible, thereby ascribing less esteem towards them and less appreciation of humanity's depth. In this section, I will present occasions that the Deaf are on the fringe. In contrast, I will show deafness through the insights of Deaf people by re-defining, re-imagining, and re-interpreting selected texts according to their terms. In addition, the Deaf should be part of the biblical conversations, which bears before us their hermeneutics that can offer richer discernments of God's words that aims to effect *metanoia*.

### A. Deafness Construed and Corked as Auditory Anomaly: Disabled, Disqualified or Stigmatized in the Scripture?[4]

Healing in the Old Testament is not a central theme. According to Rebecca Raphael,[5] healing is not a main concern of the prophets rather they focus on inclusion, such as in Jeremiah 31. In Isaiah 35.5-6, deafness is placed in a reversal, "… the ears of the deaf unstopped… the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." There was a transformation, but no healing, showing God's power to remake the world, where bodies are made into "completeness". In this regard, how is the Deaf or deafness represented in the Bible?

The Hebrew word חֵרֵשׁ (*cheresh*) for "deaf"[6] is likewise referred to as אִלֵּם (*illem*: mute or unable to speak) or אָטַם (*alam*: put into silence, or to stop).[7] In some instances, the word חֵרֵשׁ (*cheresh* such

as in Isaiah 29.18) is used as a metaphor. The approximate translation of the word חֵרֵשׁ (*cheresh*) in Greek is κωφὸν (*kophon*),[8] which means either "deaf", "mute", or "dumb". While in the book of Leviticus 19.14, חֵרֵשׁ (*cheresh*) is meant to protect the Deaf. Notably, Moses is slow in speech and tongue,[9] which was his reason or alibi for refusing God's call. However, God never looked at his speech impediment as a loss, and was not even bothered at all, because God looked at Moses' heart that is inclined to be just especially towards the oppressed.[10]

To fairly present the Old Testament in relation to deafness and Deaf people, I would like to cite the required prayer set by God to Israel – *shema*, "Hear, O Israel" (Deut 6.4-7). One might consider this an *audist* Divine ordinance that excludes and offends the Deaf people. However, an alternate translation of shema is "to understand", which does not necessarily pertain to auditory sensory (Gracer 2011: 36). The word "hear" in Hebrew is שְׁמַע (*shema*), where the letter ע (*ayin*) in Kabbalah[11] means "to see", "to know" or "experience". This is not merely a points to the auditory capability of knowing, but an understanding through an "insight" gained in one's experience, thus we exclaim "I see!". In the case of Deaf people, they gain knowledge by listening with their eyes, which coincides with the meaning of שְׁמַע (shema) that is to listen and understand not with one's ears but with one's eyes. In further striking a balance, in ancient Judaism, if a person is born with a disability, this was not a punishment rather, they belong to God's varied creatures (Abrams 1998:119). Transcending from a literal meaning of the text, we can see that God's words truly welcomes and includes those who the larger society seems to disregard and disqualify.

Now we turn to the New Testament where "many of the sick, infirm, possessed, lame, blind, and deaf-mute were healed." Sounds like disease and disability including deafness is under "repair". Is it?

In the New Testament, the hearing readership perceives that Jesus healed deafness in the gospels. Indeed, healing is one of Jesus' ministries, and such belief has greatly influenced a medicalized view of deafness (including disability) that must be "cured/(repaired)" because it is "broken" and "defective". Deafness (disability and disorder) seems to cease some biblical scholars to pursue an in-depth study that at presents limits this condition in the act of curing.

Limiting our reading to the character's physical condition has failed us to listen to their narrative or context. Further, distant from an

alternate reading kept us from seeing a Deaf hermeneutic. What could be the challenge of a healing/curing "normative" reading of deafness (and disability) in the Bible for us today? Our reading of deafness in the New Testament has always been an *audist* (and an *ableist*) bias that leans on a sensory/auditory anomaly and physiological flaw, where the burden and fault is on the Deaf person. Focused only at the loss and limitation results to our failure to see the gain in deafness, which is a future possibility to some of us. The next section will be an attempt to show what we can gain from understanding deafness and from the Deaf people in terms of re-imagining God's words.

**B. Possible Perspective towards Engendering Human Diversity: Deaf Gain**

To this day, Bible scholars still scout on methodology, theories or a combination of exegetical tools that can blend within and around an interdisciplinary understanding of the text. The recent attempt to blend is the approach of Louise Lawrence,[12] in her reading of some New Testament narratives, she uses what she terms as sensory anthropology (Lawrence 2013). Perhaps, this is an opportune moment for us to see deafness beyond limitation, and take on the perspective of a gain.

It remains a challenge for the hearing people to shift their paradigm on the notion of deafness as gain. Today, many Deaf rejects the medical perspective of deafness, and gears to their identity as an ethno-linguistic cultural minority, and therefore, deafness is a way of life (Scully 2012: 109) and the Deaf is another human variety. The Deaf base their claim of having a unique culture[13] on their organic experiences, shared history of exclusion, and more essentially their means of communication expressed in sign language,[14] bodily movements, iconic and facial expressions, mime, lights and touch. Apart from language and experiences, Deaf culture is beyond spatial boundaries because by nature Deaf are diasporic for they are all over the globe. In addition, Deaf people lived in a sort of "in-betweenity", that is, they are bilingual (at time multilingual), because they use sign language, English, and their native language (such as the non-Americans). In addition, living in an *audist-ableist* society, where they are always on the fringe, the Deaf are in constant re-negotiation because of their condition. Focuses on the inadequacies of the Deaf, and the limitations of deafness has hindered us from learning from them. For H-Dirksen Bauman, (Bauman and Murray 2009:1-10) hearing loss can be viewed

as gaining deafness, it a matter of reframing people's perspective about deafness as something different and not a deviation from normalcy. In like manner, he explicates that society must value the Deaf as they are, apart from what they contribute to society and humanity. Indeed, Deaf culture's contribution to humanity offers an alternate way of seeing the world from a Deaf "eye", be this in communication and technological innovations[15] (and/or assistive technology). The Deaf pictorial (face) language communication, perspectives, arts and designs, psychology, humor, their philosophy can enrich our view of life. Further, for Bauman and Murray, "Deaf ways of being in the world are ways that contribute to the cognitive, creative and cultural diversity of the human experience." (Bauman and Murray 2010:212) Normally, transmission of culture begins in one's family or clan; however, this is not so with Deaf people. Their culture continues to exist through institutions, such as schools and Deaf communities or organizations/associations. Their first exposure happens in schools, where they immediately sense belonging. The experience is like a "home-coming" for them.[16]

In the Deaf community I serve as a volunteer sign language interpreter – the Our Lady of Annunciation Parish-Deaf Ministry (OLAP-DM) members, I asked the question if they want to hear, and they simply answered "no". To mingle with other Deaf gives them the leverage to gradually accept and appreciate their deafness and Deafhood, not a deformity, but someone diverse,[17] which for them is equally promising and beautifully diverse.[18] Today, there is a gradual advocacy among Deaf people in considering the Deaf as a human variety; and one way to appreciate this is through the Deaf hermeneutics. Here, I would like to share with you their biblical dynamics in seeing God's words and I invite you to meet the Deaf "eye-to-eye" in the next part.

## III. Deaf Hermeneutics: Gaining Richer Insights from Deaf Perspective

The OLAP-DM, Deaf hermeneutics is an ongoing process though the weekly Bible fellowship held after the Sunday Mass and lunch. Deaf likes to engage in conversations and in community life; therefore, we apply this in Bible fellowship. In the course of this fellowship, I personally noticed a different way on how Deaf see God's words, thus, our Bible fellowship evolves the notion of Deaf hermeneutics. Engaging the Deaf in Bible conversation does not only provide them the space in the Church but empowers them to participate and contribute in their

community's spiritual growth. In our attempt for an active participation and collaboration with the Deaf, it matters that they express themselves according in their own terms, in manner and language they are at home. This endeavor leads to an in-depth insight as well as a discovery of Deaf hermeneutic that can enrich our understanding of *God's dabar* (words), and our shared humanity. Based on my experiences with some Asian Deaf (Filipinos, Koreans and Japanese), they show excitement in sharing their stories and perspectives, and I would like to share some of Deaf hermeneutics that transpired during our bible fellowship.

For the Deaf, most of the words in the Bible are difficult to comprehend. In order to make sense of God's words, it is necessary to translate the readings in Deaf language terms, and this involves some sort of imagination on the part of the interpreter when translating the Bible (including interpreting the sermon of the preacher during services). Hence, I embark the task to re-imagine and re-interpret the readings that will make sense for the Deaf, but remains faithful to the text. Second, here, one will observe that Deaf hermeneutics project insights that are simple, direct, experiential and concrete. To cite some of their hermeneutics, I share some of the passages in the gospel of Mark that they have interpreted so far: 9.2-10, 7.31-37, and 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

The passage on Jesus' transfiguration for many Bible scholars is one of the three predictions of Jesus' death in the gospel of Mark. Other scholars see this as a confirmation of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. The presence of Moses and Elijah represents Jesus' embodiment of the Torah and the Prophets. However, the Deaf in my community sees this pericope differently, for them this passage is about *struggle, of never giving-up or non-surrender and an attitude of patience*. For them the action of going up to the mountain is difficult, it is a struggle that is an in-between circumstance, where at times we thought of to either continue or simply retreat and give-up. For them, being Deaf has been a life of struggle in a dominant *audist-ableist* society. Recalling their younger years, they question their identity, 'are they Deaf or hearing with defective ears'. Having the latter, they tend to give-up being Deaf just to conform to the standards of society. Gaining a gradual acceptance of their deafness and understanding of Deafhood, they opt not to surrender to the struggles, but remain patient, discover their potential and reach the top of their goal as a Deaf person.

Another passage is Mark 7.31-37, commonly inscribed as the "healing of the Deaf man." Framed with the narrative of healing of the blind, this pericope is likely to be rhetorical, thus making blindness and deafness a sort of metaphor. The evangelist Mark uses blindness and deafness to show the difficulty of the disciples in recognizing, understanding or denial of Jesus' purpose. On the other hand, Carmen Fernández redirects the reading towards the reception of some Deaf communities, which for her is a call from Jesus for the Deaf people to "open up" to active discipleship.[19] Nonetheless, it challenges the hearing people on how our reading of the narrative pegged in silencing the Deaf of their agency. More so, for the Deaf in my community, as well as other Deaf Koreans I recently encountered, this passage is about Jesus' way of meeting the Deaf man "eye-to-eye". It is possible that the Deaf man was the one who touched his ears and tongue, indicating to Jesus that he cannot hear and speak. *Ephphatha is a process of being "open" to a different reality, that is, a Deaf reality*. Thus, the intent look of Jesus is his gradual "opening" or acceptance of the Deaf man as he is, which Jesus told the crowd to intently look at the Deaf man for them to see that he "correctly" expresses himself. If some Deaf are to edit the entire story, for them this will end with an embrace, which is a typical Deaf gesture.

Lastly, Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 22-23 when taken together it is often read as the "tradition of the elders". Some Jewish scholars acknowledge that Jesus seems to build fences around the Torah, which means that he was safeguarding the people from violating the commandment; it is better to do some preventive move. For some Christians the commentary of the Pharisees and some teachers of the law are plainly hypocritical, which, when left unchecked is living a life that is disintegrated from one's faith. However, the OLAP-DM community has a different view on this matter. This time Deaf perspectives need some weaving, for each has a different version, *such as warm heart, preparing the self to love, understanding others, learn to contribute and commit.* For them the very heart/core of a person, that is, it is a call to prepare one's heart to truly love, which begins with conditioning the self to be warm and understating of others. From this, they will learn to contribute that will gradually hone their hearts to commit.

With all these, what is Deaf gain in Deaf hermeneutic? The samples of Deaf perspective on the selected passages in the gospel of Mark

shows that we can gain from how Deaf see God's words. Their *see* a different reality that enriches our grasp and appreciation of the bible. In their manner of re-imagining some Bible stories, they remind us that God is in the ordinariness of life, and that God's words is life itself. Hence, Deaf hermeneutics is their way of re-imagining, re-reading the Bible with a subtle undercurrent of Deaf life reality, which is not far from Jesus' and our reality as well.

**IV. Theological Reflection: Human Diversity, Why Not?**

Deafness and the Deaf are often placed in a negative light both by society and in ways we interpreted the scripture. For too long now, we negate their contribution in understanding our shared humanity, and we fail to acknowledge their significance. As temporary-abled people, we focus on what a person can do, or cannot do, and dismiss the person's being altogether. Given this awareness of subjugating deafness and Deaf contribution to biblical scholarship, it is about time that we welcome them in our biblical conversations and let them re-tell, re-imagine, and re-interpret the Bible stories in their terms, in ways they see it. Let us engage the Deaf by meeting them "eye-to-eye", and listen with our eyes to gain an alternate understanding of God's words.

In her book, *Deaf Liberation Theology*, Hannah Lewis mentioned Kowk Pui Lan's oral hermeneutics, which is a style of Indian women (Lewis 2007:120) in re-appropriating the text in their context. This method is quite similar with Deaf hermeneutics in a way that their daily experiences, their history and their character integrates their hermeneutics. Deaf hermeneutic reflects their deafness, which is an indirect retelling of what matters to them as a Deaf. Further, what is remarkable in their interpretation is a sort of reflexivity where their insights resonate with those who see it, making it inclusive.

We cannot deny that diversity is present in God's creation and humanity. Biodiversity is a reality, and (bio)cultural diversity and neurodiversity are likewise gradually being recognized by some scientists, psychologists, and anthropologists/sociologists. All these are connected to human diversity, which is part of a grand fashion and passion of God who desires variety. Unfathomably, in diversity we can live in harmony, it is a life of inclusivity. But creating standards and normality runs counter to this grand design, that results to the exclusion of the Other-'other' who are labeled to be different, diverse and deviant.

In a similar vein, one could raise the question, *is not variety/diversity excluding the standard, the "normal"*? If we look intently and deeper to each Other-'other', is there really such a thing as standard or normal?

Do not be mistaken that I prefer deafness over hearing, neither hearing is better than deafness. Rather, both presents promising and insightful understanding about life and humanity. What I propose is for the mainstream hearing people to transcend from the thinking of limitations, incapability, damage, deficit, defect and loss. Rather, let us begin to appreciate the variety/diversity of life that leads to a deeper understanding of human life through the lens of the Deaf, from whom we can gain. End the discrimination, disenfranchisement, displacement and disqualification of the Deaf in our society, for we can gain from deafness and from Deaf people, if we only meet them "eye-to-eye" and engage with then in conversation, be this biblical, spiritual or simply everyday experiences. Surely, they have something to share and impart that will be indelible in our minds and hearts. Meet the Deaf "eye-to-eye", learn from them, and we can celebrate life's diversity beginning with respect, appreciation and acceptance of their language, culture and identity. We are unique and diverse, yet this same diversity equips us to thrive and be alive. I suppose this is the reason that in the book of Genesis, God saw all creation, found it and exclaimed with great force, "very good!"

**Endnotes**

1 This independent film was shown in August 2009. Romalito Mallari was awarded as the Best Actor for his portrayal in the film. This proves that Deaf can deliver a task.

2 This film was produced by Dr. Liza Martinez, a hearing Deaf advocate, and the only Sign Language linguist in the Philippines.

3 This is a common situation of Deaf rape cases in the Philippines. This is because there are only a handful Legal Sign Language interpreters.

4 All scruipture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

5 She is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Texas State University. She also published an article "What Has Biblical Literature to Do with Disability Studies?, SBL forum. Online: http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=250.

6 *Cheresh* is an adjective masculine. In the Hebrew, a word that is adjective masculine pertains to deaf.

[7] The Hebrew word אָלַם *alam* is usually associated with binding or to bind.

[8] The Greek word κωφὸν is an adjective accusative masculine singular no degree from *kophos*: κωφός.

[9] Exodus 4.10

[10] During ancient philosophy, speech matters, because it the means for discourse, of communication and articulation, which measures a person's intelligence. Thus, when one cannot hear and speak, they are labeled as "dumb". Martha Lynn Edwards, *Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World* (Minnesota: UMI, 2002), 101.

[11] Kabbalah is a branch of mystical Jewish thought.

[12] Louise Lawrence is an associate professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Exeter under the Theology and Religion Department.

[13] Deaf people in the past were referred to as "People of the Eye".

[14] It was only in the 1980s that Sign Language was acknowledged as a language having its own linguistic structures, and syntax. Edward Dolnick, "Deafness as Culture," in *The Atlantic Monthly* 272, no. 3 (September 1993): 37-53.

[15] Such technologies were brought to existence because of necessity, and to mention some: light bulb and redefined electricity conduction (Thomas Edison), vision broadcasting (modified television, by Wladislav Zeitlin), internet (known as its father is Vincent Cerf.

[16] Scully, "Deaf Identities," 111.

[17] Many Deaf parents would want their children to be Deaf. A Deaf family that is ideal for Deaf who embraces their identity is that when the entire three generation of the family are all Deaf. In their circle, Deaf considers such condition as authentic Deaf because they are significant in preserving the culture and language. For attestations, see Sarah Tavner, "Celebrating 180 years of Deafness", *The Guardian May* 31, 2008 available from https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/may/31/familyandrelationships.disability; and quotes from Shoshannah Stern available from https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/shoshannah658569.html and https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/shoshannah_stern.html, accessed December 28, 2016. This proves that they do not consider their condition as disability or deformity. Deaf people acknowledge the impairment but this is not a problem, which needs repair or even a cure.

[18] A paper presented by the researcher in Bangalore, India, November 2013. "Deafness and Deafhood in Mark 7.31-37: "Seeing/sign World" of Filipino d/Deaf and their Narratives of Dismemberment and Empowerment in this "Hearing/word World"".

[19] Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time: Sunday Scripture Reflection, Catholic Theological Union, September 9, 2018. Fernandez is a professor of Hispanic Theology and Ministry as well as the Director of the same program, at CTU. Available in http://www.catholicsoncall.org/scripture-reflection-twenty-third-sunday-ordinary-time-0

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# ‘(Dis)abled Jesus’: Reading Jesus, His Mission, and the Jesus’ Community from a (Dis)ability Perspective•

Roji T. George

**Introduction**

The issue of disability started receiving serious hearing in academic theological discourse in the past less than two decades. While the definition of “disability” may vary from culture to culture, from time to time, in recent discussions disability scholars/theologians have differentiated “impairment,” a biological/physical condition, from “disability” as a social construct. While the former is one’s physical givenness, a problem of an individual which requires medical intervention, the latter seeks to highlight/expose the socio-religious construct that marginalizes, discriminates, and legitimizes oppression of the disabled. The Church has been accused of contributing towards the socio-religious alienation and marginalization of the disabled people by her disability blind ableist theology. This has forced the biblical scholars to revisit the biblical texts with an aim to articulate a biblical response to the quest for dignity, honour, and accessibility of the nonconventional bodies within the Church. As a result, varied approaches, like liberationist approach, have been adopted to study disability from a biblical perspective. Such studies have vehemently called for a radical shift from an exclusivistic ableist theology of the Church to building up of an inclusive community. But they seem to have failed to do much for the benefit of the disabled within and outside the Church.

In this context, this essay seeks to critically revisit the approaches employed in disability studies, especially the liberatory disability approach, proposing to undertake a reading of the biblical texts from

(dis)ability perspective in non-essentialist terms. It is purported that such an approach in current disability discourse would render stronger subversive tools to read biblical narratives without privileging an identity over the other in non-oppositional inclusive terms. Hence, at first, the trends in Disability Studies shall be investigated critically. Secondly, various socio-religious constructions from the antiquity may be studied highlighting their ambiguous nature which form a background of the biblical texts portraying Jesus, his mission, and the Jesus' community[1] as a (dis) abled Jesus/community.

## 1. Trends in Disability Studies: A Critical Appraisal

Like every other trend in the biblical/theological arena which captures its space within the discourse, Disability Studies too has gained its root in it via civil rights activism. In America, in 1990, civil activism culminated in the American with Disability Act (ADA) becoming the Federal Law. It ensured a definite space of hearing on 'disability and justice' in the American national discourse. In the pre-1990 era, predominantly, human disability was associated with a dysfunction/ impairment of any body organ that needs to be adjusted/lived with or 'fixed'/repaired of its abnormality by human medical intervention. For the first time, in 1995, the disability studies captured central stage when in the first session on "Religion and Disability Studies Consultation" of AAR, it was selected for intense theological reflection. Later in 2004, during SBL Annual Meetings, it was picked-up once again for a serious theological deliberation by the biblical fraternity. Since then, from various interpretive locations, the issue of disability was addressed in biblical studies.[2]

Hector Avalos mentions three dominant trends – Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism – in the biblical studies as a response to the issue of disability. They cannot be separated and put in watertight compartments, though they can be identified as mutually independent to a large extent.[3] The first trend, Redemptionism, seeks to redeem the biblical passages by recontextualizing them in the modern setting even when it seems to bear certain negative attitude towards disability. It seeks to rescue the text from the modern normative scholarly interpretations. The second trend, Rejectionism, in contrast recognizing the negative attitude of the biblical text towards disability, attempts to repudiate its use for the modern society. Avalos, himself as a self-confessed post-scripturalist, maintains that in postscripturalism,

a variant of rejectionism, no ancient text reflecting positive or negative attitude must be used normatively for the modern society. Finally, the third approach, Historicism, undertakes an historical investigation of disability in the Bible and in the subsequent ecclesiastical tradition.[4] In the critical evaluation of Avalos, none of the three approaches are termed perfect in adopting disability in biblical studies. In their current form, they usher "both promises and challenges for the future of Disability Studies within biblical and religious studies."[5] To me, based on the explanation of Avalos, none of these trends in dealing with biblical passages from a disability perspective seek to focus on 'disability' as a very relative category of judgment which, at most of the occasions, is dealt as physical impairment caused due to the victim's own sin and God's retribution, or for any other external reasons. They do not explore the subversive strength of the Bible in empowering a disabled person to articulate selfhood discursively 'beyond' his/her own disability. Hence, although they seek to absolve the biblical text of its negative attitude towards disability or exhume historical facts concerning the Church's attitude towards disability, they generally fail to demolish the wall of separation between the able and disabled bodies in the present by highlighting the numerous 'fatal cracks' within the oppressive, hypocritical, and exclusive able-body (biblical/theological) discourses.

In recent years, several diversified multidisciplinary approaches have been proposed/undertaken to study disability within the theological field. A dominant trend current among the biblical interpreters from disability perspective is to address disability from a liberation perspective. The need for such a liberatory exercise arises because of the constant experience of marginalization of the disabled by the able bodies, the disability blind ableist theology, and the Church's reluctance to encourage the participation of the disabled as an inclusive community. In this context, the theology of disability driven by liberation perspective, "questions the construction of human difference, exposing the categories 'able bodied' and 'disabled' as part of an ideology of ability that legitimates an ideal human embodiment."[6] Hence, Eiesland, a disability theologian, argues that the key to articulate theological method to form a theology of disability is accessibility.[7] Moreover, it like any other liberatory theology articulates theology from the perspective of the disabled and privileges their experiences and identity above other existential realities[8] aiming at "emancipatory

transformation."[9] Thus, it invites the Church to practice justice through her disavowal of unjust theological presuppositions, ecclesiastical institutions, social attitudes, etc., and affirm the nonconventional bodies by exhuming liberatory biblical themes, motifs, and images, to construct a new model of wholeness.[10]

In doing so, the liberatory theology of disability ideologically assumes an essentialist posture, counter ableist theology, by ghettoizing the disabled identity. It deliberately seeks to "alter the regular practices, ideas, and images of the able bodied."[11] While such a liberatory project is not without merit, the deep-seated issue with such oppositional construction of liberatory symbols is that it threatens to perpetuate the tendency to repeat the mistake of the discriminatory able-body theology. The religious images and symbols constructed in exclusive terms quite naturally alienate the able bodies. For example, the absolute claim implied in the term "the disabled God" is objectionable, misguiding, and non-conciliatory, because it not only essentializes God in the contextual categories of theological articulation but also it, at the outset, renders the able bodies incapable of comprehending God in 'unknown' categories. It would not result in the formation of a real inclusive community of God because, though very rightly the emancipatory transformation challenges the oppressive, marginalizing structures, it also searches for and proclaims "alternative structures and symbols of religious life that can effectively challenge oppressive beliefs and values."[12] This in no way implies a unilateral or uncritical rejection of the noble intent lying behind it. Instead, what ought to be sought is to construct a concept of God in non-essentialist terms which equally embraces both embodiments at once, affirms dignity, justice and wholeness, and fosters a dynamic self-critical harmonious coexistence of all in unity with differences celebrated. Probably, a restatement of Eiesland's famous expression "the disabled God" as "the (dis)abled God/Jesus" would enable both the able and disable bodies to identify 'God-with-a-difference' as the one who embodies the two in Himself indistinguishably and completely, at once, without giving room to hierarchical relation based on able/disable ideological theology/ies. It would help restore the dignity of the marginalized discursively without capturing God in exclusive, fixed, and narrow term(s) of contextual theologies. This would help the liberatory disability theology to reincarnate itself in a new form in order to effect emancipation of the disabled through the biblical discourse without

polarized identity. One should not forget that disability theologians like Betcher have already decried the failure of the liberatory disability theology to produce expected result. According to Betcher, "[w]hile the disability rights movement has made political headway in the United States, the liberationist model has not necessarily proven very amenable to disability."[13]

If so, where then lies the way ahead for a disability theology in non-essentialist terms? As pointed above, a new approach must avoid the interpretive pitfalls of the liberatory disability theology like calling God "disabled" which equally overlook the experience of the able bodies. It must seek to assert how a disabled individual is capable to perform many other social functions in a 'normal' way like any other able body than focusing on anyone particular impairment causing 'partial' or limited ability. In other words, despite physical difference hampering 'normal' social function, the focus must move to a positive representation of the self as 'able despite disabled.' Further, it requires a complete disavowal of the "Normate Hermeneutics"[14] of the able bodies reinforcing hierarchical relation and naturalizing one's domination upon the 'other.' It recognizes that "[t]his ideology of ability places 'disabled' and 'able bodied' at opposite ends of a spectrum—as if these are natural, self-explanatory categories,"[15] while seeking to address the two (able and disable) at once, in one utterance, bracketing the negative prefix 'dis' meaning "not" before "able." By this, on the one side, the focus remains on the ability to perform varied functions, while reminding the able bodies about their disabilities. On the other hand, it creates a flux where "dis" in disability invariably deconstructs the normate ableist discourse constantly. Hence, the ideas such as preference for "flesh" over "body," and "temporally able bodies," evoked in disability studies, must be used as the initial launch pads to articulate the concerns of the disabled people in non-essentialist, affiliative-disruptive terms, simultaneously. Both the concepts help dislodge the pretentious claim of domination by making any one type of body as a norm. According to Schumm, "Flesh in all of its messiness and imperfection—in its disability—shouts impermanence. The phrase 'temporarily abled' is nowhere more poignant than in a discussion of fleshly impermanence."[16] While "flesh," unlike "body," signifies the limitation, temporality, and frailty of human existence, the idea of "temporarily able bodies" rob the seemingly able bodies of their colonial claim to superiority. Then, the able bodies become as much

vulnerable, dependent, and fragile, as much as the disabled bodies seem wanting. It scuttles the foundation of the dominant ableist theological discourses which legitimize the marginalization, discrimination, and oppression of the disabled people.[17] In fact, it decentres the entire disability discourse from "able"/ "disable" bi-polar pre-conception in favour of the vulnerability of all flesh including God in incarnation, the (dis)abled Jesus. As a result, it would facilitate mutually enriching locale of theological cross-fertilization that would help us articulate a (Dis)abled Theology in 'familiar-yet-unfamiliar' terms both to the able and disable people alike.

Further, the (dis)ability theology would seek to: (i) Unravel the ideological thrust of the biblical text or its interpretations prioritizing and naturalizing the able-bodies, thereby, perpetuating the marginalization of the nonconventional bodies. (ii) Capitalize contrapuntal images, symbols, and ideas subsumed within the biblical tradition, text(s), and the later ecclesiastical history. It would help imagining an emancipatory space of self-actualization for both the able and disable bodies, at once. (iii) Restore and redefine hope, dignity, and 'wholeness' embedded ambivalently within the biblical passages reflecting God's positive disposition towards the disable bodies. (iv) It celebrates physical differences, in the words of Iozzio "fecund diversity,"[18] as legitimate within the body of Christ, the *ekklesia*. Hence, the *ekklesia* will become a true life-affirming, mutually nurturing, and inclusive community according to God's original vision for her; truly, it would be a non-essentialist and inclusive community of the (dis)abled.

If so, how was disability perceived in ancient cultures? Was it always perceived in negative terms as God's retributive justice over human sin? Is biblical portrayal of Jesus' identity, his mission, and the community of his followers in later years provide vital insights to articulate (Dis)ability Theology? In the remainder, we shall, at first, explore the ambivalent perception of disability in various cultures and, then, seek to identify non-essentialist elements in the New Testament that would enable us to articulate a relevant (Dis)ability Theology.

## 2. The Socio-Religious Construction of Disablility in the Antiquity

It is difficult to say anything, in general, about how disability was perceived or understood in the past among varied groups of people, cultures, and time. We encounter multiple evidences pointing to the

contradictory directions which do not help us to conclude our survey of these evidences from the past in unilateral terms. Further, it is difficult to assume that the positive or negative evaluation of disability in various literary evidences can be a direct reflection of the actual social-cultural, political, and economic condition of the disabled people. But with a certain level of caution, we may assume that these evidences at least reflect the then prevalent attitude towards the issue of disability. One thing that must be borne in mind by the modern readers of these ancient literatures is that they very often treated the value of the disabled and their right to live in a society based on the disabled person's capability to execute social functions independently or to a satisfactory level with some support from others with 'normal' physical condition. In all the cultures, in general, the reality of disability was explained in religious terms with mythological stories or logical theological deductions. Hence, they are very different from the modern perception of disability in medical terms.

In his study of the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural perception of disability, Neal H. Walls maintains that in ancient Mesopotamian family system the responsibility to provide primary care for the disabled remained with the immediate family, though the disabled could approach the temple system for assistance and care in case of any lack in it.[19] The Sumerian creation myth describes the origin of disability as a result of the illogical behavior of goddess Ninmah who in drunken state takes pride in being able to control the physical condition of humans, created to do labour so that gods may have rest. However, god Enki/Ea counters her deeds by providing the variously disabled people different productive economic roles to perform in the divine court. However, when Enki creates Umul as disabled by birth, Ninmah fails to provide any productive economic role to it. Thus, while there are some in the community who, though with disability, are capable to engage in productive activities or have high social status, some like Umul are to be cared for by the community. In contrast, the later Sumerian proverb suggests that the people with disability are created by lesser gods. In this literature, at least on four various instances infanticide or euthanasia was approved as part of medical prescriptions for the disabled who pose threat to the good health of the family/community. Later traditions explain that certain disability caused by leprosy, dropsy, etc., are the result of divine punishments. Such disabled individuals require to be sent out from the communal

life. They were also restricted from entering public square or perform temple activities. An exception to this is evident in the case of King Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king, who even with his disability is not disqualified from kingship but was healed later. According to such traditions, disability such as barrenness of a woman or being a eunuch is part of divine purpose to control human population.[20] Similarly, an extreme positive ancient attitude towards the disability is visible in Chapter 25 of The Instruction of Amenemope which acknowledges human frailty/disability as the handiwork of god who builds or tears down at his own will. Hence, the disabled should not be laughed at, mocked, subjected to hardships or punishment.[21]

In contrast to the Mesopotamian evidences, the responses of Greeks towards disability ranged from pity to derision.[22] Bruce observes that among the Athenians or Greeks, in general, from fifth century BCE, there were practices of giving State grants to the physically disabled and depicting gods as caring gods who heal people miraculously. In Plato's and Aristotle's utopian vision of a perfect state the disabled infants are not supposed to be reared. Instead, they are to be abandoned. Similarly, Plutarch stating about the ideal past speaks about the practice of examining infants at birth to determine the worth of investing time and energy in rearing them up.[23] Kelley mentions that among Greek and Romans, it was a topic of laughter for the 'normal' bodied (both among gods and humans), a cause of shame, a thing to be viewed with derision. Hephaestus, a Greek god of fire and artisan, suffers congenital disorder that is lamented and thought to be a cause of shame for his mother, Hera, among other deities. Hence, she throws him down from heaven, probably a reflection of common Greek practice of exposing or abandoning the disabled 'monstrous' infants. For the same reason, he is overlooked also by his wife over Ares, who had a normal and fit body. Among Romans the disabled were exposed or were to be killed as per the law of the fifth century BCE mentioned by Cicero. However, not in all cases such practices were common. For example, Emperor Claudius and the congenitally mute Quintus Pedius were reared. Apart from it, the Greeks also believed disability such as blindness to be the result of divine or human punishments and accidents. For example, the blind Theban prophet Teiresias was blinded for watching, though unintentionally, Athena bathing or by Hera for saying that women enjoy intercourse in ten parts out of total nineteen parts while men enjoy it only in nine parts. However, both Greek and Roman evidences

prove that the disabled were thought to have been compensated by unique abilities with unmatching skill of perfection. Hephaestus, though disabled, was a skilled artisan which is a reliable reflection of the physically disabled ones having economically productive business in the Greek and Roman society. Prophet Teiresias was compensated with prophecy by Zeus like Evanius, mentioned by Herodotus, who too was rewarded by god with prophecy after he was blinded by his fellow townsmen for neglecting the sacred sheep of Helios.[24]

Similar complex attitude towards disability prevails even in the biblical accounts underlined by Jewish and Judeo-Christian socio-cultural context. Bruce argues that Tobit, a devout Jew, who was temporally disabled for his righteous deeds suffered grave sorrow because he believed in the Deuteronomistic contractural theology. The Jewish religious system did not supply any therapeutic or other forms of assistance to the disabled but only declared the people healed when they were treated by doctors.[25] According to Eiesland, three themes - like "sin and disability conflation, virtuous suffering, and segregationist charity - illustrate the theological obstacles encountered by people with disabilities who seek inclusion and justice within the Christian community. It cannot be denied that the biblical record and Christian theology have often been dangerous for persons with disabilities."[26] Moreover, "[t]he persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual hero."[27] Such a straight-jacket view of the biblical understanding of disability is over-simplification of it, though it is not without some truth. It does provide a great impetus to undertake a Christian disability theological assertion(s) but may do so by overlooking generally the complex view of the Bible.

Several references in the Old Testament indicate that the disabled were considered to be impure. As a result, they were not allowed to enter into the presence of God in order to perform ritualistic duties (Leviticus 21:17-21 cf. 2S am 5:9). Leviticus 21:18-21 states, "[f] or no one who has a defect shall approach. ... No man among the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a defect is to come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a defect, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God ... so that he will not profane My sanctuaries."[28] Interestingly, the list of deformities enlists not just

physical deformities like blindness, crippled or deformed limb, etc. but it also directs individuals with diseases like eczema to refrain from entering into God's presence. In various instances, these deformities or disabilities are also understood as God's retributive justice towards those who violate divine principles or commit sins (Zephaniah 1:17; Zechariah 12:4). In an instance, during the exodus journey, Miriam is said to have suffered leprosy, though for a short while, because of her speaking against Moses, the servant of God, and thereby displeasing God (Numbers 12:10). The direct consequence of such a divine punishment is that the person is isolated from the rest of the society. Similarly, we read about king Uzziah who was punished with leprosy because of his pride and violation of temple system by burning incense to the LORD in the sanctuary. According to the biblical account, he was disqualified to continue in kingship and was left to live in isolation (2Chronicles 26:16-21). The retributive justice of God is evident in the cases of King Herod who died (Acts 12:21-23) and Zechariah who became dumb for not believing in the angelic message proclaimed to him in the temple (Luke 1:11-20). Not to forget the famous story of Paul's conversion in which his transition from his old life style to a new life in Christ is interlude with a temporal blindness (Acts 9:8, 18). However, in the later Post-biblical Jewish tradition, at times, disability was also viewed as a means of tactical divine intervention in particular historical points. According to Avalos, in a Midrash on Psalm 34 it is God who granted David a cognitive disability so that he may escape the political threat from Philistines to David (1 Samuel 21:10-22:1a). He states that "[t]hrough this experience, the rabbis suggest, God shows David how a disability is not a divine oversight within God's created order. Rather when framed within this theological discourse, disability becomes a means of divine deliverance for David."[29]

To add, Jacob, the patriarch, suffered physiological dislocation "while he wrestled with" God (Genesis 32:24). Thereafter, Jacob lived with a dislocated thighs limping for the rest of his life like a disabled person (cf. 32:31) while succeeding to gain victory over his adversary, the God, in wrestling[30] and in continuing in blessed favour of God for the rest of his life (Genesis 35:1-15). To me, the experience of disability made Jacob to realize a greater truth of temporal 'ableness' of human existence which transformed him from a proud and selfish deceiver of his own old and blind father (thereby his brother Esau) into a chastiser of his sons when they emulated his own (Jacob's) 'old self'

in new setting in order to avenge against Shechem, his father Hamor, and the rest of the city through deception for their sister's dishonor (Genesis 32:1-31). Similarly, God overlooks Moses' disability[31] while calling him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3-4). Upon Moses' confession of his disability (Exodus 4:10), God replies him saying, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who make him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say" (Exodus 4:11-12). It is self-evident in the case of Moses that a physical disability is not a limiting factor for God to use someone in his work. It is quite clear in Amos Yong's proposal that the event of Pentecost attests the fact that the "many tongues, many senses" are the vehicles of God's revelatory acts and not just "hearing and seeing."[32] Hence, no form of physical deformity or disability can disqualify an individual from engaging within the church activity in an authentic way as that of an able body. According to Yong, "God's communicative speech-acts engage human beings through the multiplicity of our sensory capacities."[33]

In the New Testament, too, the attitude towards disability or disabled persons is not always negative. Though, at times, we find Jesus (also his disciples) linking disability with sin, he is also the one who shows an alternate way of viewing the suffering of the disabled people (for example in John 9). In the light of an elaborate discussion ensued later in this paper, it suffices to say that in Luke 5:17-26 the words of Jesus drawing connection between sin and disability seem to be ridden with cultural values of differentiation, discrimination, and valorization. However, it is quite evident that the early church, too, maintained an ambiguous view about the people with disability. Several examples from the ecclesiastical history may be cited to substantiate this position. Jeyakumar points out that Origen continued as an active member and a respected theologian of the church even after he self-castrated in order to win over his sensual desires. Likewise, St. Didymus, the Blind, played an active role in the functioning of the Alexandrian Catechetical School and was later elevated to sainthood. However, later during the Nicean Council while several impaired bishops participated in it, the Council "resolved that eunuchs may be received into the number of the clergy but those who castrate themselves shall not be received. It further said that insane persons and energumens i.e. a demoniac or one possessed by an evil spirit should not be ordained; so also bond servants."[34]

In the remainder, we shall analyze the complex portrayal of Jesus and his community within the canonical gospel from a non-essentialist (dis)ability perspective in order to draw relevant insights for theological articulation and self-affirming non-essentialist representation of the people with disability in public discourse.

## 3. '(Dis)abled Jesus' in the Christian Canon

Amidst the complex attitude towards disability in various cultures, the portrayal of Jesus, His mission, and the community formed in and around his persona in the later years, as evident in the New Testament writings, can be of immense help to articulate a (Dis)ability Theology in non-essentialist terms. How do the New Testament writers articulate Jesus' identity? Are there clues and insights found within the canonical writings that affirm the dignity and value of the disabled within the body of Christ? Did the mission of Jesus offer a real agenda or a model to the later church as a community where disabled are not viewed with derision and condemnation but as equals while participating in community life?

### 3.1. Identity of Jesus as a '(Dis)abled Jesus'

The articulation of the identity of Jesus during the New Testament times of the Church has been from the point of his weakness, vulnerability, and frailty along with the portrayal of his victory over death, ushering of the 'new age' in and through him, and his return as the glorified Messiah, simultaneously. Within this complex depiction of Jesus is the ambivalent assertion of him as the (dis)abled God, though usually it has gone overlooked in our traditional theological discourse. In other words, he is able, while he is disable and vice versa. They are the two sides of the same coin without the one the other is inauthentic. Both aspects are necessary to picture the complete/comprehensive portrayal of Jesus' identity. Within Jesus, both the able and disable are inseparably united as they constantly deconstruct each other. Neither is independent of the other. In fact, such a portrayal of the historical man, Jesus, and the resurrected Lord would alone be acceptable to both the able and disable bodies.

Foundational to the assertion of Jesus' incarnation is, in John's words, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 Emphasis added). It is a radically subversive theological proposition which, unlike Jewish or Greek understanding, affirms the 'able-bodied'

eternal God taking over the human limitation, weakness, and disabilities in multiple respects upon Himself by the process of enfleshment. This divine act of self-limitation is also present in earlier Christian thought. In Philippians 2:7-8, Paul, quoting from an early Christian Hymn, says that he "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the *likeness of men*. Being found in the *appearance as a man*, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Emphasis added). Further, in Romans 1:3, Paul says about Jesus as the Son of God, the one "who was born of a descendant of David according to the *flesh*." In John's thought, this process of enfleshment is God's "participation in [hu]man's creaturely weakness."[35] According to Anthony C. Thiselton, "[i]n some context, especially in the OT, *sarx* calls attention to man's *creatureliness and frailty*; to the fact that he[they] is fragile, fallible, and vulnerable."[36] Paul's use of the term "flesh" in Roman 1:3, referring to humanity, denotes "[hu]man as characterized and conditioned by his mortality– its weakness, relationships, needs, and desires."[37]

In recent discussion, some disability theologians have sought to highlight the fact of God's participation in human affairs as a disabled God in Jesus' incarnation. However, it is Betcher who seeks to put the idea of "flesh" as central to the discussion on disability. According to Betcher,

> Flesh, the dynamic and fluid physics of embodiment, cannot as easily as the body submit to transcendentalist metaphysics, to the logic of the one. Flesh suggests that the capaciousness of a life resembles a teacup crackled with ten thousand veins…. Flesh might comparably remind feminism that, whereas body has already been submitted to a cultural regime of wholeness - by way of hallucinatory imagistic totalization, as even Jacques Lacan insisted, corporeality differs with itself daily. Flesh, in other words, makes alterity central and might also, therefore, allow us to talk about that which metaphysics has often hidden from the sociocultural agenda, that which we know to be true of lives - pain, difficulty, disease, transience, aging, error, and corporeal limit, if even also the epiphanies and critical insights that come with illness…. [38]

In this way, these theologians have sought to make the alterity of the flesh central to their disability discourse which God has performed in

Jesus in the very act of enfleshment. In fact, the Christian gospel itself is the enactment of God's alterity in Jesus and rejecting of the able bodied discourse. Astutely put in the words of Eiesland, "(i)t suggests a human-God who not only knows injustice and experiences the contingency of human life, but also reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival."[39]

The grand Christian narrative of God's experience of alterity in incarnation is not just in bearing the frailty, weakness, and vulnerability through incarnation but also in the continuity of the alterity of the flesh into eternal, transcosmic, and glorified reality in his resurrected body and by his 'bodily' ascension into the heavens. Within the gospel narratives, the fact of Jesus' 'fleshly' resurrection from the dead is affirmed by the visible marks of nails/disability that he bore in his 'glorified' body. The gospel narratives also attest the fact that he ascended into the heavens before their eyes in the same 'body' with visible marks of disability on it and is seated at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9-11). John 20:19-29 narrates the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples. Jesus appeared to his disciples in his 'fleshly' form, a body capable of entering through the closed door yet bearing the distinctive tangible marks of disability in his hands and on his side. According to Robert Kysar, "[t]his demonstration tells us that John's concept of the risen body is mysterious, to be sure, but has the appearance of a physical body."[40] In the words of Beasley-Murray, "the risen Lord is the *Crucified*, the flesh and blood Redeemer."[41] Thus, in reply to Thomas' quest to experience the resurrected Lord, especially, the marks of disability, Jesus invites him to touch, see, and experience His flesh: "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side" (John 20:27). Moreover, an evidence for the actual human body, the one glorified after resurrection, according to Luke, is that Jesus "took it (a piece of a broiled fish) and ate it before them" (Luke 24:43 Parenthesis added). Interestingly, the real experience of the disciples with the risen Lord gave birth to an early Christian tradition to which Ignatius bear witness, saying:

> I know and believe that he was in the *flesh even after the resurrection*; and when he came to Peter and those with him, he said to them: 'Take hold of me; handle me and see that *I am not a disembodied demon*.' And immediately they touched him and they believed, being closely united with his *flesh* and

> blood. … And After his resurrection he ate and drank with them *like one who is composed of flesh*, although spiritually he was united with the Father. (Smyrn. 3.1-22)[42] (Emphasis added)

What do such biblical evidences along with the earliest ecclesial tradition(s) point to? They together seem to bear witness to the fact that the early Christians by testifying the bodily resurrection of Jesus affirmed the visible reality of the resurrected Lord as 'Spiritual-Flesh' in quite contradictory sense. It means that: (i) hereafter, God too is 'made flesh,' i.e., in God is represented the actual human existential realities (including physical differences) perfectly without contradiction. (ii) The ascension of Jesus in flesh into the heavens proves that now the entire humanity is represented beyond able/disable binaries in (dis) abled Godhead. The stigma of sin associated with disability is ultimately ripped from "flesh" as the risen Lord eternally bears the marks of disability. Thus, even in the early Christian apocalyptic tradition the identity of the risen Jesus is complex. The eschatological Lamb of God, Jesus, is both the sacrificed Lamb and the only one who is worthy to rule the world with power and might (cf. Revelation 5:6-14).

If so, how does this reality of God's vulnerability in flesh play out in Jesus' mission? How did Jesus respond to disability in his mission? How did the (dis)abled Jesus view disability from an eschatological kingdom perspective?

### 3.2. Mission of the '(Dis)abled Jesus'

The mission of the (dis)abled Jesus in the New Testament is symmetrical to his constructed (dis)abled identity. According to Luke, the mission of Jesus included restoration of health to the disabled ("blind") and reinstatement of the socially depressed/oppressed ones (Luke 4:18) into the main stream society. This is quite evident in the gospel accounts about Jesus' mission. He healed people with mental (e.g., Mark 5:1-13) and physical (e.g., Mark 3:1-6) disabilities. In the first century Jewish world filled with strong messianism, John sends his disciples enquiring about the mission and identity of Jesus saying "Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?" (Luke 7:20). To this, Jesus replied, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE

THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM" (Luke 7:22). John Mathews observes that "Jesus' ministry, therefore, had as its ultimate objective the healing of the disabled and their participation in a more inclusive community that represented the Kingdom of God/Heaven."[43] To me, undoubtedly, Jesus recognized his healing ministry as the unflinching evidence manifest in his mighty deeds of the dawn of the Kingdom of God, the eschatological reality, here and now in human history but was not forming an inclusive community through them in the real sense. A disabled person undergoes the experience of rejection, humiliation, and exclusion due to his/her nonconventional body. Though Jesus healing them of their cause(s) of exclusion, i.e., their disabilities, is a welcoming act in their life, the fact of their non-admittance as equals in the community of the able bodies persists at the backdrop. In other words, it is their condition as the restored one from disability that allows their inclusion. In fact, the biblical scholars/theologians have seldom recognized such an implication of their excessive, but mistaken, borrowing of healing narratives from gospel accounts to portray the inclusive community of Jesus.[44]

To me, for disability studies, the mission (including his public teaching) of Jesus is significant in two respects to understand his inclusive vision: (i) his vision of the eschatological kingdom, and (ii) his alternate, non-discriminatory, and positive explanation for the existence of disability. Firstly, Jesus' vision for an inclusive community is evident in his radicalized vision of the eschatological kingdom where the economically poor and the socially marginalized disabled mass, who positively respond to the master's invitation, find accepted just as they are. In Luke 14:16-24, Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God says a parable about a man who invited many for a big dinner. According to the story, the invited guests refused to come by giving excuses, at which the master ordered his slaves to "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the *poor and crippled and blind and lame*" (14:21 Emphasis added). According to John Nolland, "[t] his reaching out to the poor and disabled corresponds to the ministry of Jesus himself, but of course in reality it needs no basis in some change of plan on the part of God."[45] Moreover, unlike Matthew (Matthew 22:2-14), Luke intentionally mentions the disabled people's entry into the dinner hall in order to draw the reader's attention to the radical shift in the nature and composition of the envisioned eschatological kingdom, i.e., uncharacterized by the discriminatory laws as a result of

Jesus' mission. Luke, in 14:19-20, refers to the socially accepted able bodies who are capable to go and see the newly purchased land, plough the oxen in the field, or is physically fit to be married (Luke 14:19-20 cf. Matthew 22:5-6). It signifies the subversive intent of Jesus' mission in which the disabled and the marginalized who accept the invitation of God are brought to share in the eschatological feast whereas the socially elite and able bodies who reject the invitation are rejected by the master in turn (14:24). In fact, Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God is unlike that of Jewish vision in which the physical state of a person is overlooked in favour of his/her response to Jesus. Sam P. Mathew states that "[b]y accepting them and celebrating with them the demarcating and discriminatory laws of purity and pollution are overthrown and the values of the Kingdom of God are promoted."[46] Hence, the kingdom of God in the vision of Jesus promises honour, inclusion, and dignity to the disabled and the marginalized just as to the able bodies. In fact, he as a (dis)abled Jesus in God's kingdom represents the disabled in eternity as much as the able bodies may find him close to their imagination.

So, is this liberative space of inclusion and self-actualization confined to the eschatological imagination of Jesus? No. Jesus, during his earthly mission, also appears to have accepted the disabled just as they are. For example, in the famous story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, Jesus affirms his privileged status in the covenantal community by saying "he, too, is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Normally, the entire episode has been only understood by able bodied biblical scholars and churchmen as Jesus' acceptance of a socially (Jewish) outcast tax collector. Nevertheless, such a reading overlooks Luke's description of his physical condition as "small in stature" that he was incapable of seeing Jesus in the crowd (Luke 19:3). Fitzmyer, Marshall, Yong, and Gundry maintain that it is a clear reference to the physical condition of Zacchaeus.[47] Zacchaeus stands doubly eligible for Jesus' act of grace – (i) as a tax collector, a group hated by Jews, and (ii) because of his physical abnormality. According to Gundry, "[t]he reference to Zacchaeus' diminutive stature marks another historical detail. It also prepares for Jesus' exercise of grace towards him, an outcast not only because he's a tax collector but also because ancient people generally despised anybody with a physical abnormality—and, shamefully from our standpoint, they considered unusual smallness just such an abnormality."[48] As pointed out earlier, such abnormalities

were viewed as the result of God's retributive justice for human sins. But Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus' house, a sinner by profession as a tax collector and a disabled by physical condition. Hence, Jesus was accused of associating with "sinners" (Luke 19:7) and announcing salvation to them who are punished by God for their sins.

Secondly, Jesus' alternate explanation for the cause of disability, in John 9, is also indicative of his vision for the disabled in the kingdom of God. In John 9:1-3, we find the disciples of Jesus enquiring with him about the root cause of the man's congenital blindness. They asked: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he would be born blind?" (John 9:2 cf. Luke 13:2). Even the Pharisees rebuked the man because to his congenital blindness based on their religio-cultural understanding, saying: "You were *born entirely in sins*" (John 9:34 Emphasis added). The term "sin," indeed, here stands for the man's congenital blindness which was believed to be a visible evidence of his (or his parent's) sin. According to R.E. Brown, during the time of Jesus it was believed that an adult could suffer for his sins but in this case the suffering of an infant could be based on the Exodus 20:5 which says, "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me." Moreover, as Brown points out, "[s]ome of the rabbis held that not only could sin of the parents leave its mark on an infant, but also the infant could sin in the mother's womb."[49] They considered it as "punishments of love," which, if suffered generously, would yield long life and greater reward.[50] But Jesus appears to reverse this cultural understanding by rejecting it completely. He, instead, perceives it differently and explains the cause of the suffering. Jesus said, "[i]t was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). In other words, Jesus considers this man as a unique location of God's charismatic self-manifestation. Thereby, he, unlike the able bodies, the Pharisees and other Jewish elites, holds a space in God's revelatory activity in the 'margins' of the world. It reflects his ambivalent attitude towards suffering out of disability which is not entirely negative, oppressive, and discriminatory.

In nutshell, the mission of Jesus was inclusive in its true sense where the disabled were accepted just as they are with their nonconventional bodies. The scope of his inclusive mission is evident

in his eschatological imaginations and concrete missionary interaction with the disabled people. He saw them as the locale of God's charismatic self-revelation. However, did he succeed in imparting his inclusive vision to his community? Did the apostles and the other members of his community capture his inclusive vision for the body of Christ? Was Jesus' community a 'community of the (dis)abled'?

### 3.3. Jesus' Community as a 'Community of the (Dis)abled'

Just as in the ministry of Jesus miraculous healing held an important role, the *Acts of the Apostles*, too, mentions that the apostles continued in the power of the Holy Spirit performing miraculous healings. It, like in Jesus' mission, proves the continuity of the inaugurated eschatology in and through the community of the (dis)able Jesus. Those who expectantly awaited in faith were healed in the name of Jesus by the apostles (Acts 13:6; 14:9-10). It does not imply a true inclusion of the disabled into the community of the God. Instead, it only proves that the disabled were supernaturally made like the other conventional bodies before being accepted into the community. However, this does not imply that the Jesus' community in the post-resurrection scenario ceased to include the disabled just as they are. The community that rallied around the person of Jesus during his earthly mission or after his resurrection as a church has consistently maintained its inclusive nature. To me, though the evidences are scarce, it is important to argue that, in every sense, it was a 'community of the (dis)abled' because they were not excluded from the community life and the disability of individuals were overcome/replaced with his/her ability. In other words, the individuals with certain disability/ies were readily welcomed into fellowship and perhaps some of them have played vital role in the history of Christianity.

For example, the inclusion of the disabled in the community of God just as they are is evident in Acts 8:25-39. It is an important event in the history of the church as the Ethiopian eunuch is the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity. Luke mentions that Holy Spirit led Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch to expound the meaning of the Scripture while he was returning from Jerusalem. This is in direct contrast with the first century Jewish social practices where a person is classified based on his race, physical stature, gender, etc. Scholars maintain that the eunuch must have been a gentile believer in the God of Israel which implies that he was not even a Jewish proselyte. If so, he is a doubly

marginalized person who is both a non-Jew by race and a eunuch, a trans-gender. In either ways, he has no rightful social space in the Jewish society. According to Malina, a eunuch is left out of the Jewish socio-religious system because of a eunuch's incapability to reproduce and transmit covenantal status.[51] In other words, his disability refrains him from full participation into the Jewish socio-religious system. However, in the Lucan account, it was the divine initiative to interpret the Scripture to a disabled eunuch that led him to baptism (8:36-39). In other words, immediately after the ascension of Jesus, the early Christian community continued to be a locale of equal participation for all including the disabled "in Christ" (cf. Galatians 4:28). Obviously, the non-discriminatory and dignity affirming teaching of Jesus was well understood, preserved, and practised by the early Christians. Without explicit command from Jesus to do so in the gospel accounts, it was clear to the apostles that inclusion of the disabled just as they are is close to the true vision and mission of Jesus, the Lord.

Another undeniable evidence for the inclusive practice of the Jesus' community is Paul, the apostle to nations. In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul uses the term *ektrōma* ("abnormally born") for himself which refers to "a birth that violates the normal period of gestation…(and) in any case the point related to some deficiency in the infant."[52] In the Septuagint, it refers to "'ugliness' or 'monstrous' nature of such a 'birth'" (Job 3:16; Ecclesiastes 6:3; Numbers 12:12).[53] Philo appears to use the term in contrast to a perfect being capable to live in *Legum Allegoriae*, 1:76: "For the soul of the worthless man is not calculated by nature to bring any thing to *perfection which is likely to live*. But every thing which it appears to bring forth is found to be *abortive and immature*."[54] It is generally argued that, probably, this term was at first used by his opponents against him to hurl insult upon him[55] which Paul turns to his advantage at this point. In 2 Corinthians 10:10, Paul refers to the words of his opponents, saying: "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.'" Even in later 2nd-3rd century apocryphal writing, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Paul is portrayed as "a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel" (*Acts of Paul* 2:3).[56] Perhaps, this physical deformity of Paul or his unimpressive physical appearance was used as a point to discredit

him of his apostolic status, which he very forcefully turns around with certain emphasis, saying "He appeared *to me also*" (1Corinthains 15:8). As seen earlier, in Jewish culture where the physically deformed or disabled are restricted from serving the deity, Paul contends that God shows no partiality but has revealed Himself to Paul as He has done in the past to the apostle in Jerusalem.

Interestingly, it is not a coincidence that in the Lucan account both the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity and the greatest apostle to the non-Jews, Paul, are (dis)abled individuals who were brought into the community of the (dis)abled at the divine initiatives-eunuch by the Holy Spirit and Paul by the Christophany on the way to Damascus. Their disabilities were immaterial to fully participate in the life of the church. What is the relevance of these insights from biblical accounts to the life and ministry of the church in India? How do they correct, transform, and challenge the church to be truly inclusive?

**4. Church in India as a 'Community of the (Dis)abled'**

The context of the church in India to fulfill her responsibility towards the disabled is very complex as various socio-economic, religious factors together contribute to the plight of the disabled in India. According to the Census of India 2011data on disability released by the government of India, over 26 million people (actual figure is 26,810,557) suffer from some form of disability, i.e., 2.21% of the total population.[57] Sadly, the disabled people in India are, generally, either neglected by the society or they, especially, women and girls, remain vulnerable to physical abuses. It is not unusual to witness disabled people callously mimicked for cheap humor and mass entertainment quite insensitively in casual talks, private parties, and television programs by the able bodies. According to a "survey in Orissa, India, [it is] found that virtually all of the women and girls with disabilities were beaten at home, 25 per cent of women with intellectual disabilities had been raped and 6 per cent of women with disabilities had been forcibly sterilized. Research indicates that violence against children with disabilities occurs at annual rates at least 1.7 times greater than for their peers without disabilities."[58] Apart from it, recent studies prove that the issue of poverty is closely linked with disability. It says that "Poor people are more at risk of acquiring a disability because of lack of access to good nutrition, health care, sanitation, as well as safe living and working conditions. Once this occurs, people face barriers to the education, employment, and public services that can help them escape poverty."[59]

Another major factor responsible for large scale apathy toward the disabled and the negligence towards their suffering is the influence of religion, like Hinduism, upon social attitude towards disability. In India, like other world religions, Hinduism as a religion of the majority has influenced the social attitude towards disability and has led to a discriminatory, oppressive, and insensitive social construction of it. The condition of the disabled has been explained in Hinduism through the theory of *Karma* and supernatural influences. In Hinduism, firstly, it is believed that every soul transmigrates and the wellbeing or the suffering of it in the present life is determined by the *karma* of the previous birth(s). So,"[i]f a person is born deformed or unhealthy, it must be-so people say-because of sins committed in his former life."[60] This legitimizes their suffering as self-inflicted and destined to suffer as one's fate which cannot/should not be reversed or rectified by human intervention. It stigmatizes a disabled person and, thereby, further victimizes them. Secondly, within Hinduism disability (including diseases) is the "manifestation of the will of a supernatural power(s)" (demons) that surround a person.[61] Disabilities such as mental, physical, and resulting out of varied diseases are thought to be the consequences of these supernatural beings possessing human bodies. As a protective measure, these supernatural powers are resisted by magical spells and tying of amulets on their arms or wearing of them around their neck.[62] Such superstitious beliefs have subjected vulnerable group(s) of disabled people to torturous religious practices, at times, like performing rites (puja) of magic spells which aggravate their psychological trauma, physical pain, and social isolation. People with certain forms of disabilities are considered inauspicious. Hence, many a times, they are isolated from certain religious services and other auspicious occasions.

It is in this context that the church in India must fulfill her call to be Jesus' community of the (dis)abled. In contrast to the general cultural practice of isolating disabled from the religious practices, the church must involve the disabled as equals among the able bodied. Their physical or mental difference must be seen in the light of the enfleshment of the Son of God in Jesus, the eschatological kingdom vision of Jesus, and the externalization of varied abilities in the fleshly existence of the resurrected Jesus in the presence of God, the Father. Hence, the church must give equal opportunities to the disabled in every spiritual activity, including leadership, based on what they are

able to perform. They should not to be rejected in view of their physical limitations. Moreover, unlike Hindu practice of casting out demons to heal the disabled by subjecting them to physical torture, the ministry of healing must be practised within the church, as in the post-resurrection Jesus' community, as an evidence of the continuity of God's rule in and through the present church here and now. It ought not to resort to any form of violence against the disabled. In cases where the disabled are not healed, in no way it must lead to the condemnation of the disabled individuals as sinners or lacking in faith. Instead, the church must be open to the course of medical intervention in addition to reposing faith in God's healing touch. They must be accepted within the church just as they are, even if healing does not happen. In other words, the present church needs to model herself in the light of the eschatological community where there is no distinction made between the able or disable but the community will be called a Jesus' community of the (dis)abled.

As a part of her mission, the church must actively involve in restating the causes of disability affirming the dignity of the disabled from Jesus' perspective. While the oppressive 'Normate Hermeneutics' of the church must be rejected intentionally by the church in interpreting the Bible for the people, she must also seek to overthrow the concept of *karma* uncritically accepted by many Christians equating it with biblical idea of sin as a cause of disability. Unlike in Hindu understanding of disability as the result of spiritual forces, the church must declare the acceptance of them and share with them in their disability as God voluntarily identified in the human frailty through incarnation to usher salvation to humankind. The church must participate in their shame, pain, and damnation by working for their upliftment. In a context of insensitivity towards their human dignity, pain, and helplessness, the church must not only become a space of their emancipation but she must also undertake disability awareness programs to eliminate oppressive social constructs about disability. The church must accept and preach disability as the reality of every human life not limited to visibly disabled individuals. The theological articulations to the content of every church sermon must invariably focus on temporal human ability, the 'flesh,' and must shun from privileging the able bodies over disable bodies. The God-talk of the church must be done within the categories of (dis)ability, i.e., the (Dis)ability Theology.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of disability must be central to Christian theological discourse. It must be consciously undertaken in non-essentialist terms, without privileging any one body over the other. The "Normate Hermeneutical" approach of the Church must be replaced with (Dis)ability approach which constantly deconstructs every essentialist and exclusive claim. To this direction, the ambiguous biblical perception of the Bible needs to be taken as a source of theological articulation. In this sense, the very identity of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament, his mission from the eschatological perspective, and the portrait of the Jesus' community as the community of the (dis)abled must play a vital role in forming the Church's attitude towards the disabled people. The church must become a locale of emancipation of the disabled and their self-affirmation in the fleshly resurrected Jesus. Both the disable bodies and the able bodies must together define the Church as the Community of the (dis)abled. Thus, the Church in India must fulfill her mission carefully towards the abled and the disabled through (dis)ability sensitive God-talk, run disability awareness programs eliminating oppressive socio-cultural constructs both within and outside the Church, and seek to affirm the dignity of all equally.

### Endnotes

- This article is published with permission. It was published earlier as "'(Dis) abled Jesus': Reading Jesus, His Mission, and the Jesus' Community from a (Dis)ability Perspective," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 4/2 (2014): 101-125.

[1] The expression "Jesus' community" is not used here in technical sense, referring only to the community of people with Jesus, but for a wider sense including the early community of Christians who rallied together sticking around the person of Jesus Christ.

[2] Rebecca Raphael, "The Bible and Disability Studies: An Editorial Introduction," *Perspective in Religious Studies* 34/1 (2007): 3; Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, introduction to *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, Semeia Studies, No. 55 (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 3; Hector Avalos, "Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism as Emerging Approaches in Disability Studies," *Perspective in Religious Studies* 34/1 (2007): 91.

[3] Avalos, "Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism," 91.

[4] Avalos, "Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism," 91-92.

[5] Avalos, "Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism," 92. See also 92-100 for a critical evaluation of the trends.

[6] Cheryl Strimple, "Disability Studies as Liberation Projects: Implications for the Classrooms," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 64/2-3 (2013): 2.

[7] Nance L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20. Elsewhere, she defines "Access" or "accessibility" "as both a rhetorical and a technical term" which means "the availability of the same choices accorded to able-bodied people. It also means opening the meaning of 'normal' to the ordinary lives of people with disabilities. Accessibility as used here refers to social-symbolic, physical, and legal inclusion in the common life" (28).

[8] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 87.

[9] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 22.

[10] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 87.

[11] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 91, (Emphasis added).

[12] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 93.

[13] Sharon V. Betcher, "Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse," *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion* 26/2 (2010): 111.

[14] Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, 92. According to Wynn, "The 'normate hermeneutic' is the means by which scripture is interpreted so that it complies with and reinforces the socially constructed norms. This hermeneutic imposes a society's interpretation of disability on the text without due consideration to the text itself."

[15] Strimple, "Disability Studies as Liberation Projects," 2.

[16] Darla Y. Schumm, "Reimagining Disability," *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion* 26/2 (2010): 134.

[17] cf. Mary Jo Iozzio, "Thinking About Disabilities with Justice, Liberation, and Mercy," Horizon 36/1 (2009): 37-38.

[18] Iozzio, "Thinking About Disabilities with Justice," 35.

[19] Neal H. Walls, "The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, 15-16.

[20] Walls, "The Origins of the Disabled Body," 16-29.

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[22] Patricia Bruce, "Constructions of Disability (Ancient and Modern): The Impacts of Religious Beliefs on the Experience of Disability," *Neotestamentica* 44/2 (2010): 265.

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[26] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 74. Cf. Elaine Ledgerwood, "Saints Not Sinners: An Investigation into 'Positive' Constructions of Disability in the Historical Church," *Colloquium* 42/1 (2010): 85-98.

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[29] Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper, introduction to The *Abled Bodies*, 1.

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[32] Amos Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Senses: Pentecost, the Body Politic, and Redemption of the Dis/Ability," *Pneuma* 31 (2009): 167-188.

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# "Your sins are forgiven"– Reading Mark 2:1-12 from a Disability Perspective

Tabita Kartika Christiani

**Introduction**

Reading the Bible from a disability perspective has been developed in the past two decades worldwide. For example, hermeneutic of disability and theology of disability becomes a cluster in the American Academy of Religion (AAR), an annual meeting of theologians coming from all over the world. In Asia, it has become a perspective or method in biblical studies, as shown in the Society of Asian Biblical Studies (SABS), an every other year meeting of those who are interested in biblical studies.

As a person with not-so-apparent disability, namely, scoliosis, I have been interested in reading the Bible from a disability perspective. I have published two articles, one on John 9 written in Indonesian language (2014), and the other one on Revelation 5 written in English and published in *In God's Image: Journal of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, Vol. 36 no. 1, June 2017, p. 31-36, entitled "Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb: A Disability Hermeneutics of Revelation 5."

In this article I would like to read Mark 2:1-12 from a disability perspective. I start with describing the moral approach to disability, then proceed to my own experience on the moral approach to disability in a Javanese context of *Slametan*. Based on this experience and analysis, I read Mark 2:1-12 in dialogue with my experience on the moral approach. By so doing I hope this article becomes a contribution to the effort of reading the Bible from an Asian disability perspective.

**Moral Approach to Disability**

A psychologist, Rhoda Olkin[1] looks disability from moral, medical, and social models. The moral model understands disability as "a defect caused by moral lapse or sins, failure of faith, evil, and test of faith." The medical model sees disability as "a defect in or failure of a bodily system that is inherently abnormal and pathological." Whereas the social model explains disability as "a social construct; problems reside in the environment that fails to accommodate people with disabilities." These three models show paradigm shift from individual (the moral and medical models) to social.

This table compares these three models[2] :

| Measure | Moral | Medical | Social |
|---|---|---|---|
| Meaning of disability | Disability is a defect caused by moral lapse or sins, failure of faith, evil, test of faith. | A defect in or failure of a bodily system that is inherently abnormal and pathological. | Disability is a social construct. Problems reside in the environment that fails to accommodate people with disabilities. |
| Moral implication | The disability brings shame to the person with the disability and his or her family | A medical abnormality due to genetics, bad health and habits, person's behavior. | Society has failed a segment of its citizens and oppresses them |
| Sample ideas | "God gives us only what we can bear" or "There's a reason I was chosen to have this disability." | Clinical descriptions of "patients" in medical terminology. Isolation of body parts | "Nothing about us without us" or "Civil rights, not charity." |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Origins | Oldest model and still most prevalent worldwide | Mid-19th century. Most common model in the United States. Entrenched in most rehabilitation clinics and journals. | In 1975 with the demonstrations by people with disabilities in support of the yet-unsigned Rehabilitation Act. |
| Goals of intervention | Spiritual or divine, acceptance. | "Cure" or amelioration of the disability to the greatest extent possible. | Political, economic, social, and policy systems, increased access and inclusion |
| Benefits of model | An acceptance of being selected, a special relationship with God, a sense of greater purpose to the disability. | A lessened sense of shame and stigma. Faith in medical intervention. Spurs medical and technological advances. | Promotes integration of the disability into the self. A sense of community and pride. Depathologizing of disability. |
| Negative effects | Shame, ostracization, need to conceal the disability or person with the disability. | Paternalistic, promotes benevolence and charity. Services for but not by people with disabilities. | Powerlessness in the face of broad social and political changes needed. Challenges to prevailing ideas. |

Even though many people support the social model, Olkin reminds that emphasis on the social model can cause people with disabilities "eschew from medical interventions, socialize only with other people with disabilities, and be active in the disability rights movement." Also

therapists who emphasize the social model may less pay attention to their clients' need on an individual or family level. Regardless of these shortages, the social model is very helpful in looking at the commonalities of the disability experience as a minority group in society, like other minority groups based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. But, unlike other minority groups, people with disabilities are prone to be separated from people without disabilities in using public facilities such as entrance, bus, bathroom etc. Also people with disabilities often have barriers to fully functioning in the society due to pain, fatigue, and muscle weakness they endure.

Unfortunately, in many Asian societies, the moral approach is still strong. Whenever a baby born as a person with disabilities, other people start to ask: what's wrong with the parents… what sins they have done… their faith is weak… it is the work of the evil spirit… it is a test of their faith…. Because the moral approach is judgmental, disability brings shame to the whole family. Therefore, they hide their children who are persons with disabilities, for the rest of their lives. Other people may know about those hidden children, but they keep silent and think that it is a private domain of the family that others cannot intervene.

On the one hand, the moral approach can bring a spiritual acceptance. Some biblical verses may be meaningful for persons with disabilities to make peace with themselves. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NRSV) "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." Jeremiah 29:11(NRSV) " For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." 1 Peter 5:7 (NRSV) "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." These verses are sometimes taken out of its context of the whole passage, yet they become meaningful and powerful for those who prefer the moral approach.

On the other hand, however, the moral approach can also bring shame, less self-confidence, and less opportunity for them to participate in the life of family, church, and society. The problems are rooted both from the persons with disabilities themselves, as well as from surrounded communities and societies. The way families, communities,

and societies treat persons with disabilities influences the development of personalities of persons with disabilities.

**Disability and *Slametan* in Javanese Culture**

As stated above, the moral approach to disability still exists in Asia. I experience this more than 40 years ago, when my scoliosis was known for the first time. My nanny, who was a Javanese (a tribe in Indonesia), as soon as my scoliosis was known, gathered some people to pray in the Javanese tradition, namely, *slametan*, to ask God bring *slamet* (mercy, salvation) from any bad spirit. This is different from my parents' reaction. They used the medical approach, and brought me to an orthopedist for treatment.

Clifford Geertz explains *slametan* as follows:

> *The slametan* is the Javanese version of what is perhaps the world's most common religious ritual, the communal feast, and, as almost everywhere, it symbolizes the mystic and social unity of those participating in it. Friends, neighbors, fellow workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near-forgotten gods all get bound, by virtue of their commensality, into a defined social group pledged to mutual support and cooperation.[3]

In *slametan* there are only men participating in the ritual. Women are in the kitchen. Actually there is no gender equality here. Those men are sitting on a traditional mat, circling around a *tumpeng* (rice in a form of a mountain, with other foods surrounded). A religious leader leads a prayer in accordance with the purpose of the slametan; all say "amen." After prayer, the leader starts eating, followed by all. They eat only a little and then take home the rest of the food.

The goal of *slametan* is to accomplish a condition of slamet, where everything is going on well according to its own way, and there is no calamity or misfortune.[4] Through *slametan* it is hoped that everything is back to its own order. Therefore, *slametan* is done in times of crisis, both in the life cycle and in special occasions. In *slametan* everyone would be sitting together uniformly, without any social ranks. Also everyone would contribute to the *slametan* ritual, as a token that he is part of the community. *Slametan* is a sign of harmony, a prerequisite for receiving blessings from God, spirits, and ancestors. *Slametan* is

a plea for protection from any danger in the world that is sometimes chaos. The goal is not to pursue a better life, rather, to maintain the right order and to avoid any danger.

*Slametan* is done in the whole life cycle, from womb to tomb: seven month pregnancy; giving birth; when the child is about to walk; circumcision; marriage; death (several time line after death: 7th day; 40th day; 100 day; 1000 day). *Slametan* is also done in certain times in the whole year. And *slametan* is done in special occasion and purpose, namely, house moving, bad dreams, harvest, name-changing, opening a factory, illness, supplication of the village guardian spirit, and starting off a political meeting.[5]

From this list, what my nanny did when my scoliosis was known was *slametan* related to illness. She thought scoliosis was a disease that could be cured. Even though she knew that my parents preferred to choose medical approach, for her it was important to ask *slamet* for me, for my life, and the medical treatment that I was about to go through. Actually in *slametan* there is no judgment that relates disability and sin, because for the original Javanese there is no concept of sin. Problems happen because there is no harmony with the universe. *Slametan* is done to restore harmony that brings *slamet*. Therefore, it is difficult to decide whether *slametan* is part of the moral approach, because it does not meet the criteria of moral approach: disability is a defect caused by moral lapse or sins, failure of faith, evil, test of faith. There is no such criteria in the concept of *slametan*, whose goal is to restore harmony.

**Reading Mark 2:1-12 from a Disability Perspective**

Based on my experience, now I would like to read Mark 2:1-12. This passage is parallel with Matthew 9:1-8 and Luke 5:17-26. However, Mark 2:1-12 is more vivid and detail. I read this passage from a disability perspective. Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper write that disability is not a new method of biblical scholarship. They contend, "Since disability is a subject within biblical scholarship rather than a new type of biblical scholarship, there is no single method for studying disability in the Bible."[6] One could use some criticisms, e.g. source criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, postcolonial criticism, etc. in reading the Bible from a disability perspective. They give examples:

Source criticism may help us to understand more clearly what

> disability represents in different biblical texts rather than treating disability as if it operates in a singular and consistent fashion across the entire Bible. Form and rhetorical criticisms may help us analyze how disability imagery contributes to the message(s) of a particular prophetic text. A postcolonial approach to disability could examine the ways in which characters with disabilities are imagined as "other" in biblical texts as well as how biblical scholarship allows the nondisabled to masquerade as "normal."[7]

Junior and Schipper mention there are three models in disability studies, namely medical, social, and cultural models. "The cultural model does not provide one precise definition of disability. Instead, it examines how notions about disability and nondisability (or "ablebodiedness") operate within a given culture."[8] Along with the cultural model of disability, which is developed in humanities, Junior and Schipper show how biblical texts reflect cultural notions of disability – as well as nondisability. They write, "Even in texts that do not deal with disability explicitly, the critical study of disability may help us to understand better the cultural expectations for human normalcy reflected in biblical literature."[9] Therefore, even though disability is not recognized as a biblical criticism, disability perspective brings a new nuance for reading the biblical passages. It reminds the Bible readers for not using normalcy as the standard of human beings.

An Asian theologian, Kwok Pui-Lan, describes there are three approaches used by Asian scholars in reading the Bible from Asian perspectives. They are: cross-textual hermeneutics, looking the Bible through the perspective of other religious traditions, and discerning biblical and theological insights in people's stories, myths, and legends.[10] From these three approaches, I will use the second approach with modification: looking the Bible through the perspective of disability. In other words, disability becomes lenses through which I read Mark 2:1-12. Later, I will dialogue my biblical reading from disability lenses with my Asian cultural experience of *slametan*. Here I will dialogue cultural notions of disability reflected in the biblical passage with that of Asian experience. I quote Mark 2:1-12 from New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as follows:

> 2 When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that

there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. [3]Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. [4]And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. [5]When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." [6]Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, [7]"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" [8]At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? [9]Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? [10]But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" he said to the paralytic[11] "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."[12] And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Verses 1-2 describe the setting of the event. Following chapter 1, after healing Simon's mother-in-law and many who gathered at Simon's door, a journey to neighboring towns to preach in the synagogues, perform exorcisms, and to provide healing to a leper, Jesus returns to Capernaum. It is said that he is at home – either Jesus is back to Simon's house or it is another house. Again many people gathered in the house where Jesus was teaching. The house was packed, there was no more room, even at the front door. Many people came to listen to Jesus' teaching.

The story begins in verse 3 and continues until verse 5. Some people came, bringing a paralyzed man, carried by four people. It was not clear whether they were relatives or friends of the paralyzed man. Paralyzed can mean paraplegia, quadriplegia, and hemiplegia. Paraplegia is paralysis from the waist down. Quadriplegia is paralysis of the legs, arms, and truck. Both are caused by disease of injury to the spinal cord. Hemiplegia is total or partial paralysis of the right side or left side of the body, caused by injury to the motor centers of the brain,

like what happens in strokes. It is not clear what kind of paralysis is experienced by that person. The fact that he was laying down on his mat showed that the paralysis was severe.

The people who were bringing him to Jesus hoped that Jesus could cure him. Therefore, when they found that the house where Jesus was teaching was full of people, they tried to find an alternative way. They removed the roof above Jesus, dug through it, and let down the mat on which the paralytic laid (verse 4). Jewish houses in Jesus' time had flat roof made of mud and was easily removed and repaired. To reach the roof, there was a permanent ladder outside the house. This effort meet the meaning of social approach to disability, which understands that problems reside in the environment that fails to accommodate people with disabilities. Therefore, they creatively work for providing access and facilities for the person with disability (the paralyzed man). What they did show how they cared about him, and at the same time how they believed that Jesus could help him.

Therefore, on verse 5 it is said: When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus saw the faith of the people who brought the paralyzed man, not the faith of the paralyzed man himself. There is no prerequisite of faith for someone to be healed. Jesus called the paralyzed man "son" or child (*teknon* in Greek). Kathleen Mills explains "son" is a kinship term.[12] Jesus' authority to heal and to establish a new household is granted to him by means of his kinship identity as God's Son.[13]

The question here is why Jesus stated about forgiveness of sins, instead of healing his paralysis. If Jesus healed him right away, without stating about forgiveness of sins, the story would have become clear and there would not be any debate with the scribes. Because of the statement, the debate between the scribes and Jesus started. Using the socio-rhetorical method of hermeneutics, Ben Witherington III calls the five pericopes in Mark 2:1-3:6 as "Jesus Meets His Critics in Galilee."[14] The debates included five issues: forgiveness of sins, fellowshipping with the unclean and immoral, fasting, healing, and working on the Sabbath.

Verses 6-10 are about controversy of the forgiveness of sin. Many scholars believe that the controversy over the forgiveness of sins is a later insertion to the older healing story. "It is tempting to dismiss the forgiveness of sins controversy with the scribes and deal only

with the healing part of the narrative."[15] The meaning of the healing story becomes more powerful because of the controversy. It raises questions on the relationships between sin and disability. Actually Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." He did not say, "I forgive your sins." Therefore, there is no blasphemy done by Jesus. His sentence can mean, "Your sins are forgiven by God." But the scribes recognized it as blasphemy.

Then Jesus asked which is easier to say: 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up and take your mat and walk.' The question is actually not only which is easier to say, but also which is easier to do.[16] It seems easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' because there is no physical evidence of forgiveness of sins – compared with healing that is shown by the ability of the paralyzed man to stand and walk. But, which is easier to do? Such miracles of healing had been done by many prophets in the Old Testament, whereas forgiveness of sins can be done only by God.

How is the relationship between sin and disability? Is there any cause-and-effect relationship between the two? Black[17] contends that "Jesus does not speak of sin and sickness in a cause-and-effect way, for he only compares forgiveness and healing rather than equating them." Hector Avalos and others[18] contend that Jesus does not see the relationship between sin and disability as one of causes and effects. Jesus deconstructs this cause-and-effect belief and instead replaces it with a new kind of relationship between forgiveness and healing under the direct authority of God represented by the Son of Man. If there is a cause-and-effect relationship between sin and disability, the forgiveness automatically results in healing. It did not happen with the paralyzed man.

Black contends that "the causal relationship between sin and sickness is that the physical symptoms of illness or disability are sometimes caused by sins that have been committed *against* a person, or possibly by sins a person has committed against himself or herself, as in the case of disability resulting from driving drunk or drugged. It is rare that the physical symptoms of disability are the result of sins committed by the person against another."[19] Here Black emphasizes the difference between sin done by the person with disability and sin done against the person with disability. Yes there is a relationship between sin and disability in terms that disability is a result or effect of the sin done by another against the person with disability. In other

words, the person with disability is a victim, or a survivor, of the sin done by another. In another case, disability is a result or effect of the sin or fault done by the person with disability against himself/herself.

If there is no cause-and-effect relationship between sin and disability, how is actually the relationship between forgiveness and healing? "Jesus' forgiveness is an act of compassion that is given in light of faith and results in a holistic restoration of the individual."[20] "Healing and forgiveness belong together".[21]

The Greek word *sozein* was used in association with both the healing of the physical body and the healing of the soul – the forgiveness of sins.[22] Therefore, associations of sin/sickness and forgiveness/healing were natural at that time. "Salvation was both physically and spiritually oriented, and Jesus' ministry involved both.[23]

Verses 11-12 describes how Jesus cured the paralyzed man only by words. The fact that the crowd, who were amazed by the curing, glorified God, showed that Jesus did not do any blasphemy. It was God who forgave sins and cured the paralyzed man. The discussion here is about what Jesus did: was it curing or healing? Healing is different from curing. Curing means the removal of sickness and disease. It implies only on the person with sickness/disability. It is like the medical approach to disability, which is very personal. Whereas healing is broader than curing. Healing includes relationships between the person with disability and the whole community/society. Healing can mean renewal of relationship and reconciliation between both. Healing is more needed, since "physical disabilities alienated people from their families, from their social and religious communities, and from their rituals."[24] In other words, "Jesus' healing ministry was an attempt to break down the walls of alienation that divided the community from its members on the margins."[25] Healing changes social values, negative attitudes of the society towards persons with disabilities, as well as systemic structures that perpetuate oppressions, stigmatization, isolation, and alienation of the persons with disabilities. Healing, therefore, is liberating.

**The Moral Approach Revisited**

Finally, I would like to dialogue between my experiences of *slametan* with Mark 2:1-12. As mentioned above, in *slametan* there is no judgment that relates disability and sin, because for the original Javanese there is no concept of sin. Problems happen because there is no harmony

with the universe. *Slametan* is done to restore harmony that brings *slamet*. Therefore, there is no moral approach in *slametan*. How about Mark 2:1-12? Is Jesus using the moral approach? From the disability perspective of reading Mark 2:1-12, it is clear that Jesus does not use the moral approach in its basic meaning, that disability is a defect caused by moral lapse or sins, failure of faith, evil, test of faith. There is no cause-and-effect between sin and disability. Jesus' healing act is to restore relationships among people, with and without disabilities.

What Jesus used was closer to the solidarity approach to disability. A theologian, Gerald McKenny,[26] supports the social model, but he argues that it has to be complemented by the medical model, and then the two models are qualified by the third model, namely, the solidarity model. By solidarity model he means joining "people with disabilities and people without disabilities and breaks down the "us-them" and "normal-abnormal" distinctions."[27] Solidarity takes the concrete form of hospitality or friendship, which, unlike the social model, does not require autonomy and independence. Thus, the solidarity model is more acceptable for mentally and cognitively challenged persons as well as those who have severe disabilities that prevent them from autonomy and independence. The solidarity model does not neglect disability itself, unlike those who say that everyone has disability in some way and so disability can refer to all people. Rather, by appreciating disability, the solidarity model can offer genuine hospitality and friendship.

By analyzing *slametan* and Mark 2:1-12, it is clear that both do not use moral approach to disability. Rather, they are closer to solidarity approach. This finding raises a question: from where the moral approach comes? If the Javanese culture, as part of Asian cultures, does not support the moral approach, why do many people use this approach? In the same way, if Mark 2:1-12 does not support the moral approach, why do many Christians use this approach? Does it come out of people's own idea? Or out of people's judgmental attitude? Or the influence of the Old Testament mindset? Or Western understanding of disability during medieval period, which influenced the missionaries who came to Asia?

In the Old Testament, especially Leviticus 21:16-20 (NRSV), says:

> 16 *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:* 17 *Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God.*

> [18] *For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long,*[19] *or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand,* [20]*or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles*.

This passage could be used as a foundation of the attitude towards persons with disabilities. Since they are considered as unclean, they are prohibited to draw near to the offerings table. From this understanding comes the notions that disability is related to uncleanness and sin. What Jesus did to persons with disabilities showed that he deconstructed this Old Testament understanding of persons with disabilities. Jesus liberated them. However, he did not always succeed. Many people still keep the negative considerations toward persons with disabilities – from Jesus' time up till now. As a result, the moral approach to disability is still used.

Ancient European understanding of disability was negative as well. Persons with disabilities were called *monstra*, which was understood "to be either signs of the gods or malformations of demons."[28] In Rome or Athens, the center of civilization, the *monstra* were cast out to inhabit the world's outer edges. In the Christian view, there was debates about whether *monstra* had souls, which made them fully human, and could be converted. In the early modern period, the *monstra* were transformed into the "noble savage" or "natural slave," who was not quite beast, but not fully human either.[29] When the European travelers went to Africa and Asia, they brought the mixed understanding of persons with disabilities: updating modern scientific disciplines of disability, as well as the emerging of freak shows (circuses, fairs, carnivals, and amusement parks), performing persons with disabilities. This influenced Asians to use the moral approach to disability.

In ancient Javanese culture, there was appreciation to persons with disabilities. There was a traditional troops called *Polowijan*, consisted of persons with disabilities. They were recognized as blessed and wise people, to whom the Javanese king asked advices. In military parades they always walked in front. But, this was changed since the colonial time. Persons with disabilities were then recognized as useless people in economic and production cycles.[30]

The encounter of European and Javanese cultures resulted in the changing of attitude toward persons with disabilities, from

appreciation to abandonment. Now-a-days there are efforts to bring back the tradition of appreciating persons with disabilities – not in the form of *Polowijan* troops but in daily life in society. Christians can participate in this movement, based on the dialogue of biblical and cultural understandings of disability.

## Conclusion

*Slametan* that is done related to the finding of disability is not a sign of the using of moral approach to disability, because *slametan* itself is an effort to restore harmony in the whole universe. The reading of Mark 2:1-12 from disability perspective shows that Jesus does not use the moral approach to disability, because there is no cause-and-effect relationship between sin and disability. Both *slametan* and Mark 2:1-12 are closer to the solidarity approach. However, because of the influence of other sources, there are still tendencies of using of the moral approach to disability. Therefore, there is a need to promote the solidarity approach, and at the same time reduce the use of moral approach.

### Endnotes

1 Rhoda Olkin, "Could You Hold the Door for Me? Including Disability in Diversity." in *Educational Publishing Foundation: Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Vol. 8, No. 2, 2002, 132–134.

2 *Ibid*., 133.

3 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1976), 11.

4 Niels Mulder, *Pribadi dan Masyarakat di Jawa (Personality and Society in Java)* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1985), 28.

5 Clifford Geertz, 11.

6 Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, "Disability Studies and the Bible." In McKenzie, Steven L. and John Kaltner (Eds.). *New Meanings for Ancient Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 25.

7 *Ibid*., 26.

8 *Ibid*., 23.

9 *Ibid*., 33.

10 Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 62.

11 Kathy Black, A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 105.

[12] Kathleen Elizabeth Mills, *The Kinship of Jesus: Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 108.

[13] *Ibid*., 109.

[14] Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 113.

[15] Kathy Black, 111.

[16] Ben Witherington III, 111

[17] Kathy Black, 110

[18] Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, Eds., *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 86.

[19] Kathy Black, 112.

[20] Hector, et.al., 86.

[21] Ben Witherington III, 118

[22] Kathy Black, 113.

[23] *Ibid*., 113.

[24] *Ibid*., 113.

[25] *Ibid*., 121.

[26] Gerald McKenny, "Disability and the Christian Ethics of Solidarity." *Fu Jen International Religious Studies* Vol.6.1 (N. Summer 2012), 5

[27] *Ibid*., 9.

[28] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 82.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] Book Review: Herman Sinung Janutama, Polowijan - *Disabilitas dalam budaya masyarakat eksotik (Polowijan – Disability in the Culture of Exotic Society)*, https://www.solider.id/polowijan-membedah-diskursus-difabel-dari-kacamata-budaya-jawa, accessed on December 20, 2018.

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# Part III

# Disability, Theology and *Diakonia*

# Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization

Wati Longchar

## Introduction

Millions of people are pushed to the margins due to injustice. Ableism,[1] ageism, patriarchy, racism, clanism, tribalism, casteism, classism and materialism are unjust institutions and structures that perpetuate, disenfranchise and dehumanize person with disability,[2] indigenous people, women, Dalits as they do not fit into the normative scheme of dominant powers. They are looked down upon as inferior, incapable, self-imposed, and that they are poor because they are sinners, lazy, not smart and lack intellectual capacity. Persons with disabilities suffer most in the church and society due to ableism.

Theological reflection from the perspective of persons with disabilities is almost silent in all our theological discourses. Persons with disabilities whose voices were never heard in the church, and whose experiences were never considered in doing theology, are raising new theological questions: Are we not created in the `Image of God'? Is our disability a curse from God? Is our physical impairment the result of our parent's sin? Or, is our disability due to our personal sin? Are we sinners? Why are we excluded from the church which is for all? Why are we not given responsible position in the society? Why do people look upon us as inferior? How can/do we contribute our gifts to the life of the church and society when we are not given any space? All these questions and many more are crucial to Christian theology. Our church will remain incomplete without addressing those issues and concerns; our society is incomplete without recognition of the gifts of

persons with disabilities. It demands a new way of reading the Bible, doing theology and ministerial practice.

**Persons with Disabilities in Society**

It is said that about 10% of the human population has some deformity or other, yet they seldom receive any attention. In many societies, persons with disabilities are treated as second-class people, objects-of-charity or even abandoned. They are subjected to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts by the able-bodied majority and they do not exercise and enjoy the same basic rights as their non-disabled counterparts. In the context of economic competition, the persons with disabilities experience more discrimination in employment opportunity because employers in both public and private sectors regard them as weak, helpless and incompetent to perform. The persons with disabilities are usually the first to be discharged and the last to be hired in any form of employment.

There is also a close linkage between poverty and disability - disability causes poverty and poverty causes disability. Persons with disabilities constitute a disproportionate number of the poor in the developing countries. 97% of children with disabilities who live in the developing world do not have any form of rehabilitation and 98% do not receive any education, and majority of them come from the rural places.

In many families, persons with disabilities are not given due respect. Even if the person is the eldest in the family, if he/she has disability, he/she will not be allowed to involve in the decision making processes of the family. This is linked to the belief that people with disabilities are inadvertently mentally disabled and therefore unable to make right decisions. Such attitudes create division in the family and it is an outright violation of a basic human right of the persons with disabilities. It undermines the persons' intelligence as well. Some of the common and obvious cultural discriminations experienced by persons with disabilities in society include:

a) **Inheritance** - Disabled persons cannot inherit properties of their parents. A disabled person would not be considered when a family gives a share of land to the children especially the male members. In other words, the disabled person is not entitled to any immovable property rights.

b) **Stigmatization** - Disability connected to superstitions culminates in stigmatization. They are looked upon as inferior, sinners or impure/imperfect beings.

c) **Infanticide** – In some societies, children with disabilities are being killed on the ground that they are being possessed by the evil spirit and to protect family's prestige/status.

d) **Abandonment** – In some cases, children with disabilities are abandoned simply on the grounds of keeping away `the curse', or stigma.

e) **Confinement** - Often as a means of hiding what is perceived to be a disgraceful aspect in the family, a disabled child is kept in seclusion from those who visit the family.

f) **Illiteracy** - Persons with disabilities are not given equal treatment in accessing the right to education. Able people have a notion that disabled children are not capable of articulating ideas.

g) **Disease** – Due to lack or denial of adequate treatment many people with disabilities are left to die from disease as a means of getting rid of the "handicap" in the family.

h) **Denial** – They are denied political, economic and educational rights. Some churches have even denied ordination of the disabled on the ground that a disabled minister may distract others whom he/she is supposed to serve.

**Cultural Beliefs and Disability**

Among many societies, there is a strong belief that nothing just happens, but that bad things or unfortunate events are caused by evil spirits and good things are the result of the blessings from good spirits. If something happens in one's life e.g. serious suffering, death, accident, disability, even death of an animal or a poor harvest, people always considered this as a consequence of bad action, e.g. killing of animals while one's wife is pregnant, giving false witness on land matters, killing of innocent person, telling lies, violation of religious observance, violation of restricted days, taboos, etc. Some societies see disability as a result of children conceived out of incest or wedlock, or an expectant woman doing certain practices that are taboo (e.g. eating certain fish or eating cat, tiger meat, etc.), having sex outside marriage;

killing animals, and laughing at a person with disability. Others believe that failure to respect and appease ancestors' spirit results in disability. `Blindness', `crippled', `still born', `mental imbalance', `demon possession', etc. are associated with those evil practices. If such a person is given a place in the community, the whole village community is affected. Thus, society does not give any opportunity for disabled people to live a normal life even though they can do many things as normal persons. Even today persons with disabilities are not taken in political matters or are not allowed to be involved in religious matters. In some contexts, they are not even allowed to speak in public.

In many societies, having a disabled child in the family is seen as a bad omen. A child born with disability or accidental disability is often viewed with suspicion, as it is seen as associated with the wrongs committed by parents or grandparents against God, the gods or ancestral spirits. Efforts to trace the wrong doer often leads to blame spouses, usually a man accuses the woman. In some societies, the presence of disability at birth was often considered to be reflective of a broken relationship between the family and God. Often "the child was killed and sent back to God so that the Creator God might send another child without disability. Such children were killed with the full approval of the community and the question of infanticide never arose."[3]

Such understanding and practices still dominates many societies. Unfortunately, culture colludes with wrong interpretation of scripture, the living condition of people with disabilities suffers many forms of discrimination and isolation in society. Let us see how abled people construct of theology that brings exclusion and marginalization to persons with disabilities.

## Marginalization and Theology

### Misconception of God

Theology is God-talk, discourse on God. We construct images of God metaphorically shaped by our culture. Hebrew and Greek thought provided foundations and philosophical resources for construction of Christian theology. We see God hierarchically and dualistically where God is perceived as impassable – beyond change, who is incomprehensible being, omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent and Holy of Holies who dwells above in heaven. Within this framework, able bodied-people formulate patriarchal, success, beauty and perfect-

oriented images of God like the male Ruler, Lord, King, Almighty, Father, Master and Warrior. Though God is merciful, loving, compassionate, a comforter, and liberator who shares in our sufferings, we tend to over-emphasize the triumphalistic images of God. K.C. Abraham says that "all these images are constructs of abled people for the abled people."[4] This consciously or unconsciously promotes the following views of Christian life:

a) Prosperity, good health, healing, success are seen as blessings from God to be celebrated. Physical disabilities, sickness like HIV and cancer, poverty and failure in life are seen as punishment and curse from God.

b) We tend to promote a transcendental, holy nature of God who does not come in contact with the world and accepts only the perfect, unblemished ones. Persons with disabilities are distorted images of God, imperfect, unclean, unholy and sinners who therefore, should not be allowed in the temple service; their presence defiles the holy place. In the name of maintaining holiness and sacredness, we exclude, discriminate and deny opportunities to persons with disabilities, women and persons infected by disease like leprosy (and today HIV). Such discriminatory attitudes and practices are sin.

c) We conceive God as an all-powerful 'super-magician'. Everything is possible, if we have faith in God. God has the power to heal even terminal disease like cancer and raise people from death. Yes, God is all powerful and there is nothing impossible for him. We need to pray for each other for God's mercy and healing. But the danger is that those who are not healed are considered faithless, and branded as sinners. We often think that persons with disabilities are sick; we want to heal them from their disabilities. But did Jesus heal all the sick people during his ministry? Did he raise all the dead during his ministry? No, Jesus did not. It was not the intention of Jesus. Jesus himself suffered pain and died on the cross. Suffering and death is part of God's structure of creation. No human person can escape death and suffering. Even the innocent suffer, e.g. Job. This expectation of God's `super-magic' healing, leads to the belief that our prayers are not answered due to lack of faith. This brings more pain, anxiety

and psychological crisis to people who already experience physical pain and suffering in life. People die, or suffer not because of sin, or punishment from God; it is the will of God. If we narrowly interpret healing-faith in terms of miraculous 'CURE' alone, then we are misreading the biblical teaching. Such one-sided interpretations of God's work will reinforce denial and stigmatization to persons with disabilities.

d) This view of God and reality of life negates the body. The soul is the highest aspect of a human person which finds its true destiny by escaping from this perishable body and world. So, why should we care for the body? Why should we care for people with disabilities or people living with HIV? We do not have to worry for the body as it is temporal and perishable.

Such construct of God contradicts the true message of the Scripture. The Bible affirms that God became flesh; became Immanuel. Jesus is the incarnation of God and gave his life for the downtrodden people. In Jesus, we find fullness of life.

**Misconception of Sin and Disability**

An important biblical insight that has influenced the life and church is the doctrine of sin and creation of humanity. The presence of persons with physical impairment in society created much debate in church especially on the question of perfect God, imperfect creation and the consequence of sin etc. Two positions of the church may be cited here to show the interconnection between marginalization, disability and sin.

**a)** *Disability as Consequence of Sin: A Source of Exclusion* - The concept of sin is differently used in Christian circles. Some theologians speak of `missing the mark' of God's purpose in life; others speak of `dethroning God and enthroning self at the centre of one's life' etc. But the most crucial issue is: how does the Christian understanding of sin affect the lives of persons with disabilities? A dominant view of physical impairment was that it is the consequence of sin. Even today majority of Christians would say that it is the consequence of sin, punishment from God and a curse to the family. This belief is further re-imposed by the doctrine of rebirth[5] (*karma samsara*) in Hinduism and Buddhism, and Primal religious belief in evil spirits.[6] This wrong interpretation of disability linking it to sin has caused much damage

to persons who live as healthy persons with disabilities. It has become a source of exclusion in society. Classical theologians regarded the "Original Sin" as the universal and hereditary sinfulness of humans since the Fall of humans. It is accepted that since all human beings are the descendants of the first couples: Adam and Eve, they all inherited the sin of their parents and then all become sinners. Augustine taught that the Original Sin is transmitted through sexual act. The Original Sin has distorted God's perfect order of creation, the consequence of which is imperfect order of creation. Since imperfect creation is the result of sin, they do not come under the scheme of God's grace. It is a direct consequence of sin and the work of demons: it is a curse and punishment from God. Though the offence the persons with disabilities commit is relatively insignificant and most often they are not even conscious of their so-called misdeeds, many abled people take it for granted that their disability is a manifestation of their own personal or parents' sin in the past or in this present life. To this day such understanding still persists. Unfortunately, the church also had not woken up to the fact that discrimination, prejudice and exclusion meted out to persons with disability that have serious consequence in their lives is not considered as sin, rather sin is defined only in terms of smoking, drinking, or going to movies on Sunday. We do not recognize corruption, manipulation and abuse of power in public life as sin. Belittling and neglecting persons with disability is a more serious sin. There are sufficient proofs that Christian theology of (the Original) sin is the root of the denial and exclusion of persons with disabilities in society and church. It gives justification to escape from institutionalized form of social evil. Physical impairment as the work of demons and the consequence of sin has deprived persons with disabilities in church and public life. This wrong notion of the traditional view of sin has not only neglected people's real life situations, but also affirms the oppressive context that does not give direction for transformation of life. In other worlds, this wrong understanding has contributed to exclusion of persons with disabilities from an active involvement in the spiritual, social and developmental life of the church.

**b)** *Sin and Image of God* - Throughout the centuries, the churches have never acknowledged that persons with disabilities are created in the image of God. Some theologians exclude them by interpreting `the image of God' in terms of `perfection' – perfection which was understood in terms of physical and mental endowment. There is no

beauty in the disabled. Any form of disability makes a person less than human – they are not created in the image of God. Some understood this in terms of `rationality'. Persons who cannot articulate do not represent God's image. Some interpretations even focus on the exercise of power. God created humans to exercise power and have dominion over the rest of creation, a capacity into which God invites humans to participate. Since persons with disabilities are not capable of exercising power, they do not reflect God's image. Others interpreted this in relation to the human capacity for creativity and freedom. Since persons with disabilities cannot exercise creativity and freedom fully, they cannot be counted as full `being'.[7] These are all able-people's interpretations and they do not respect life especially of those who live a healthy life endowed with variety of gifts despite physical impairments. Disagreeing with the dominant Christian interpretations, Gordon Cowans argued that none of the above formulations sufficiently takes into account the experience of disability, particularly the experiences of persons born with impairments. Many persons are born with impairments which inhibit their capacity to engage and interact with their environment in the same way as others.[8]

The dominant interpretations of sin and the image of God justified extermination of people born with physical impairments. Killing, apart from "imperfect beings" like persons with disabilities, of any person is considered as sin, because the human person is precious, created by God in his own image. The Reformers who held deliberate discharge of semen as a crime were negative towards persons with disabilities. *Onan* deserved to die, (Gen. 38:8-10) taught Calvin, for the crime of the unproductive discharge of semen. Deliberate spilling of semen outside of intercourse between a man and a woman was considered a crime worthy of death.[9] But in the case of persons with disabilities, Luther and Calvin held them in contempt and justified their removal from society by death as "an act well-pleasing to God".[10] A person with disabilities represents a distorted image of God and so they are sub-human, hence it is not considered as sin or crime to kill a disabled person.

Discrimination, denial, and exclusion at homes, churches and society is rooted on this understanding of God's structure of creation. It perpetuates people to treat disabled people as inferior not only with respect to their specific physical limitations, but also to their "total

being". They are treated like second-class people, objects-of-charity or even abandoned. Some parents do not give them adequate food, medical treatment and some of them never take them out of their homes. Their presence is considered as a shame, disgrace and burden, but never as a precious gift. Society makes them absolutely dependent by denying privileges and opportunities in all sectors, including the church. This is sin and it contradicts the Kingdom values.

**Misconception of Suffering and Disability**

We often assume that suffering such as unexpected illness, death of a loved one, accident, loss of job etc. are punishment from God, When the tragic disease and death happen to us, we ask why God, why me? When a child is born with physical impairment, we ask why God? We often think that it is the result of some mistake we committed. Job strongly rejected the idea that suffering is God's punishment and that our suffering is caused by our own personal sins. Jesus also refuted the idea. Jesus opposed making people suffer by unjust system and practices. Nancy L. Eiesland criticized the idea of virtuous suffering and that physical impairments were a sign of divine election. Such idea gives a notion that "disability is a temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly rewards."[11] She wrote:

> The biblical support of virtuous suffering has been a subtle, but particularly dangerous theology for persons with disabilities. Used to promote adjustment to unjust social situations and to sanction acceptance of isolation among persons with disabilities, it has encouraged our passivity and resignation and has institutionalized depression as an appropriate response to `divine testing'. Viewing suffering as means of purification and of gaining spiritual merit not only promotes the link between sin and disability but also implies that those who never experience a "cure" continue to harbor sin in their lives. Similar to the practice of emphasizing self-sacrifice to women, the theology of virtuous suffering has encouraged persons with disabilities to acquiesce to social barriers as a sign of obedience to God and to internalize second-class status inside and outside the church.[12]

The idea of virtuous suffering encourages passivity that whatever happens is the will of God and that compromise with an unjust system

is natural. The idea of virtuous suffering blinds our eyes to see injustice and ignore people who try to struggle for change. The experience of suffering should thus lead us to fight for justice and dignity.

**Misinterpretation of Temple service**

The scripture passage like Lev. 21:16-24 is often interpreted to justify exclusion of persons with disabilities from Christian ministry. It reads:

> 16 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 17 Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. 18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, 19 or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, 20 or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. 21 No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. 22 He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. 23 But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them. 24 Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel. (NRSV)

Affirming the holiness doctrine, the Church assumed that "blemish" recorded in Leviticus speaks about exclusion of persons with disabilities and women from temple service. The Jews believed that disability is a sign of sinfulness and women's menstrual period is unclean and unholy. Does this text really suggest disqualification and exclusion of disabled people from the temple service? Walis Ukan,[13] an OT scholar, refuted this misinterpretation. He underlined three arguments: The text is speaking about

(i) *To relieve but not to exclude* - According to the Jewish practice of offering, the priest had to offer two bullocks, one ram, seven male lambs without blemish and a lamb as a burnt offering for God. In addition, some grains, oil and wine had to be offered as offerings (*minchah*) daily. It involves laborious and arduous duty. Every day and night, the priest had to make offering of animals, smoke flesh and incents and the fire of altar is kept by the priest. Indeed, it was a

laborious and arduous work. God's commandment to Moses, "No of your off springs come near to offer the food of his God," (v. 21) needs to be seen in terms of "the laborious and arduous process of ritual".[14] A disabled priest could not undertake this hard duty. This verse does not imply denial or exclusion of the disabled person from serving God. On the contrary, it demands from the abled priest to give physical relief to the disabled priest from the daily laborious duty.[15]

(ii) *To support but not to discriminate* - After commanding disabled priests to be relieved from laborious duty, it says, "the food of his God, from the most holy and the holy, he shall eat." (v. 22).This has a profound social and religious meaning. It also expresses God's abundant richness and grace upon disabled person. This affirms inclusion and support of the disabled person, and the abled people should offer them the resources they need to lead a dignified and good life. The challenge is that we need to create a social, religious and cultural system that support disabled people.[16] Though disabled priests could not perform the duty of offering, they still deserved the portion of the food of God that is the most holy of holy, just as the normal priest enjoyed. They deserved the welfare and rights regardless of their disabilities. They should not be socially or religiously excluded or marginalization just because they are disabled. They are not to be excluded from the family of priest. Instead, they are active member of the family of priest. Hence, to work for a social, political, religious and cultural support system and network is what God demands from us today.

(iii) *To honour but not to marginalize* - "Because I am the Lord who sanctify them" (v 24) gives a new perception of disability. It challenges the traditional stereotyped understanding that disability is manifestation of sin and they are cursed and hated by God. This verse clearly affirms that there is no room of contempt, discredit or marginalization of disabled priest. God says, "I am the Lord who sanctify them." The passage is reaffirmation that persons with disabilities are created in God's own image.[17] Disability should not be the reason to exclude them from ministry. Every disabled person deserves acceptance and entry into the Kingdom of God. In the eyes of God, the disabled priest is also sanctified by God. In God's Kingdom, Walis Ukan concluded that

> The disabled deserves the dignity and respect just as normal people do. God demands us to establish a friendly, just and

> life-affirming society and environment for the disabled. It is our collective responsibility to create a just and inclusive church and society so that broken and anguished hearts will experience love, care and acceptance in God's Kingdom.[18]

**Jesus and Disability**

Jesus brought people with disability, the poor and the ones rejected by society into the centre of God's Kingdom. All human beings are precious, valuable and they must be respected. Jesus challenged discriminatory practices and the callous attitude of abled rich people. Those who were discriminated, excluded, ostracized, rejected on the basis of disease and disability were challenged by Jesus. For instance, Jesus' act of healing of a shriveled man on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-12) was a challenge to Jewish leaders. They did not want the shriveled man to be healed in the Synagogue on the Sabbath because for them the observance of Sabbath was more important than saving a life. They were afraid that this man would enter the Synagogue with the ailment which would defile the holy place. Religious rituals, laws and finding fault were more important than saving a life. But for Jesus, life was more important. Jesus broke the religious rituals. Against their ritualism, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath". Jesus healed that person in spite of all the religious restrictions and the fact that the Pharisees were watching him. In Jesus' view, care and healing is of prime importance than religious practices.[19] Jesus stood for the cause of the sick and disabled. He defended them against the prevailing attitude that suffering and physical impairment is due to sin. Jesus rather reached out and touched them to bring healing to the sick and disabled. He not only healed them of their physical infirmities but also restored them to their rightful place in the society. Because of his compassionate love for the disabled and sick, Jesus did not hesitate to break the Sabbath law (Mk 3:1-6). Jesus' whole motive behind his healing ministry was not to present himself as a kind of healer or super-magician but his aim was to start a movement of hope for the hopeless; a movement from being nobody to being somebody. On encountering Jesus, the sick and disabled experienced the worth and dignity of life. In the Kingdom of God there is nothing such as unclean or sinner that cannot be made clean again.[20]

We can imagine what Jesus would do for persons with disability today in our church and society. Jesus would not take the road of denial,

discrimination, ostracization and isolation.[21] He would be there with them to bring healing, hope and restoration to the community just as he did on many occasions. Jesus would certainly condemn the Pharisaic attitude of the abled people. Therefore, it is not our duty to pass judgment and undermine them, but accept those with disability the way they are and minister to them with compassion, open-hearted acceptance, love and care. We should allow them to grow and contribute their gifts to the church and society. The stigmatization of people with disability calls the Church to ask what it means, in our time, to be the inclusive community that Jesus envisioned and so proclaimed. As a community of disciples of Jesus Christ, the Church should be a sanctuary, a safe place, a refuge, a shelter for the stigmatized and the excluded. The disciples of Jesus are thus called to work for a church of all and for all.

**Celebration of God's Gifts**

The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) has drawn our attention to the fact that without inclusion of the gifts of persons with disabilities, we cannot talk about the unity of the church. There is no unity of the churches without acknowledging the gifts of persons with disability. All people with or without disabilities are created in the image of God and called to an inclusive community in which they are empowered to use their gifts. In fact, the world will be poorer without the contribution of persons with disabilities. Jesus protected, forgave, loved and cared for them. Jesus strongly disputed the connection between sin and blindness, saying "It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). Jesus challenged the Jewish's understanding that God punishes sinners by blinding them or their animals (Ex. 4:11). So there is no room for exclusion of persons with disabilities in the church.

We need to affirm that diversity is an integral part of God's creation. Society - from its most basic unit (the family) to its broader forms (the church and the community) - has to be a place where everyone, regardless of gifts and abilities, is genuinely welcomed, given every opportunity to participate meaningfully and nurtured toward fulfillment. We need to work together more rigorously so that our common vision for the establishment of an inclusive, affirming and empowering global society may be realized. Let us strive to create a society and church where everyone, regardless of gifts and ability, is genuinely included or else our churches will remain disabled communities without the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

**Endnotes**

1 Imposition of social, cultural and religious norms developed by the able people as normative for disabled people.

2 Disability is a condition that hampers, impedes or prevents a person from performing normal activities which include caring for oneself, doing manual tasks, walking, seeing, standing, hearing, speaking, learning and working.

3 Samuel Kabue, "Introduction of EDAN & Disability Discourse in Theological Education" a paper presented at "Disability Studies Resource Material Writer's Workshop" from 24-28 June 2008 at Mombasa, Kenya, p. 4.

4 K.C. Abraham, "Theological Reflections on the Experience of the Disabled," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective, eds*. Wati Longchar & Cordon Cowans (Manila: ATESEA, reprint, 2011), p.169.

5 The doctrine of rebirth teaches the cyclical process of life. The condition of the present life is determined by our past deeds. Disability is a product of past misdeeds and we can do nothing about it.

6 The traditional primal religion strongly advocates that "bad things are caused by the evil spirits and good things are the result of the blessing of benevolent spirits".

7 Gordon Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability; Humanity in Creation, Disability and the Image of God," in *Disabled God Amidst Broken People: Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, ed. by Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans, (Manila: ATESEA, 2007), pp.47-48.

8 *Ibid*., p. 48.

9 Cited by Adrian Thatcher, "The Virus and the Bible-How Living with HIV helps the Church to read it," a paper presented at workshop on "Ethics on HIV & AIDS Prevention," at on 8th January, 2008 at Johannesburg, p. 5.

10 Cited by Adrian Thatcher, p. 6.

11 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 72.

12 *Ibid*. p. 72-73.

13 Walis Ukan, a Bible study on "Misleading Text to Disability" (Lev. 21:16-24 and Mark 9:43-47) at Asia-Pacific Consultation on "A Just And Life-Affirming Church & Society: Person With Disability Perspective" at The Yushan Theological College & Seminary, Hualien, Taiwan, December 11-14, 2016.

14 *Ibid*, p. 3.

15 *Ibid*.

[16] *Ibid*.. p. 4.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 5.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 6

[19] Razouselie Laseto, "Jesus and Disease: A Search for a Place for HIV & AIDS in Jesus' Approach to Human Disease," in *Health and Life: Theological Reflections on HIV & AIDS*, ed. RazouselieLasetso (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2007), p. 37, see also V. J. John, V.J. John, "Biblical Approach to Understanding HIV *& A*IDS: Some Insights from the Life of Jesus in the Gospels" in *Health, Healing and Wholeness*, ed. Wati Longchar (ETE-WCC/CCA, 2005), p. 90.

[20] Razouselie Lasetso., p. 40.

[21] *Ibid*.,p. 44.

# Living in Her Wisdom: Women with Intellectual Disability

Isabella Novsima

## Idiocy[1] and Normalcy

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) in the 11th edition of their manual introduces the term *Intellectual Disability* (ID)[2] to replace the previously used term "mental retardation." In Indonesia, the terms "idiot" and *retardasi mental* (mental retardation) are still used to refer to persons with intellectual disability. Diverse terms are used to classify and label people within this group (idiot, feeble-minded, people with learning disability, mental retardation, and intellectual disability). The meaning of each term is understood according to the context in which it is used. As a matter of fact, scholars in disability studies have observed that the labels are socially constructed.[3] Labels are laden with biomedical assessments, cultural assumptions, or (and) expectations.

In Indonesia, these biomedical and cultural dimensions intertwine with the religious belief of the community. As the biomedical world mapped the normal standard of intelligence and development of human beings, both cultures and religions create their ideology of normalcy through attitudes and expectations toward members of the group. It means that the normativity of the biomedical, cultural, and religious spheres will always influence the life of the community members.

The epitome of normalcy can be traced back to the history of idiocy in the fourteenth century. In that time, the legal term "idiot" (Greek) means a private individual. The consideration of categorizing people as public individual or private individual was based on their

capacity to perform such tasks as handling money and identifying lineage. Patrick McDonagh quotes the unpublished manuscript of Chris Goodey entitled *Intelligence and Its Disabilities: The View from History* (2008) that a private individual will be classified under the lower status, idiota, because they do not work in public office; they were aligned with the peasants and (most) women.[4] Moreover, Goodey compares the criteria for being identified as "idiot," noting that they would not necessarily include those individuals diagnosed as "idiot" in the nineteenth century.[5] Even after the professionalization of the treatment of idiocy, there was no guarantee of consistent diagnoses.[6]

Based on this history, I will analyze three major issues regarding the term of idiocy. Firstly, by assuming that idiots are private individuals, the community alienate the persons in this group. The majority group, those who define the classification, assume that the idiots are not capable of being involved in the (normal) society. Secondly, the idiots align with peasants and (most) women who, I assume, are not equipped with formal education, and are therefore assumed to be unable to contribute to the (normal) community. This historical issue of the peasants is irrelevant to the Indonesian context in the twentieth century, because peasants play a major role in providing rice to the society. Unfortunately, the Indonesian women in this current time still face the social stigma of domestic versus public life. Thirdly, the idiots, in terms of inability to handle money or identify lineage in the fourteenth century, become more narrowly defined in the nineteenth century as an intellectual condition. In the wider context, skills or intelligent capacity are related to the adaptive behavior of people with intellectual disability. This is problematic due to our broad cultural notions of intelligence. McDonagh noticed this problem by saying, "Idiocy as a concept is nothing if not problematic, ambiguous and obscure or more prosaically a social construction".[7]

According to McDonagh, idiocy as a social construction is problematic, ambiguous, and obscure. The narrative of normalcy is pivotal to this concept. Both idiocy in particular and disability in general reflect the normativity of the group with given power, and this is the real challenge. In the framework of disability studies, people who are classified as non-disabled, without disability, or temporary abled,[8] are within the group who have the power to shape normativity. They produce disablism, which is defined by Fiona Kumari Campbell, in

her *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Ableness*, as a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities.[9]

When it comes to the topic of ableism, religions also infuse this –ism with theology. It is not surprising that the Quran and the Bible do not explicitly explain whether a person with disability has an equally significant role and being in the communal lives. The frame of the scriptural texts are written in the ableism framework. Therefore, disability theologians invoke the voice of people with disabilities by proposing an alternative metaphor of God and an inclusive theology that embraces the concept of disability.[10] I was with Deborah Creamer when she was complaining about the Christian aversion to theology of disability. While the disability theologians reconstruct the metaphor of God and an inclusive theology, it is significant to remember that ableism permeates all aspects of church life, and it is dangerous. This idea is concomitant with Campbell's definition of ableism. She argues that ableism refers to "a network of beliefs processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human."[11]

The concept of idiocy, as a product of normalcy, is utterly relative. Amos Yong, a disability theologian, in his book entitled *Theology and Down Syndrome*, argues that "even if normalization is an absolute concept, its application is, culturally relative: treat all people in the way that is customary to value in the culture".[12] The relativity of this normalization and its products, namely intellectual disability (previously called idiocy), depicts the relativity of the concept of suffering, which has always been followed by defining and thinking about the disability.

In the following, I will explore the concept of intellectual disability from the Islamic and Christian perspectives. I analyze the writings of Mohammed Ghaly as a Muslim theologian and Amos Yong as a Christian theologian. It is interesting to find out the implications of their theologies, as they are both men with temporary-abled bodies and intellects. In his book, Yong dedicates a chapter entitled "Disability in Context: Feminist, Cultural, and World Religious Perspectives,"

while Ghaly, in his book entitled *Islam and Disability: Perspectives in Theology and Jurisprudence*,[13] explores the concept of theodicy and Muslim's response to disability in general.

**Women with Intellectual Disability and the Suffering**

As I mentioned before regarding to idiocy, McDonagh observed that:

> Idiocy is identified as a lack in men, when it appears in women it is more often seen as a 'stripping down' to an essential element of female nature, a representational consistency that seems aligned with the common association of men with culture and women with nature. Thus women with intellectual disabilities serve to validate the sovereignty of the masculine over the feminine in the binary opposition that structures understanding of gender over much of recorded Western history.[14]

This binary opposition differently exists in the life of women with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia. Even this experience as women with intellectual disabilities obviously mirrors more marginalization as human beings.

The several dimensions of life as women in Indonesia is gradually and randomly affecting women based on their social context interpretation of their conditions: firstly, as woman; secondly, as woman with physical disability; thirdly, as woman with physical disability who lives in poverty; fourthly, as woman with physical and intellectual disability who lives in poverty; fifthly, as woman with physical and intellectual disability who lives in the institution for the rest of their lives; sixthly, as a woman with physical and (or) intellectual disability and different sexual orientation who lives in poverty and (or) being institutionalized for the rest of their lives.

The experiences of women with intellectual disability in Indonesia are very diverse and unique, but there are no statistics about woman with disability in Indonesia. In regards to suffering, various contexts of life contribute to diverse experience and meaning. One way for society to be informed about the woman with intellectual disability is through texts. As McDonagh claims,

> Literary and other cultural products are important to understanding the history of the idea of idiocy, even if the notions expressed in these sources do not always conform to those endorsed by medical practitioners and their allies. When

> 'idiocy' appears in texts, whether they are novels, person's letters, medical reports or newspapers articles, it is laden with meanings from the explicit to the subtle and unacknowledged.[15]

Based on the role of the literature, I choose an Indonesian Novel written by Ayu Utami. The Novel, entitled Saman, portrays a woman with intellectual disability named Upi. Here I quote some of her writing about Upi which imaginatively represents the complexity of woman with a profound intellectual and physical disability.

> The girl's name was Upi. The mother began to tell Wis about her lunatic daughter. When she was born, her head was so tiny that her father thought it was some sort of retribution for his having killed a turtle over by the lake in the early stages of his wife's pregnancy. And the child never learnt to speak, though her body developed as normal into that of an adolescent. Maybe because she could never master the language of humans, Satan took hold of her tongue. When she was in her teens she showed signs of being possessed and she became quite delinquent. It started when she developed the habit of rubbing her genitals up against the rubber trees as they were being tapped by the villagers, fortunately without taking her clothes off. Everyone would watch her – the boys with lust and the girls with embarrassment – but we just kept trying to care for her.[16]

> Then they saw the girl being put into a sort of cage behind the house. Wis could hear her moaning pitifully when the two men had locked the door. The others watched in silence. A group of children momentarily looked up from their game – a competition involving rubber seeds – and laughed. "Stop! Stop! What are you doing?"Wis rushed over to the two men who'd just taken the key from the lock. "We have no choice. Our sister's mad. She is possessed by the devil. The cage, a meter and a half by two meters in size, was made of wood and bamboo. It stood there on short stumps like a little stage. It stank of urine and dampness. And there were flies everywhere. The girl squatted behind the bars sobbing, she wasn't howling any more.[17]

> Nobody knew her name. People called her whatever they liked: Eti, Ance, Yanti, Meri, Susi, anything. Like a dog in need of affection, she would respond to any name ending in "i": Pleki,

> Boni, Dogi. She had achieved notoriety in this town for one thing. She was in the habit of wandering around the streets and rubbing her genitals against any suitable object – a post, a fence, the corner of a wall – like an animal in heat. Of course a number of the local boys had taken advantage of this particular habit of hers. Everyone said she enjoyed it too. That's why she keeps coming back to town, they said, in search of an electricity pole or a man. And she would always be certain to find both: a passive pole and an aggressive man. "But everyone says she's mad," Wis whispered in bewilderment.[18]
>
> She was certainly no beauty, although she wasn't as hideous as he had first thought, in his state of shock. Her face was asymmetrical. The skin of her cheek was soft; she must be still in her teens. There was the odd pimple here and there on her face. But her skull; there was no doubt that her skull carried only a small volume of brain. Her low forehead was stained red from a weeping wound, which had been infected for a long time. And now she had a broken leg, which the doctor had set in a plaster cast.[19]

As a novel, Utami's writing on Upi's experience is real for many women who live with profound intellectual disability in small villages. In 2010, Indonesia initiated a program called "Indonesia free from Pasung (Shackled)." Diah Utami, the Director of Mental Health at the Indonesian Ministry of Health, describes that nearly 0.5% of Indonesian (more than 1 million people) suffer from severe mental disorder and (or intellectual disability) are literally being restrained. This statistic and Utami's illustration depicts that the most vulnerable people who become classified in this category are women. The social stigma of women's inferiority, their bodies as the embodiment of sin (even associated with evil), or the objects of other (men's) sexuality, reduce their humanness merely to sexual appetite. These women live within the community but at the same time are alienated by the normalcy of the community.

It is utterly obvious that women with intellectual disability in Indonesia are very vulnerable as "objects" of sexual exploitation, sexual violence, and sexual abuse. Pusat Pelayanan Terpadu Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Anak Madani Kota Banda Aceh (The Center of Holistic Service for the Empowerment of Urban Women and Children, Kota

Banda Aceh), on May 7, 2014, published on their website an article entitled "Woman with Disability Facing Socio-Culture and the Law." In this article, the author claims, based on some sexual abuse and sexual violence cases brought by families with a member as survivor, that the cases were dropped by the court because some of the abusers were "social figures." In addition, they spread the perception that the survivors, who live with physical and intellectual disability, should feel gratitude because others are still willing to "abuse" them. For this reason, consequently, the ableist normativity perpetuate a culture of "abusing," "oppressing," and "violence." Who is the sufferer in this culture?

**Islam and (Intellectual) Disability**

I met a young woman in her early thirties. Previously, I saw her sitting on the path almost every night around 8:00 pm. She wore casual clothes, sometimes with training pants. One night, I had a chance to invite her to have supper with me. From our conversation at the time I knew that her name was Pipit, I called her as Mbak (Sister) Pipit, and she came from another region of Java. She told me that she had escaped from her family because when she was at home, her family would restrain her at 6.00 pm. In Jakarta, she lived in the slum of Ciliwung River. In the morning, she worked as a "helper" to buy water for the family in the slum. In the evening, she would wait for her "customers" who would buy her service as a sexual worker. Her customers are mostly drivers. She charged 20.000 rupiah (about 2 USD) for her service.

I noticed several things in my encounter with her that night. First, I noticed that one of her legs was longer than other. It was clear that she walked differently. Second, her family restrained her for some reason. I think it was because of her intellectual disability which is sometimes deemed as mental illness. Therefore it was dangerous both for her and other people. She said her family restrained her because she was a "naughty" girl. Thus she had to be controlled. Third, she is a Muslimah. She responded "Allhamdullilah, sudah jalannya Allah" (Allhamdulliah, God planned it already) to almost every aspect of her story, including her escape from the family and when her customers deceived her with fake money. As a Christian woman educated formally in seminary and without any challenges from normalcy, I was challenged by Mbak Pipit to think about my identity as a woman and as a human; about God's role in life; about social construction and expectation, and about suffering.

Maysaa S. Bazna and Tarek A. Hatab, in their writing "Disability in the Quran" claims that the concept of disability, in the conventional sense, is not found in the Qur'an.[20] They found terms in the Qur'an and Hadith that are conventionally associated with disability, such as blind (*a'ma*), mute (abkam), deaf (assum), weak (*da'if*), and also several terms to denote the "lower" level group such as *mustad'afun*, orphan (*yateem*), destitute (miskeen), needy (*faqeer*), and wayfarer (*ibn us-sabeel*). Apparently, people with intellectual disabilities are classified as *da'if*. *Da'if* is from the Arabic word root *da-'a-fa*. The word *da'f* (weakness) means, in Lisan Ul-Arab, the opposite of strength, and the meaning applies equally to physical, mental, spiritual, and moral attributes.[21] Even though the central discussion of disability in the Qur'an is the concept of perfection, the Qur'an's position toward humans in general is that human have been created weak and God wants to lighten their burden.[22]

This concept of human's perfection and weakness and God's role in human suffering is well described by Ghaly through *ta'lil*, whose most used English equivalence is "theodicy."The theological use of *ta'lil* in this sense indicates the quest for the divine and wise purposes (*hikam*) for God's actions. Ghaly explains that the meaning of *ta'lil* was not restricted to developing arguments to clarify or justify pain, suffering, evil, and the like.[23] Rather, *Ta'lil* was a generic term indicating that God's actions can be rationalized, whether they are deemed good or bad from a human perspective.[24]

In his book, as well as in his article entitled "Evil and Suffering in Islam," Ghaly provides three distinct approaches on theodicy, namely, anti-theodicy, pro-theodicy, and the median approach. The anti-theodicy approach emphasizes the perfect character of God.[25] This theodicy is followed mainly by the Ashari[26] and Zahiri schools. Things happen in life contrary to people's wishes and desires, which they eventually perceive as evil because humans have no control over what is going on in life.[27] In the case of disabilities, God acts in accordance with God's self-sufficiency and omnipotence, for human judgment on God's acts would diminish God's unlimited power and thus tarnish His perfect character.[28]

In the Ashari's view, God was undoubtedly All-Wise (*al-Hakim*),[29] Abu Hamid al-Ghazali explained it by saying, "Al-Hakim is the one who has wisdom. Wisdom is equivalent to the understanding of

superior things through the highest modes of knowledge…He is the truly wise, because He knows the most sublime things by the most sublime modes of knowing." God can inflict pain on man-indeed. He can torment man-without hope of reward and for no reason.[30] Thus God's wisdom was, to the Asharis, simply knowledge and does not necessarily entail purposiveness in His acts and all sorts of disabilities and by default suffering and evil are to be traced back to God.[31]

The second approach is pro-theodicy. This approach emphasizes that the divine perfection of God's character is to be measured by His oneness and justice, wisdom, and solitude for the welfare of His creatures.[32] This approach is followed mainly by the *Mutazili* and *Shii* schools.[33] The theologians in this group insist that although inflicting and suffering are in principle evil, the existence of evil in the world does not tarnish the perfect character of God, especially His justice and wisdom.[34] In the *Shii* tradition, justice naturally includes the avoidance of oppression, and all foolish acts and wisdom have always been seen as closely connected with justice.[35] God's justice and wisdom are to be measured by the same scale as one applied to human actions because justice, wisdom, and goodness of God's acts can be recognized by human intellect.[36] Human intellect is represented by mature and of sound mind, which is classified as people with legal liability in Islam.[37] Mutazilis, who believe in metempsychosis, said that all types of suffering in this life are the result of one's sins in a previous life.[38] Moreover, they believe that the natural evil that hit children is good because it is purposeful: by divine assistance and compensation.[39]

The third approach is the median approach. Ghaly observed:

> One of the possible purposes that have been intensively discussed by the advocates of the median approach was that suffering can function as a disciplinary action or punishment introduced by God for sins committed by people with legal liability in Islam, i.e. adult people of sound mind. In principle, the possibility of a cause-effect link between committing sins on the one hand and suffering pain or harm on the other hand was not ruled out.[40]
>
> In Quranic verse, "Whatever misfortune happens to you is because of the things your hands have wrought, but for many (of them) He grants forgiveness" (42:30). Some commentators interpret "misfortune" as illness, harm, or any form of

> suffering and 'the things your hands have wrought' as one's sins and misdeeds.[41] In addition, this approach views the cathartic function of suffering by purging the sinner of his sins and bringing him relief from greater torment in the hereafter.[42] Two other closely interrelated purposes for the existence of suffering are to gain a reward in the Hereafter and to enable the suffering person to attain a lofty rank in Paradise.[43]

From these three theodicy approaches, I conclude that Islam believes that people with disability are created by God. Nevertheless, their conditions, which are deemed a calamity, are unquestionable (anti-theodicy), as Mbak Pipit frequently said, "Everything is already planned by God." People with an intellectual disability, without a sound mind, consequently, can never be the subject of God's agency, even if they will never be regarded as wrong doers. I found this problematic for women with intellectual disability who are often blamed for their sexuality, as in Upi's experience (pro-theodicy). The discipline aspect from suffering only affirms that women with intellectual disability sinned in their (previous) life (median approach), which is one of the reason why women with intellectual disability are perceived to be inferior by the abusers.

**Christianity and Intellectual Disability**

I met Ani Ong in 2004 in a residential institution named Panti Asih Pakem, for people with profound mental retardation. She was 45 years old but her physical and mental development stopped before she was 5 years old. Her body was really thin and almost "transparent" because her bones were visible to my eyes. Her face was far from the image of beauty that advertisements repeatedly expose. She didn't talk with what I understand as language nor did she smile at others. She was totally dependent on the caregiver for feeding and cleaning her body. She didn't experience menstruations like her friends in the residence, and that must have been a relief because she would only sit on her wheelchair for her whole life. Some women, during their cycle feel the importance of being "active."

Ani Ong challenged me to reflect on the meaning of life. She challenged everything that I hold as important and meaningful as a woman and as a human. What is suffering for her? If she is on the extreme pole of physical and intellectual human condition, does it

make her less than any other human in the center of the normativity? Who has the power to define God with a metaphor? Nancy Eiesland, Jennie Weis Block, and Kathy Black, are women with and concern about disability. Yet they have the power to embody their voice of vulnerability, interdependency, and accessibility. Rational women with physical disabilities can also develop their theology, but not the Ani Ong of the world.

Amos Yong notices the tension between feminists without a disability and feminist with a disability approach. Quoting Anita Silvers, Yong says, "Nondisabled feminists are reluctant to engage with disabled woman, namely because they perceive them not as a powerful, competent, and appealing females but instead as dependent, passive, and needy."[44] On the other side, feminists with disability articulate a relational, interdependent, and interpersonal understanding of what it means to be human.[45] Apparently, the proposal of feminists with a disability can be regarded as embracing people (women) with intellectual disability. Nevertheless, women with an intellectual disability, particularly in Indonesia, continue to struggle with the stereotypes and stigmas in their capacity as social beings.

Yong admits that his representation of the experience of woman (with and without disabilities) in the developing world is viewed through Western lens, often through a feminist perspective and for purposes most directly related to thinking about a theology of disability in the Western context.[46] This is true due to a lack of accessibility to women with (intellectual) disability, and other stigma and stereotype challenges that may have already been passed by women with disability in the Western context. In the Indonesian academic context of theology, there is no single literature on intellectual disabilities.

On the chapter "Reimagining the Doctrines," Yong ties together the doctrines of creation, providence, and theological anthropology. He grounds his inquiries on two basic questions. First, how should traditional understandings of the doctrines of creation and providence be revised in light of our contemporary experiences of our intellectual and physical disabilities? Second, how does our wrestling, especially with intellectual disabilities, affect the historic Christian view of human beings as created in the image of God?[48]

Yong makes thorough observations on Christian teachings regarding disability. Despite the wide spectrum of Christian doctrines

that Yong describes in his book, I will only focus on the doctrine of the providence of God. It is interesting that in the framework of God's providence, the disability concept will always be followed by the concept of suffering and evil. Nevertheless, Yong's theology tends to avoid relating disability to the concepts of suffering or evil. Rather, he opts to construct a disability providence theology.

On the matter of providence theology, Yong proposes to join disability providence theology with the concept of "limitless" articulated by Deborah Creamer, and by using the four fences of Chalcedon as an analogy, he proposes four fences of a disability theology of providence. The concept of "limitless" which is perceived in the limits model, proposes three significant religious claims that are not unfamiliar to Christian tradition. First is the notion that limits are an unsurprising characteristic of humanity. The second is a claim that limits are an intrinsic aspect of human existence, that is, part of what it means to be human. The third that the limits perspective implies is that limits are good or, at the very least, not evil.[49]

On the matter of theology of providence, rather than defining what God's providence is related to disabilities, Yong suggests that God's providence is not related to disabilities. The first fence is that God is not arbitrary; hence, disabilities are neither merely accidents nor are they directly intended by God.[50] The second fence is that God's sovereignty and human freedom are not mutually exclusive.[51] The third fence is a claim that God's will is not opposed to the laws of nature.[52] On the contrary, regularities and surprises of nature can be understood as God's gifts precisely in so far as they make possible of the ordering and diversity of human lives. The fourth fence is that God's will is not to produce two classes of human beings, whether the saved and the damned, the healthy or the sick, or the whole and the disabled.[53]

According to Yong, both the concept of "limitless" and the four fences of a disability theology of providence are pivotal in constructing a disability theology. The concept of "limitless" opens up theoretical space to rethink God's activity (as revealed in scripture), creaturely creativity (in terms of freedom exercised within constraints), and nature's courses and process (in terms of the spontaneity and variation in the world).[54] Moreover, through the four fences of a disability theology of providence one can avoid a theology that imposes such an "explanation" on the disabled person.[55]

**Living in Her Wisdom**

The life of a woman with intellectual disability portrayed by Ayu Utami, my encounters with Mbak Pipit and Ani Ong, and the report from Pusat Pelayanan Terpadu Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Anak Madani Kota Banda Aceh about violence cases brought by the survivor's family, cannot be generalized as the experience of all women with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia. Similarly, Mohammed Ghaly and Amos Yong's theologies cannot generally represent the Islamic theology or Christian theology on disability. However, we could find the connections between Islam and Christian theology on disability that affect the lives of women with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia. Albeit there is a need to acknowledge the contributions of the social context, economic structure, cultural expectations, and biomedical assessment in defining disability from the perspective of normativity. I believe that Islam's theodicy and Christian providence theology would have profound effects on the lives of women with intellectual disability in particular and Indonesian society in general.

Neither Ghaly nor Yong are Indonesians. They are men with temporary abled bodies and intellects. It is obvious that there is a distance between their disability theologies with women with intellectual disability in Indonesia. However, the lack of literature on disability theology written by Indonesian Islam and Christian theologians makes their theologies precious resources that should be listened to by Muslim and Christian theologians in Indonesia.

On the one side, Ghaly does not specifically demonstrate how Islam perceived people with intellectual disability, but he examines the disability in general by relating it to the concepts of calamity, suffering, and evil. It means that the existence of disability in Islam is attached to these concepts. On the other side, Yong approaches the disability, specifically intellectual disability, by envisioning limits as an inevitable dimension of being human. Furthermore, by using the four fences of disability, he insists that we can only imagine the disability in the frame of God's providence by finding what is not rather than what is in the relation between God's providence and disability.

Ghaly, through the three theodicy approaches, finds the pattern of God as *al-hakim* (all-wise) intervening in the conditions of human life that cause suffering and calamity. The difference in approach shows that God as *al-hakim* is apprehended differently by each theodicy approach.

Yong employs the concept of the limitless of Creamer, acknowledges the metaphor of disabled God proposed by Eiesland, and develops a liberation theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) from a disability perspective. According to him a theology of the cross insists that the life and death of Jesus serve as a redemptive model that values rather than marginalizes the brokenness that becomes the characteristic of so much of human life.[56] I think Yong's effort to find theology of the cross as an alternative is significant but still pointing to the existence of disability that should always be attached to pain and suffering.

The entire issue is problematic, as Susan Wendell[57] notes in her book *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*; "Although we begin with the suffering, limited, painful, fragile, and vulnerable body, we soon realize that paying too much attention to these aspects of the body is debilitating, and that we must learn to free 'ourselves'from these experiences simply in order to pay better attention to the other demands of life."[58] I think Wendell's reflection on her disability challenges disability theologians to perceive disability beyond the approach of suffering, limitedness, pain, fragility, and vulnerability.

Though I acknowledge the crucial aspects of interdependency as a consequence of the limitedness and vulnerability of human beings, from my imagination of intellectual disability perspective, I must insist that the definition of vulnerability, fragility, suffering, and calamity constructed by people without intellectual disability is pragmatic. Thus it could oversimplify people with intellectual disability who experience life differently, because their life is beyond the definition made by people without intellectual disability. A book written by Kelley Johnson and Jan Walmsley with Marie Wolfe, entitled *People with Intellectual Disabilities: Towards a good life*, provides the conversation with a young woman with intellectual disability, who explains her good life in her own view, which is different from the way "normal" society perceives as a good life.

From this point of view, I conclude that people without intellectual disability often try to imagine the life of people with intellectual disability without never fully grasping the reality of disability. By considering the dimensions that constitute a person's identity, people without intellectual disability are unable to fully conceive of the meaning and experience of the suffering or the good life of people with

disability. For this reason, people without intellectual disability need to confess their disability. As a matter of fact, people without intellectual disability, who attempt to comprehend the suffering, will tend to classify people with intellectual disability as the sufferer, because of the ableist normativity prevailing in almost every area that constitutes human identity.

**Endnotes**

1 Idiocy appears as a state of being when applied to an individual, but is also reification: an idea given flesh and embodied by (or imposed upon) specific individuals. All the same, many histories tend to accept a relatively uncomplicated reading of idiocy as something residing fully within the people so designated, with different historical approaches simply providing different lenses through which to view the same phenomenon (McDonagh 2008, 5-6).

2 The term Intellectual Disability is preferred because it (a) better reflects the changed construct of disability, aligns better current professionals practices that focus on functional behaviors and contextual factors, (c) provides a logical basis for understanding supports provision due to its basis in a social-ecological framework, (d) is less offensive to persons with disabilities, and (e) is more consistent with international terminology (AAIDD 2010, 3).

3 People who are now designated "mentally retarded,""intellectually disabled,""developmentally delayed","learning disabled,"or "cognitively impaired" have—as the multiplicity of current terms suggests—been subject to a staggering number of labels and epithets over the years and condition denoted by another, especially as each term is the product of a specific social and cultural impairment. Disability activist and theorist have elaborated a distinction between the concepts of "impairment": physical condition and "disability": social condition, a form of oppression, exclusion or constraint. Ref. to Partick McDonagh, Idiocy: *A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 12.

4 Partick McDonagh, 6.

5 *Ibid*.

6 *Ibid*.

7 *Ibid*., 5.

8 This "powerful" group produces ableistnormativity. Ableistnormativity results in compulsive passing, wherein there is a failure to ask about difference, to imagine human being-ness. Compulsory ableness and its

conviction to and seduction of sameness as the basis to equality claims results in a resistance to consider ontologically peripheral lives as distinct ways of being human least they produce a heightened devaluation. See Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Ableness.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4.

[9] Fiona Kumari Campbell, 4.

[10] Deborah Creamer mentions that some of Disability Theologians against the ableism by proposing alternatives theology: Nancy L. Eiesland proposes "The Disabled God," Jennie Weis Block proposes "A Theology of Access," and Kathy Black proposes " A Theology of Interdependence." Creamer claims that each of them demonstrates that the idea of God is not incompatible with disability. Comp. Deborah Creamer 2006.

[11] Fiona Kumari Campbell, 44.

[12] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome – Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity.* Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007, 135.

[13] Mohammed Ghaly, in his book, divides two parts of Islam responses disability. The first part consists of the Speculative Theology and the Practical Theology and the second part is Islamic Jurisprudence. In this paper, I limit the analysis to the theology part.

[14] Partick McDonagh,127.

[15] John Langdon Down acknowledges that the literary contributes to build social portrait of human condition. He mentioned "the popular novelist, in this as in other cases, seizes on the characteristics of some exaggerated specimen, portrays them by the aid of a vivid imagination, and henceforth the exaggeration becomes the type of a species in the mind of human, see (down 1887:82)." See Patrick McDonagh, 14.

[16] Ayu Utami, *Saman: A Novel* (Jakarta: PT Equinox Publishing Indonesia, 2005), location1177.

[17] *Ibid*, location 1166-1167.

[18] *Ibid*, location 1127.

[19] *Ibid*, location 1118.

[20] Maysaa S. Bazna EdD, and Tarek A. Hatab PE. 2005. "Disability in the Qur'an." Journal of Religion, Disability & Health, 9:1, 5.

[21] *Ibid*., 17.

[22] *Ibid*., 11.

[23] Mohammed Ghaly, *Islam and Disability: Perspectives in Theology and Jurisprudence*. New York: Routledge, 2010), 5.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] *Ibid*, 24.

[26] Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari wrote: "We assert that God has powers (quwwa), as He says "Did they not consider that God who had created them was mightier than them? (Qur'an 41:15)…and that there is neither good nor evil on earth, save what God wills and that things exist by God's will and that not a single person has the capacity to do anything until God causes him to act and we are not independent of God nor we can pass beyond the range of God's knowledge: that there is no creator save God and the works of human beings are things created and decreed by God. He has said that 'God has created you and that which you do' (Qur'an 37:96). Human beings have not the power to create anything but are themselves created…Human beings do not control for themselves what is hurtful or what is helpful, except what God wills and that we ought to commit our affairs to God and assert our complete need and dependence upon Him. See Mohammed Ghaly, 384.

[27] Mohammed Ghaly, 384.

[28] *Ibid*., 24.

[29] *Ibid*., 25.

[30] *Ibid*., 385

[31] *Ibid*., 26.

[32] *Ibid*., 385.

[33] *Ibid*,

[34] *Ibid*., 28

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] *Ibid*., 386,

[37] *Ibid*., 387.

[38] *Ibid*.

[39] *Ibid*., 388.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] *Ibid*.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] *Ibid*.

[44] Amos Yong, 123.

[45] *Ibid*.

[46] *Ibid*., 120.

[47] *Ibid*., 163.

[48] *Ibid*.

[49] Deborah Creamer, "Theological Accessibility: The contribution of Disability." *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Fall 2006, Volume 26, No.4), 94-95. (Creamer 2009, 94-95).

[50] Amos Yong, 168.

[51] *Ibid*.

[52] *Ibid*.

[53] *Ibid*.

[54] *Ibid*., 167.

[55] *Ibid*., 168.

[56] *Ibid*., 178.

[57] Susan Wendell is a philosopher with chronic fatique immune dysfunction syndrome. Comp. Amos Yong, 125.

[58] Amos Yong, 125.

**Further Reading**

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# Disability - An Ability to Depend Fully on God

Varghese V. C

## Introduction

The people with disability are often considered as people who are unable to live a normal life. Although, it is true in a way; it is not true always. To some extent, they may be unable to do their basic needs, attend school, have higher education, work independently for livelihood, travel alone, etc. However, there are many disabled people who live and have lived a better life than normal people and secured their places in the pages of history.[1] Even in the Bible there are men and women who have done great things though they had disability in their lives. In that sense, the newly coined term "differently able" for referring to the disabled people is very apt for them. Because, even in the midst of disability, they have proved that they are able to achieve great things as abled ones.

## Attitude Towards the Disabled People

There is a misconception that disability is connected with evil or evil spirits. This understanding has developed a negative attitude towards people with disability. Due to this reason, there are so many social and cultural stigmas related to the disability. Despite the fact that "all human beings can be accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities,"[2] disabled people are often discriminated and neglected even in the Christian families and community. The disabled children are usually constrained to remain inside their homes due to the shame and culture of honour. It compels them to confine themselves into their own world and become victims

of bad habits and addictions. Some family even hide their disabled children inside the home, because they consider that having such a child is shameful. In some cultures, disability is considered as a curse. Especially, in some African culture, "even if one clearly has polio, there is a belief that a demon causes the disability" and such children cannot attend the school due to the fear of local community.[3] Therefore, the disabled children are often abused verbally in the homes and outside by family members and friends respectively.

In some occasions, even I was asked to be inside the room by my parents and other family members, while all others were in the hall.[4] Moreover, my parents always restricted me to go for excursions during my school days. Though, it was because of their concern towards me, I was not happy with those decisions.

It is an undeniable fact that disabled people often face communal and social suffering in the form of alienation, exclusion, and normalizing pressures.[5] This sentence may be re-structured, like "There are incidences where in the "civilized" society people with disability are inhumanly treated and ultimately rejected." Once a family was removed from a flight because they had with them a teenage son with Down syndrome.[6] Moreover, in a recent incident, a teen with Down syndrome was kicked off from a flight after vomiting.[7]

Amos Yong rightly observes that "it is no wonder that people with disabilities are often stigmatized and feel unwanted in public spaces."[8] Many times in my childhood, my friends have neglected me while they were playing or asked me to stay back from some games. In those days, I was heavily hurt and felt so much pain within me. Gradually, unacceptance, exclusion, rejection and neglect from the friends created within me a sense of feeling unwanted. It led me to loneliness,[9] isolation,[10] lethargic,[11] short-temper,[12] disobedience,[13] inferiority complex,[14] depression,[15] living behind the mask,[16] world of fantasy[17] and even suicidal thoughts.[18] It also caused me to develop a bitterness towards the people and hatred towards God for creating me in this way.

**Need of Change in Attitude**

According to Jackie Mills Fernald, "the biggest barriers that keep congregations from seeking and welcoming those with disabilities are not physical or communication hurdles, but those of attitude."[19] Now, therefore, it is the time to educate the people to change their

misconceptions about the disability and negative attitude towards the disabled. Why because, "throughout the Bible God calls his people to care for and defend the needy and the sick, to be a voice for those with no voice."[20] Moreover, in order to change our attitude towards the disabled, we need to understand the truth what Kay Toombs claims that the reductions of disease, suffering, disability and realities of aging and death "do not diminish one's worth as a human being."[21] As Swinton remarks, "the key point in relation to disability is that all bodies are holy places.[22] Recognizing that is the beginning of understanding what it means truly to be with people who have disabilities. Their bodies, like all bodies, are holy places."[23]

Therefore, these kinds of consultation should help us to "replace rejection and exclusion with friendship."[24] It is possible only if we are willing to spend sufficient time with the disabled people and listen to their voices.

**Is Disability a Curse or Due to any sin?**

The question of disciples to Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2) reflects the Jewish understanding that every sickness is a divine punishment for any sin. Even in today's context, many people see the disability as a curse or divine punishment. According to Yong, "images of Jesus and the apostles healing the sick, raising the lame, opening the eyes of the blind, and so on, fueled the historic quest for cures for disabling conditions, but they may lead people with disabilities to internalize the normate view and thereby wonder what is wrong with them that prevents their reception of God's healing power."[25] It is a reality, because I was also blamed many times by different people that it is because of my lack of faith and prayer that I am not able to get the healing.[26] In that sense, one has to admit that Paul also was not healed because of his lack of faith. But John Swinton asserts that "presumably the reason Paul's prayers were not answered was not that he lacked faith."[27]

The people who blamed me of lack of faith might have thought that there is something wrong within me, that's why I am born as a disabled person. Similarly, the common understanding of disability is seen in the words of Thomas E. Reynolds that "it seems to be a body gone wrong and in need of remediation through cure, healing, or rehabilitative adjustment to participate fully in society."[28] In a broader sense, it is

true that disease, distress, disability and even death are the result of human depravity due to the fall of human. However, as Thomas H. Graves alleges that "to claim that all misfortune is retribution for our sin is not true biblically, is not true always in the world around us."[29] It means, as for a disabled person is concerned, his disability is not due to his personal sin. In regard to this, Reynolds quotes Frances Young, who argues that disability "is not some kind of punishment for sin [and] it is not usually anyone's fault."[30]

Many assume that the disability is a problem, which needs to be fixed or eliminated.[31] However, it is not the Bible teaches about the disability. Moses had a difficulty to speak and he "describes himself as having a speech difficulty at three different points (4:10; 6:12, 30)."[32] Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper argue that "although we lack the knowledge to support a precise diagnosis of Moses' disability,[33] we can regard his presentation of his condition in 4:10, 6:12, and 6:30 as a physical disability."[33] If God wanted, he could have healed Moses before sending him back to Egypt with a great mission (Exo. 4:10-12). But Swinton rightly observes that "God does not heal Moses' disability in order that he can carry out his vocation."[34] In the case of Paul, even when he asked the Lord to heal him; the Lord did not heal him. We have no clue from the scripture to know what Paul's weakness was. However, some scholars treat the "thorn in the flesh" as a disability (2 Cor. 12:7). Swinton's words, "we cannot be sure exactly what Paul's disability was,"[35] itself indicate that he considers Paul's thorn as a disability. Though, three times Paul pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him, the Lord did not do so (2 Cor. 12:8-9). As Swinton points out, "God did not feel that it had to be removed in order for Paul to work powerfully for the kingdom."[36]

Although, the "normate assumptions would have expected Jesus to heal the sick, impaired, and disabled;"[37] he did not heal Zacchaeus,[38] but assured him of his salvation (Luke 19:9). These examples attest two important facts. First, it denies the popular assumption that the disability needs to be fixed or cured.[39] Swinton also agrees that "disabilities have meaning beyond the mere desire of human beings to eradicate them."[40] He further adds that "in the strange new world within the Bible, human bodies and human disability have meanings that stretch beyond our simplistic biomedical assumptions that we need to fix what is broken and normalize what we consider to be abnormal."[41] Once we learn this

fact that disability is not something that needs to be fixed or cured, we will not have much difficulty to accept them as they are. As a parent of an autistic son, Reynolds says that "I cannot see his body as 'wrong' and 'lacking,' as just a thing in need of remedy or cure," even though his way of being does not conform to social expectations.[42] **Second**, it affirms that God accepts a person as s/he is regardless of his/her physical characteristics or capabilities concerning his salvation.[43] Throughout his/her mission of redemption and reconciliation, Jesus was helping the people to know that they belong to God and God loves them just as they are.[44] If it is so, "disabled human bodies can [also] carry powerful messages of redemption just as they are."[45] Therefore, Fernald rightly points out that "the church is all inclusive, a place where all are welcome regardless of disability."[46]

**Ability to Depend Fully on God**

When I recall my life before having a personal relationship with God, I can say that it was very difficult to trust or depend on God in the midst of any kind of disability.[47] However, in regard to disability, Kruschwitz quotes Reynolds, who claims that "disability opens up our vulnerability and dependence upon each other and God."[48] The words of Jeans Vanier also shows that there is some ability in the disability. For he says, "weakness carries within it a secret power [and] the cry and the trust that flow from weakness can open up hearts."[49] It means, when we acknowledge our weakness, we will realize the need of God's power in our life. In that way, God will help us to understand that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). What Reynolds and Vanier say is very true, because from my own life experience, I learned that disability, in fact, is an ability to depend fully on God. There was a time in my life that I did not want to depend neither on God nor on people. I always longed to live a life of independency.[50] However, the more I began to understand and accept my weakness, the more I could acknowledge God's grace in my life and depend on God for more strength in my life. Reynolds rightly states that acknowledging our own vulnerabilities and weaknesses helps us to open up ourselves more radically to God's grace.[51]

Moses, in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament are the two best examples of acknowledging God and depending fully on God in the midst of disability. Their life and ministry demonstrate that

"God uses disabled bodies to carry out the key tasks of the coming kingdom."[52] It is an irony that God used Moses, a person who had a difficulty of speaking in order to deliver God's words (Exo. 4:10). When Paul fully depended on God, despite of his weakness; he "discovered a great strength in the disabling condition."[53]

It is the realization that "in the kingdom of God personal control, physical strength, beauty, and human capability are not the criteria with which to measure a meaningful life",[54] which would help a disabled person to depend fully on God even in their disability. The life examples of Moses and Paul teaches us that "disabilities do not prevent one from having a powerful ministry within God's coming kingdom."[55] Moreover, many great people's dependence on God in the midst of disability is expressed in the words of Joni that "so many of the old hymns were written by people who struggled with disabilities."[56] It is nothing, but trust and confidence in the Lord that made the people with disability to write hymns about God, heaven, hope, etc…

Why do I say that disability is an ability to depend fully on God, because "for it is in weakness that we concretely feel our need for God and for each other."[57] Paul beautifully expresses this fact when he writes, "for my [God's] power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). When the people with disability depend fully on God, they can press forward in their faith and demonstrate that God's grace is sufficient for every need despite any physical challenges.[58] It is always a weak person, who needs strength and a powerless person, who needs power. As a filled vessel cannot contain any more water, a perfect person does not need any more potency. However, as there is no one perfect, everyone needs God's strength and power. In that case, a disabled persons need more of God's strength and for that they have to depend on God fully. It is remarkable to note here what Jean Vanier says, "I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."[59] Why because, cleaving to God even in the midst of weakness and difficulties is an evidence for the utter trust in God and full dependence on God.

The lives of Moses and Paul teach us that they viewed their disability as an opportunity to depend fully on God for accomplishing God's mission. In that sense, their dependency does not reveal their inability, rather it reveals their ability to trust God even in the midst of such disabled situation. In other words, their dependency on God

is the result of their confidence in their abilities to do great things for God. Moses' pleading "if your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exo. 33:15) and Paul's proclamation "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13) express their total dependency and utter confidence in the Lord. God's response to Moses on his speech difficulty, "who gave humans their mouth?... Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak…" (Exo. 4:11-12), was an invitation from God to fully rely upon him for accomplishing his task. It was because Moses fully depended on God, whenever he faced any problems, he always looked unto God and cried out to the Lord for help (Exo. 14:15; 17:4). God's reply to Paul that "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9) was also a call to rely on God in every circumstances. Therefore, Paul believed that all sufferings help us to depend fully on God. It is very evident from his words, "…but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Thus, in the scripture, we "have a 'cloud of witnesses' who have testified to the truth that one can die in dignity and in tremendous victory, even in the direst circumstances"[60] (cf. Heb. 12:1).

In today's world, people want to be self-sufficient and independent. As I said earlier, till I learned to depend on God, I was hesitant to depend on others and get any help from them. I always kept me away from people, including friends, thinking that I may become a burden for them in some ways. But God taught me that human beings are created for mutual dependence. To put differently, "we are not independent sources of our own destiny with seamlessly complete bodies."[61] In Raynolds' view, therefore, disability "invites us to see our humanity as vulnerable gifts of God to be received by each other in relationships of mutual giving and receiving."[62] In that sense, "wholeness is not self-sufficiency. Rather, it is the genuine communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another in light of the grace of God."[63] The realization that it is not self-sufficiency and independency that matter in the Reign of God will help the disabled people to fully depend on God for fulfilling God's purpose in and through their lives.

**Affirming God in the Midst of Disability[64]**

At the age of 36, Thomas H. Graves became disabled due to a fall while playing tennis. As a minister and a professor of philosophy of religion, he found it difficult [65] to speak of God in a meaningful way, being true

to his faith and honest with his disability.[66] In his own words, "like the biblical exiles I needed to learn to sing the Lord's song in a very strange land."[67]

However, when Graves began to understand the nature of God from the scripture, "[his] encounter with personal disability brought [him] to a refined definition of divine omnipotence."[68] In his opinion, it is neither his own sinful character nor God's perfect character is the source of his disability and anguish.[69] Then, one may ask the question, what is the source of the disability and disorders? According to Graves, as "nature at the point of creation is not yet perfected; chaotic elements and remnants of disorder remain in our unfinished universe."[70] When one realizes this fact, "rather than indicting God for the evils of human life and the short comings of the natural order, it is possible to see it as part of the divine plan to provide all that is necessary for free and creative personal life."[71]

Therefore, from his own life experience, he says that "I have found reflection on the issue of evil to be a pathway toward belief."[72] It is because, he learned that "God comes to us in the form of Jesus bearing the wounds and disabilities of a vulnerable human life."[73] Moreover, "it is in the disabled body of Christ on the cross that we encounter our redemption,"[74] which also was a plan of God. It means, if a disabled person truly understands that her/his disability also is the part of divine plan and God is with her/him always,[75] s/he will be able to affirm God even in the midst of any kinds of disability.

**Conclusion**

When we understand that even the disabled people are capable of accomplishing great things in their lives for the people as well as for God, we will change our misconceptions and wrong attitudes towards the people with disability. As the how is "reason of disability is human depravity"?

Would you like to say, "As the consequence of disability is the human depravity, so its result should be dependency on God". Please use better expression than what has been used here of disability is the human depravity, it should result in a total dependency in God. When a disabled person realizes that her/his disability is neither because of any of her/his fault nor a divine punishment, s/he will be able to trust God fully and depend totally on God for more of God's grace and strength

like in the life of Moses and Paul. Therefore, one can affirm that the weaknesses are the way to have a total dependency on God. So to say, disability is an ability to depend fully on God.

**Endnotes**

1 Helen Keller (Author), Fanny Crosby (Hymn Writer), Nick Vujicic (Preacher), Joni Eareckson Tada (Painter), are some names among many.[1]

2 Amos Yong, "Zacchaeus: Short and Unseen," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 16.

3 Daniel Alamillo, "Disability is Not Inability: Grassroots Participatory Development and Collective Action in the Iganga District of Uganda," *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Developmen*t Vol. 7, No. 1 (2012), 93.

4 It usually happened when some people have come to my home with a marriage proposal for my sister.

5 Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 32.

6 *Ibid* 28

7 Dennis Romero and Ali Gostanian, "Teen with Down Syndrome Kicked off Alaska Airlines Flight after Vomiting," *News*, April 06, 2018, Accessed on 08/06/18, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/airplane-mode/down-syndrome-teen-kicked-alaska-airlines-flight-after-vomiting-n863166.

8 Yong, "Zacchaeus," 12.

9 I liked and was compelled to spend all my time alone.

10 I used to withdraw myself from all kinds of social gathering and celebrations.

11 I became very lazy and used to take things for granted.

12 I used to argue and fight with my parents as well as with my elder sisters.

13 I was a very rebellious person and never wanted to listen to anyone including my parents.

14 I severely hated myself and even questioned my own existence many times.

15 Always felt dejected and unwanted and it drained all my enthusiasm.

16 Hiding the reality or not willing to accept the reality.

17 I always found happiness in living in an imaginary world, dreaming of unwanted and inappropriate things.

18 Many times, I thought of quitting my life.

19 Jackie Mills Fernald, "Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 89.

20 Fernald, "Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities," 89.

21 S. Kay Toombs, "Jars of Clay: Disability in Intentional Christian Community," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 40.

[22] See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20.
[23] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 21.
[24] Heiki Peckruhn, "Travelling in the Ark," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 88.
[25] Yong, "Zacchaeus," 11.
[26] Especially, when I used to attend a big meeting of famous preacher.
[27] John Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 19.
[28] Thomas E. Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 25.
[29] Thomas H. Graves, "Affirming God in the midst of Disability," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012), 80.
[30] Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 26.
[31] Yong, "Zacchaeus," 12.
[32] Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 428.
[33] Junior and Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity," 429.
[34] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 18-19.
[35] *Ibid.* 19.
[36] *Ibid.* 19.
[37] Yong, "Zacchaeus," 15.
[38] Amos Yong, in his article "Zacchaeus: Short and Unseen" treats the pathological dwarfism (e.g. shortness of Zacchaeus) as one of the physical disabilities (14-15).
[39] Yong, "Zacchaeus," 16.
[40] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 20.
[41] *Ibid.* 20.
[42] Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 26.
[43] Yong, "Zacchaeus," 16.
[44] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 23.
[45] *Ibid.* 20.
[46] Fernald, "Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities," 89.
[47] In my school days, I really didn't like God and was angry with God and people. In fact, I hated God for creating me as a disabled person. Though, I was born and brought up in a traditional Christian family, I attended all the church services and other spiritual activities only because my parent's compulsion.
[48] Robert B. Kruschwitz, "Introduction," *Disability: Christian Reflection* (Waco: Baylor University, 2012), 8.
[49] Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 30.
[50] In my school days, my dream was to get a good secular job and live a life independent of others.

[51] Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 32.
[52] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 18-19.
[53] *Ibid.* 19.
[54] Toombs, "Jars of Clay," 39-40.
[55] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 19.
[56] Joni Eareckson Tada, "Disabled Hymn Writers," *Joni and Friends*, accessed on 08/06/18, http://www.joniandfriends.org/radio/4-minute/disabled-hymn-writers/.
[57] Toombs, "Jars of Clay," 40.
[58] *Ibid.* 40-41.
[59] Jean Vanier, *Transforming Hearts*, accessed on 08/06/18, http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/his_message/jean_vanier_on_becoming_human/to_be_fully_human.
[60] Toombs, "Jars of Clay," 41.
[61] *Ibid.* 31.
[62] *Ibid.* 26.
[63] Raynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 32.
[64] This title is taken as it is from one of the articles of Thomas H. Graves.
[65] When he learned that he became disabled, he used to ask "what have I done to deserve this?" (See Graves, "Affirming God in the midst of Disability," 80).
[66] Graves, "Affirming God in the midst of Disability," 79-80.
[67] *Ibid.* 80.
[68] *Ibid.* 80.
[69] *Ibid.* 80.
[70] *Ibid.* 81.
[71] *Ibid.* 81.
[72] *Ibid.* 81.
[73] *Ibid.* 82.
[74] Swinton, "Many Bodies, Many Worlds," 20.
[75] OR God is also suffering with him in his disabled condition.

## Further Reading

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# Disabling Christian Discourse on Sin and Grace: An Ecclesiology Inclusive of People with Disability

Bendanglemla Longkumer

*O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to your servant: but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." So the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord? Now therefore, go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say. Exodus 4:10-12*

*Beloved, Do not be surprised at the fiery trials that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:12-13 .*

## Introduction

When we see a person with disability we usually ask questions like: Why is this? Why is s/he like that? Why am I in this way? David Aldrus commented that this is because of the worldview that is imposed on them this feeling when they become/are disabled. Such feelings and attitudes are usually devised from the present day societal or cultural point of view. The above questions are again substantiated by *why* and *where* is God![1] This thoughts or feelings sprout from our theological construct with the belief that sin and guilt are at the bottom of every suffering. Physical disability limits life and it is not a very good experience of the person who is disabled. S/he cannot walk, see, talk or even understand as others do.We add to their problem our attitude and make their life more problematic. We make them die even when they are not yet dead.

Scottish theologian John Swinton asserted that, theologians writing from the context of disabilities have been acutely attuned to the fact that the constructs of Christian theology and the practices they engender have assumed an able-bodied hermeneutic for human experience and for concepts of God. This has resulted in the marginalization and misrepresentation of the voices and experiences of persons with disabilities in theology, church and society. Situating the persons with disability in the midst of this, the paper intends to look at the connectedness between the rationale behind Christian view of sin and disability. It will also address an empowering subject that is Grace and with an attempt to arrive at how the modern churches should become the model of the Reign of God where there is no barrier by becoming a facilitator.

**Reformation's Influence on Church's View Toward Disability**

With the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the church began to look at her theological view anew. This new way of thinking and viewing at the world amplified the belief that physical disabilities are a result of sin. Since disability is viewed as bad, as bringing about negative situations, as undesirable, many conclude that physical disabilities could not be part of the perfect world. The afflictions in a disabled body are looked at as a result of sin and evil and hence the church and Christians in particular have a contemptuous view on disability as bad. This places the effects of sin on the hearts and attitudes of people rather than the circumstances, situation or physical condition.[2]

Having a closer look at the time of reformation period, people with developmental disabilities were treated as subhuman organisms. Luther is being critiqued in modern era for his words about a disabled child whom he encountered. Luther is reported to have suggested that the child should be suffocated "because I think he's simply a mass of flesh without a soul. Couldn't the devil have done this, in as much as he gives such shape to the body and mind even of those who have reason that in their obsession they hear, see and feel nothing? The devil is himself their soul" (Luther 397).[3]

Calvin in his Commentary on the Gospel of John speaks of physical suffering and how many wrongly see in them the judgment of God. In his words, "Scripture testifies that all the sufferings to which the human race is liable proceed from sin, whenever we see any person wretched,

we cannot prevent the thought from immediately presenting itself to our minds, that the distress which fall heavily upon him are punishments inflicted by the hand of God. While all distress arises from sin, there are a variety of reasons why God may cause such to befall his people. This means, we ought not to seek the cause of the blindness in sin…when the causes of afflictions are concealed, we ought to restrain curiosity, that we may neither dishonor God nor be malicious towards our brethren."[4] Calvin summarized his thoughts as, Do we want to show that there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastors who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor.[5]

The Reformation also pointed out the fact that God's grace can save us from sin, death and the power of the devil. God's action through the gospel is necessary because our sinful state is such that we can do no good on our own to effect a change in ourselves-our guilt covers our entire being. When people with disability are reminded of their sinful state, they are often led to conclude that this sinfulness is wrapped up in their physical condition. The focus becomes the physical condition rather than the totality of their being and in particular their spiritual standing before God.[6] It signifies that people think and understand especially the fallen state differently from their circumstances. In Calvin's thinking, all people are made for each other to benefit and support each other. This places responsibility on us to apply in our lives from what we benefited or obtained from the Lord for the common good of the church. Thus we must value the welfare of the church above our own welfare realizing that no individual member can flourish without the entire body's flourishing.[7]

The thought that the sin of Adam and Eve led the creation into the cursed state of sinfulness and death, preoccupies the church. Thereby considering problems related to physical and outer appearance as a result of sin. Hope is not lost yet, as there is a bright side in the story that Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sinful condition. This strong tradition in the church that sin entered the world and that it has affected us all in one way or the other, which broke us away from God. It has corrupted humankind which has in fact triggered having improper conclusions in our relationship toward the disabilities. A result that came out of Reformation which was common in the Middle Ages was the dualistic way of looking at the reality: such as that, what

is not faith is sin.[8] What is not good is bad and what is not God is evil. Therefore, the condition of disability is bad. However, it should be thought that the varied physical conditions are just part of the things (in an abnormal way/different way) that exists in a fallen world.

**Theological Issues/Problem of Sin and Disability**

While architectural barriers, accessibility to transportation, lack of support to people with disabilities contribute to the problem of exclusion of people with disabilities from Christian communities, there are also issues with religious teachings, our discourse on creation, sin, redemption which is the core concept of Christian community. People with disabilities within Christian communities are regarded as being punished and cursed by God, and therefore not suited for being part of Christian congregations, which, according to Nancy Eiesland, is "disability-sin-conflation".[9] To this Wilder commented that, Christian religious doctrines are mixed in terms of their recognition of people with disabilities as eligible for full Christian practiced.[10] These images can be traced to the Biblical records and centuries of Christian interpreting and practicing it that formed widespread cultural attitudes and thereby creating a systemic marginalization of the people with disabilities. One can see clearly that one of the common themes that run through the Hebrew Scripture (supported by New Testament) is the conflation of moral impurity and physical disability. For instance, people with any defects such as, blind, lame, who has a marred face, or any limb too long, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or one with a blemish eyes, were prohibited from the priestly activities of bringing offerings to God or entering the altar (Lev.21:17-23). Such passages were used to warrant barring persons with disabilities from position ecclesiastical exercises. One of the common questions that immediately arises is "Can he/she do it"? It worsens the situation when such physical standards are retained as well as linking disability with sin, marring the divine image in humans and preventing religious services in the church and people's attitude.

Viewing disability as a disease, it mentions some common diseases such as blindness, deafness, dumbness, leprosy, and paralysis. The general understanding was that God brings disability as punishment for our transgressions. For instance, Israel was threatened for breaking the covenant and hence punishment was due. The Lord will inflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of the mind. At midday, you

will grope as a blind person in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything that you do, day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you (Deut. 28:28-29). Two cases of paralysis confirm that God is the cause of disability: king Jeroboam (1 Kings 13:4) and King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:19-21). Physical disability and the perfection of the body is another theme found in the Bible. In the very center of this theology is the teaching found in the book of Leviticus, which sets forth the requirements for ministry and physical imperfection being the reason as an impediment to the exercise of priestly office.

Such linkage between sin and disability can be also seen in the New Testament. For instance, when the paralysis man who was lowered by his companions into the house where Jesus was teaching, the forgiveness of sin and physical healing has been represented as equivalent (Luke 5:17-26). Jesus on perceiving the thoughts of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law enquired, "Which is easier to say," "your sins are forgiven you," or "Rise up and walk" (Luke 5:23). John 5:14 recounts the story of a man by the pool of Bethesda. After healing the man Jesus said, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing comes upon you." John 9:1-3 also demonstrates this sin-disability link but in a different way. On being asked whether the man's disability is the result of his sin, his family, Jesus responded that it was none of their fault but that the works of God should be revealed in him (John 9:3). Luther seems to have been preoccupied with spiritual interpretation applicable to the Christian church such as, the central point being the lack of spiritual insight by the religious teachers and dangers of such blindness. And while referring to Leviticus 21:16-23, he went on to refer that Christians do not offer worthless blind, lame, or false sacrifice but a faithful and pleasing one. To this modern interpreters have a feeling that his allegorization provided a convenient cover for indifference toward the exclusion of disabled Levites from their ritual roles.

Christian theologies and biblical interpretations continue to reinforce negative stereotypes, and support social and environmental segregation and mask the lived realities of the people with disabilities. They are considered as unfit to worship together, and to be given responsibilities. This is because of the understanding that those who represent God must be perfect and whole (Lev. 17-26; Heb. 9:14). Perfection is an idealized flawless physical and mental state. Perfection is a problem with theological interpretation right from creation account

and further including physical flawlessness in the service of God and that the experience or the lived realities of people with disabilities are rather ignored or considered as "not fit for this".

The conflation of sin and disability confirms the religious model of disability, which views disability as inflicted as punishment of God because of one's sin. And because of this not only the person affected but the whole family was stigmatized.[11] And because of this stigmatization, the family had to reject or hide the disability. They shun them from coming out and participate in community life. The theological meaning of perfection has historically included physical flawlessness, and many religious orientations make a direct connection between physical perfection and spiritual beauty. Accordingly, PwD lack perfection and embody "un-wholeness." Besides the theological problem, it is the attitude of the people that is more problematic. To this Eiesland further argues that, a critical examination of religious doctrine is necessary to address the injustice of exclusion of people with disabilities from the church. The theological problem is not people's capacity for faith, but a skewed understanding of what faith entails.

**Grace, a Source of Empowerment for People with Disability**

Each family, individual have different responses to disability. Our family had experienced tremendous loss of heart when our third daughter was born with myelomeningocele.[12] Despite our theological information that it is not our fault but still we speculate on what went wrong in me that would result to this. We use to pray, God what have we done to have this punishment befall on our family? In fact we prayed several times for God's healing, knowing He is all powerful. He could just say a word and she would be healed completely, because that's the aspect of God we have learned. When suffering, disability becomes a reality, it might be a struggle to reconcile with the fact that He is good and yet has allowed this brokenness in our lives. What Joni Eareckson Tada wrote is significant here: Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night with chronic pain, and you think to yourself, who is this God? Shifting this to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, at first she was convinced that it was God's will that Jesus goes to the cross. However, she got this enlightening lesson that God transforms and uses such events as a means to divine ends. This reality is what she calls the Sovereignty of God.[13]

Not only is our family called to live with disability, but our daughter she has to live with that every day of her life. Forgetting about what the world may say, but we have to adapt to this life and care that she will need from us. And out of this experience, we begin to appreciate more of God's sustaining grace we see in her as she grows day by day. That itself is what sustains us, empowers us and encourages us to hold on to with hope, knowing that it is God's grace that has led us this far. What Paul has written makes sense, '*concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you. For my strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me'* (2 Cor. 12:8-9). Hence, affliction is not a result of sin, a fallen world or even of punishment. Rather it is to be viewed as a way to align one's life with the Savior. A reassuring verse from the Bible is what keeps us going, "*for to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that you should follow His steps"* (1 Pet. 2:21).

In Christian tradition, the acknowledgement of sin is not a shameful thing; rather, it opens a space for the inflowing of grace and acceptance.[14] One of the surprising and exciting things about our life is that God leads us taking us to unexpected circumstances unraveling God's grace and love. That mixture of bitter-sweetness of grace helps us to realize and understand and acknowledge the meaning of wholeness in life. And that is the joy of living a life with disability. Despite critical comments made on disability, Calvin gives a unique insight into disability taking the dislocating of Jacob's hip. For him, one's disability, even physical ones show God's strength. He says, "For we know that the strength of God is made perfect in our weakness, in order that our exaltation may be joined with humility; for if our strength remained entire, and there was no injury or dislocation produced, immediately the flesh would become haughty, and we should forget that we had conquered by the help of God. But the wound received and the weakness which follows it compels us to be modest ."[15]

**Inclusive Ecclesiology**

Conversations on disability are being carried forward worldwide especially among the churches. Deliberations from different perspectives point to the fact that it is not just concerning some particular church, rather it should be the conversation of the life and health of

the church. It should be reflected as the health concern of the church. It is not just the healthy who are being called God's children, fit to pray and do ministry. Despite care and support being rendered to people with disabilities, there remains a big question as to how the church has treated people with disabilities in regard to spiritual care as compared to other needs. It is still a challenge for the church to fulfill the WCC interim theological statement: "A Church of All and For All". This is because the churches in its entirety are yet to fully become inclusive and accessible to people with disability. The traditional concept of the church as *ekklesia, qahal* which means assembly of the people is being deviated with the double standard hierarchical system. The motive of the church as a worshipping community where everyone irrespective of who or what they are can come and be part of the body of church, is pushed aside with its stereotypical attitude particularly to the term "disability". Right from the church structure to its teaching/preaching, doctrinal interpretations to ministerial practices, churches are not being accommodative to persons with disability.

The contemporary churches as bearers of Christ's ministry and message has to facilitate the integration of disability issues into the whole spectrum of the life of the church and society while at the same time giving adequate attention to those special and unique areas necessary to equalization of opportunities. One of these areas includes advocacy in disability human rights concerns. This means working with the churches towards participation and inclusiveness of person with disabilities in the spiritual, social, and development life in church and society and advocating for the general improvement of services for persons with disabilities. The church must become an advocate for and with them.

Churches need to identify with the problems faced by person with disabilities and endeavor to create enabling environments in which they can participate equally with persons without disabilities in the social, economic, cultural, religious, and political life of society. Because disability rights approach is still rooted in the assumption that it is less desirable. By contrast, disability culture asserts that disability is not to be hidden, healed, or even overcome. It helps us to understand that it is not the disability that is the problem rather the attitude of the society, toward them that is problematic. In one of the pamphlets of the Not yet Dead organization, it reads: People with Disabilities don't want your pity or your lethal mercy. We want freedom we want life we're not yet dead.

The contemporary church should read and reread the Parable of the Banquet (Matt. 22:1-14) where people from different walks of life with different life conditions are invited to partake in the communion. No matter how the invitation was send or what was the condition of the invitation, but what matters here is that each of them received their share of partaking in the communion, equally. Jesus Christ showed compassion for persons with disabilities. In the New Testament Jesus is frequently credited with showing kindness and effecting miraculous cures of those who were lame, blind, and otherwise disabled. St. Paul directed Christians to "comfort the feeble-minded." Jesus also welcomed those who were poor and disenfranchised and treated them as equals. Let us also create that world for our brothers and sisters and let them experience heaven here on earth and prepare them to long for the actual heaven .

**Endnotes**

1 John Swinton, "Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New possibilities," *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 14 (2011): 276-277.

2 David Aldrus, "Theology and its Impact on people with Disability: *An Ecclesiology Inclusive of People with Disability," Missio Apostolica,*

3 Cited by Courtney Wilder, Luther, The Catechisms, and Intellectual Disability," *Intersections,* 47 (Spring, 2018): 39.

4 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Gospel According to John*, trans. By William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009) 364-366.

5 This is coming out of the life situation where disability was often identified or categorized as being poor or with poverty.

6 David Aldrus, "Theology and its Impact on people with Disability: An Ecclesiology Inclusive of People with *Disability," Missio Apostolica*, 143.

7 Nelson Kloostermann, "Calvin on Ethics," in *Calvin for Today*, edited by Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Heritage Books, 2009), 206.

8 There's a connection made between disability and faith when Jesus pronounced "Your faith has made you well" (Mk 5:34; 10:52; Lk 8:48; 17:19; Mt 9:22). In another instance Jesus ascribes the disciple's failure to heal an epileptic child as their lack of faith (Mt 17:14-20). Such kind of labeling is considered as "disabling theology" especially by Nancy Eiesland.

9 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 72.

[10] Courtney Wilder, "The Catechisms, and Intellectual Disability," *Intersections*, 38.

[11] Nancy Eiesland considers this as violence committed against the disabled. To this she pointed out the use of two terms- "Stigma" and "minority group model". This is a social construct that breaks relationship subjecting the disabled to prejudicial attitude and discriminatory acts by the abled bodied.

[12] A birth defect in which a developing baby's spinal cord fails to develop properly. Before we came to terms with the medical explanations of the baby's problem, we were informed through different people that the devil's eye had befallen on her when I was carrying her. So, as was a common practice from where my husband comes, we were told to get a pinch of mud and paste it on the swollen area while cursing the evil. But that didn't change anything, till we had to come to terms to the doctor's explanation after several tests were done.

[13] Joni Eareckson Tada, "Finding God in our Suffering," *Veritasi*, 9 (2009):1-9.

[14] Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70.

[15] John Calvin, *op.cit*., 64

# Resurrected (Yet) 'Disabled' Christ: Resurrected Body and Disability

Samuel George

In Christendom, Resurrection is considered a state of perfection devoid of any 'defects.' This notion of 'perfection' in the resurrected state has adversely affected our Christian understanding of disability. We look forward to a time of which, renowned gospel singer, Jim Reeves popularized in his song – *Across the Bridge*. He sang (and we sing) "Across the bridge there's no more sorrow. Across the bridge there's no more pain. The sun will shine across the river. And you'll never be unhappy again."[1] Disability is seen as imperfect and defected, therefore, it does not have place in holy places. This imperfection or defect if it is not removed here on earth then there is an eternal hope that in 'across the bridge' it will not be there. There is a hope of an eschatological healing. Resurrection or after-life is seen as a state of perfection. And Christians look forward to that state of perfection.

This notion of resurrected body as 'perfect' and without defect is contrary to the state to which, Jesus was raised to. His wounds were still visible (and felt) even in the resurrected state. So, if the resurrected Christ has the wounds (symbol of defect) still visible, then why the emphasis on perfection (without defect) in the current state of our life. Why disability is seen as sin/curse, imperfect?

This raises fundamental questions about perfection, resurrection, and Christology. Here in this paper a humble attempt is made to Christologically look at the question of resurrected body and disability.

## Resurrected Body in the Christian Tradition

Christian hope of resurrection requires that the one raised be the same

person who died.[2] Candida Moss in her lecture, "Heavenly Bodies: What does it mean to be Resurrected from the Dead?",[3] rues that even though the writings of the Early Church and Jesus tradition talk about resurrection, there is very little exploration into the nature of resurrected bodies. This 'lack of' interest in the resurrected body has led to much speculation in our theologizing and spirituality. Deformity and imperfection are incompatible with the resurrected body. Out of this speculation arose the notion that (some Christian thinkers thought) it did not make sense to depict the resurrected body as feminine. Women who are resurrected are made whole by given masculine bodies.

Some of these ideas are borrowed from the ancient 'pagan' and Greek backgrounds. Among the Greeks there was an idea that the shape of a person existed even after their body decayed. It is from this view the ritual perfection of cremation emerged. The body needed to be buried intact, with the bones in place, lest this effect the body in the afterlife.

There was another perspective that was prevalent (which made it to the present Christian spirituality in a dominant manner), i.e., of eschatological healing, i.e., the dismembered/deformed body would be restored to 'perfection' by God in the afterlife. The resurrected bodies as heavenly bodies therefore, 'perfected' bodies communicate something about the relative values placed on gender, disability and non-disability. In the early Church, the resurrected bodies re-inscribed culturally-dominant norms that from a disability perspective were ableist in nature. They present a vision of a future in which the identities of existing bodies – actual people – will be reconfigured 'perfectly'; where individual identities will be overwritten and differences will be eradicated from the heavenly kingdom.[4]

Christian understanding of resurrected bodies is very dominantly influenced by the theology of Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15). It speaks of the resurrected bodies which will be like Christ's (the first one to be resurrected); resurrected bodies will not be "flesh and blood" (as it is in the present). It will have continuation as well as discontinuation with the old body, like a seed to a plant. He offers a glimpse of that life with the description of the risen body as a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*). What is sown perishable, in dishonour, in weakness, and as a physical body (*somapsychikon*) is raised imperishable, in glory, in power, and a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42-44). He is not speaking

about the composition of a body, whether earthly or heavenly, but of different 'temporal modes' of existence, i.e., a *somapsychikon* is a type of person subject to sin and appropriate to 'this age' in contrast to a *somapneumatikon* who is a type of person transformed by the Spirit and fitting for the 'new creation.'[5] According to Moss, Paul is talking about embodiment.[6] For him, spiritual body does not deny physicality, but it does tell us that the future body is different from the present. We are yet unaware of the 'material' of the spiritual body.

The early Christians were content with the resurrected body of Jesus with scars but for general resurrection of the believers (at the end) they believed that disability would be removed from the world. Christian understanding of the resurrected bodies took concrete shape in the post-apostolic period, especially within the context of the intellectual challenges from the Greek philosophies. Resurrection became the litmus test for orthodoxy in the early Church. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr (*De Resurrectione*) were some of the early thinkers to write on resurrection from a Christian perspective. One finds similarities between these perspectives and that of Paul especially the notion of continuity as-well-as discontinuity. To the Greco-Roman ideas that the characteristics of a person's body are important for his/her identity even after the body itself has died, pseudo-Justinian positions vociferously counters:

> …. For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed.[7]

Resurrected bodies, will be 'whole' and 'perfect'. Disability is not a part of someone's identity, it is part of the irrelevant corrupt matter that is discarded in the resurrection. Eschatological cleansing will transform the body so that it is no longer decaying and useless.[8] Irenaeus argued that Jesus healed and raised people from the dead in order to demonstrate that in the afterlife too God will heal people in their bodies. He reinforces the New Testament connection between healing and salvation, able-bodiedness and divine order. Accordingly, the continued presence of disability in the world is an indication that salvation is incomplete. Therefore, disability is a corruption – a hindrance to finding God. Human identity, as a reproduction of the

divine image, is only fully present in the non-disabled. For Irenaeus, disability is the sinful residue that tarnishes God's highly refined and polished creation.[9] Augustine, insists that anything "naturally present" in human bodies will be present at the resurrection, but this will not include 'deformity' and 'infirmity.'[10] At the resurrection, the body will be perfectly subject to the soul; mortality, sickness, and pain will be replaced by incorruptibility.[11] There is an erasure of deformities in the eschaton.

**Cues from the Resurrected Body of Jesus**

John 20:24-29 has this uniquely surprising story of the resurrected Jesus with wounds/scars. Scholars point out that they are part of the resurrection apologetics who also point out that John's gospel is a gospel of exaltation. Hence, the story of the resurrection should be viewed from the perspective of Jesus being exalted through resurrection.

Thomas decided "unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (v.25). Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand put it in my side" (v.27).

Paul argued (in I Cor. 15), that every resurrection (after Easter) is patterned after the resurrection of Jesus. Our resurrection, like Christ's, entails both continuity and radical transformation that is a new creation; it is creation, however, not from nothing (*ex nihilo*) but from the old (*ex vetere*) matter of this present age.[12] In that case, we need to address some of the questions being raised about the resurrected body of Jesus. What kind of body he had (and we will have)? Did he had the same physical pre-Easter body? If so, why was the 'wound' still visible on his resurrected body? If eschatological healing is what we all look for (in the resurrection body) then what about the body of resurrected Jesus? For John, it was more of a scar than a fresh wound. A scar that is visible and felt. Two aspects can be construed from this passage for Christological and disability studies.

1. Disability studies tell us that impairments are integral for recognizing Jesus first, then they are integral for everyone else.

2. It is anti-Docetic affirmation. The body of Jesus is important. "Mark of the nail" and to touch him is to prove that he is not a ghost.

Yes, we do agree that removal of physical infirmities was one of the core purposes of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, the

Christ. However, the perpetuation of the idea of resurrected bodies without infirmities is similar to the idea of the Gospel of Thomas where a perfect resurrected body must be male ("for every female who makes herself will enter the Kingdom of Heaven").

Scars on the resurrected body of Jesus debunks this notion (of physical perfection in the afterlife). Infirmity is part of our identity. The scars of the wound Jesus endured in his body is his identity. He retained his scars of the wounds, lest he wouldn't be recognized by those who have seen and experienced him. But could they not have recognized him through other means!

**Implications for Disability Theology**

Disability theologian Nancy Eiesland, was an embodied being and her disability was an integral part of who she was. To the suggestion "Don't worry about your suffering now – in heaven you will be made whole" she wondered, "My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? Would I be absolutely unknown to myself in heaven, and perhaps even unknown to God?"[13]

**1. Redefining Perfection (strength, healing)**

PwDs are made to feel that their impaired/disformed bodies are 'not perfect.' They are the outcome of sin, curse ("… who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"). This notion of disability as imperfect (therefore sinful/cursed) has impacted the lives of PwDs so negatively that even religion does not help them in anyways. A Disability-inspired-reading of the Bible helps us to re-look some of these negative notions.

God's idea of perfection differs from ours. God's perspective on perfection is succinctly portrayed in his chiding of the prophet Samuel when he went to choose the new king of Israel. "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (I Samuel 16:7).

The scar on the resurrected body of Jesus suggests that disabled bodies are still vehicles of God's glory and resurrection life. Chong writes, "If the resurrected Jesus is the ultimate image of God (Col. 1:15), and he bears the marks of impairment, then people with disabilities

are also fully image-bearers."[14] Eiesland too says, resurrected Jesus' impairment marks reveal "the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability."[15]

The question of perfection also raises the question of healing. What is healing? What if one is not healed here, but there is hope of an eschatological healing?

Mark 9:43-48 talks about being deformed in the Kingdom of God "… it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell" (9:47). According to the above passage, if amputees (being deformed therefore, a symbol of sin and curse) can enter the kingdom of God, does that mean disability and deformity too will inherit the kingdom? This passage alludes that there is disability in the hereafter too. There is no eschatological healing as it is promised in our theology and spirituality. There is a continuation of what is here and now and the afterlife. Mark subverts the idea that 'able' and 'beautiful' are virtuous. He insists that deformities enter heaven, whereas 'beautiful' and 'whole' is cast into the hell. In the divine scheme the unnatural becomes natural. Amputation (deformity) in earthly life will save from eternal damnation. If so, where is the question of being disabled means being damned?

**2. 'Disabled' Jesus: a Christology of Solidarity**

'Disabled Jesus' is a contextual Christology. Eiesland writes, "it is contextualized in that the disabled God emerges in the particular situation in which people with disabilities and others who care find themselves as they try to live out their faith and to fulfil their calling to live ordinary lives of worth and dignity."[16] It is at the resurrection, the disciples understood the significance of the person of Jesus. Eiesland further writes,

> In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important words was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the imago Dei. Paradoxically, in the very act commonly understood as the transcendence of physical life, God is revealed as tangible, bearing the representation of the body reshaped by injustice and sin into the fullness of the Godhead.[17]

The resurrection of Jesus points to the incarnational promise that he

is the Emmanuel (God with us and will be). He is with us as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. The impaired resurrected body of Jesus points to the fact that the resurrected Christ is revealed as the disabled God. This has implications for our salvation too. The resurrected Christ calls his followers to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation.[18] Resurrection of Jesus does not posit that suffering and loss are triumphantly eradicated, but rather that they are transposed into the promise of a fullness yet to come.[19]

The resurrected body of Christ is not merely a resuscitated or reanimated physical corpse. Neither is it an apparition or some spiritualized and fleshless pseudo-body. It is a transcendent body, appearing and disappearing abruptly. But it is the body of Jesus. He appears bearing wounds from the cross. His risen body demonstrates the extent to which God affirms the created and whole person.

> Liberation for new life confirms the goodness of creation, the goodness of the imago Dei in its embodied form, but it does so by transforming it into a heavenly form. Hence, redemption is not from bodily existence, but for bodily life in all its capacities – that is, creativity, relationality, and availability – the richest possibilities of which lie in communion with God.[20]

At the cross, Jesus subjects himself to disability, and his resurrected body continues to bear his scars as a sign of God's solidarity with humanity. His disabled body represents one who understands by embodying disability even in his transformed, resurrected body. It also suggests that disability indicates not a flawed humanity but a full humanity. Our bodies participate in the *imago Dei* in and through vulnerability and its consequent impairments, not despite them.[21]

The resurrected Christ thus embodies the blessed contingencies and dependencies of human life and places these in the heart of God. The impaired body of Christ is an icon of the disabled God, a God whose vulnerability is thus palpably real.[22]

The resurrected Christ as disabled challenges the 'suffering servant model' and 'conquering Lord model'. It means moving away from the vision of redemption and promised new life in terms of homogeneity, wherein all people are normalized according to the ideal non-disabled body. Jesus' risen body marks God's identification with human vulnerability, such that differences are confirmed rather than pressed

into ghost-like conformity. There is no assimilation into normalcy in the new life to come. Of course, we will all be transformed and changed (I Cor. 15:51), the sting of suffering taken away in a way that we cannot imagine. Even so, however, we shall remain who we are, not standardized and folded into a homogenised common stock.[23] The resurrected body of Jesus also makes possible a renewal of hope for PwDs, not a utopian hope (of erasure of all human contingency) but a recollection and projection that even our nonconventional bodies, which often times dissatisfy and fail us, are worth the living.[24] Ehrman writes,

> The resurrection brings the harvest of our life – experiences, history, virtues, memories – to a new bodily pitch in Christ. We enter into a new situation of God's love that is continuous yet discontinuous with the former situation. In the resurrection, we shall finally be in our element and in action, transformed in God's love and grace.[25]

Resurrected body of Jesus also points to the acceptance of the disabled God who enables the PwDs in finding peace and reconciliation with their own bodies and Christ's body, the church. The impaired resurrected body of Jesus alludes to the fact that disability becomes a new symbol of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.[26]

**Conclusion**

Asian context is predominantly the context of poverty, religious plurality, caste discrimination, and gender inequality. It is also the context of extreme ableism. In such a context, Jesus, as the resurrected (yet) disabled Christ becomes paradigmatic for Christologizing. He stands in solidarity with the disabled even in the resurrected state.

The portrayal of 'disabled' Jesus Christ provides a provoking yet powerful image for Christologizing in the Asian context. He is the 'Human One' who identify with the sufferings of the marginalized, the *ochlos* (the masses). Such image would inspire us and energize us to imagine, provoke our commitment and conviction to walk with Jesus. This Christology is done by getting implicated in the struggles of the people and experiencing the suffering of the people as God's Son did it on the Cross and in his resurrected form he bears the marks of that suffering. In and through his life, ministry, death and resurrection the 'disabled' Jesus Christ identifies with the suffering humanity.

This Christology, therefore, is not triumphalistic, interventionist and imperialistic but inclusive and challenging.

An attempt was made to understand the resurrected body of Jesus and its implications for disability theology. Two things become clearer: the question of eschatological healing is to be re-thought and resurrected Christ stands in solidarity with PwDs. This has serious significance for our theologizing and spirituality, which is predominantly based on an 'ableist' ideology. The resurrected Christ calls us again to "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand put it in my side." It is in that 'touch' we experience the healing, wholeness, liberation and transformation. And it is in that 'touch' Jesus' resurrection finds its meaning and purpose, i.e., he lived, died and rose again to be in solidarity and communion with humanity – the disabled humanity.

**Endnotes**

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1 Cf. Revelation 21:4.

2 For more, Terrence Ehrman, "Disability and Resurrection Identity," New Blackfriars 96, no. 1066 (November 2015): 723-738.

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOCQJt92ScE&feature=youtu.be (accessed November 06, 2018).

4 Candida R. Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church " *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (December 2011): 993.

5 Cf. Andrew Johnson, "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15: Apocalyptic Epistemology, the Resurrected Body and the New Creation," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 75, no. 4(2004): 291-309.

6 Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church," 993.

7 *On the Resurrection*, ANF 1:344.

8 Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church ": 1005.

9 *Ibid*., 1008.

10 *City of God,* 22.20.1152.

11 *Ibid*., 22.21.

12 John Polkinghorne, "Eschatology Credibility: Emergent and Teleological Processes," in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed., Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids,

Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 50.

13 Nancy Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," *The Other Side* (September & October 2002), 12-13. http://www.dsfnetwork.org/assets/Uploads/DisabilitySunday/21206.Eiesland-Disabled-God.pdf (accessed November 10, 2018).

14 Shiao Chong, "The Disabled Savior," *The Banner* (March 3, 2017), *https://www.thebanner.org/features/2017/03/the-disabled-savior*(accessed November 10, 2018).

15 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

16 *Ibid*., 98.

17 *Ibid*., 99-100.

18 *Ibid*., 100.

19 Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 206.

20 *Ibid*., 207.

21 Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 101.

22 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, 208.

23 Roy Mc Cloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (London: SPCK, 2002), 73.

24 Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 103.

25 Ehrman, "Disability and Resurrection Identity," 738.

26 Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 101.

# Couples with Impaired Fertility: Disability Theology with a Further Concern

Dipti R. Gine

## Introduction

This presentation is a journey in interrogation between these two streams, where I would like to pose challenges to certain Biblical dictums on one hand, while on the other to counteract the so-called *plight* with counter Biblical passages. No doubt, the paper will be based primarily on personal experience, yet it will follow the Exegetical Method based on certain Biblical passages to deal with the issue of *impaired fertility*, which will be looked into mainly from the Biblical perspectives.

## Definition of the terms

1. *Couples*: Although the word couples may have diverse meaning and implications,[1] for the present paper it means exclusively married couple of which one is male and the other is female. More than one such couple constitutes *couples*.
2. *Impaired fertility*: It is a damaged or weakened rate of fertility in either of the couple leading to the deprivation of producing children of their own, the result of which may or may not be termed as *disability*. The lack of procreation ability does not make them infertile in every sense. They might show their fertility in their ideas, activities and creativity in many other ways. Therefore, I prefer the term *impaired fertility* to the term *infertility*. This term is appropriate and dignified.

3. *Disability*: Refusing to see the positive aspect, i.e., *ability*, amidst scores of negative forces and/or impulses. It reflects more of a person's attitude than aspiration, and realisation than reality. Such an act of refusal might come both from the concerned couple and the people around them.[2]

**Method of Study**

This paper will consider three interrelated questions in the process of discussion and presentation, answer to which will serve as part of its *method*. These questions will not be raised explicitly in the paper, but will be discussed as *issues* which had been *troubling* the presenter for quite sometimes.

1. What do the Biblical texts say about *impaired fertility*?
2. Is not impaired fertility a disability?
3. How can the couple with impaired fertility contribute towards Disability Theology?

These questions are based on the presenter's lived experience, which are rooted in the Biblical texts. Answers to these questions are also based on the presenter's lived experience, which are also embedded in the Biblical texts. Some Biblical texts will be taken into consideration, because they challenged the presenter's inner being as a woman and attempted to threaten at times her faith in God. These altogether constitute the Confessional Method of the presenter,[3] which would be followed for this paper. This is a confessional declaration of the presenter, who has gone through different tests and trial, and finally was enriched through the process of her journey.

**Scope and limitations**

Assuming that the issue of *impaired fertility* is eligible to come under the wider spectrum of disability, this research from Confessional Method has been undertaken with a view to contribute to the Disability Theology with a further concern. This is going to be made possible with the lived experience of the presenter expressed through Confessional Method using Biblical texts. Even though the phrase "Biblical texts" would imply both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the paper would be limited mainly to the relevant texts from the New Testament. And all these Biblical passages would be taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Catholic Edition.[4]

**Tracing out *Impaired Fertility*:**

Strictly speaking, the phrase "impaired fertility" is absent in the Bible. This phrase is, rather, coined in modern terminology to indicate the couples who have somehow fallen short of giving birth to their own biological children out of their wedlock. What the Bible has used is in a positive way of giving birth to a child as fertility. It, however, does not say what would happen to the couple in its absence![5] In order to look at the issue from the Biblical perspective, the paper will consider certain related Biblical texts.

At the outset, let me declare that Jesus has not made any direct or indirect reference to the issue of *infertility/fertility* in his teaching and action. He has not made any use of this issue in the delivery of his parables. No couple with impaired fertility had ever approached Jesus for *healing*. Again, Jesus had not healed any couple with impaired fertility. This may be seen and analysed from three different perspectives: one, there was no couple during Jesus' time who suffered from impaired fertility; two, people during his time did not consider this issue a big deal, and three, couples with impaired fertility were suffering from low self-esteem to approach Jesus. From the New Testament accounts it is clear that there was no dearth of couples of impaired fertility during the New Testament times. The birth of John the Baptizer bears testimony to it. Further, we cannot accept that people did not consider this a big deal. This was, rather, a big deal in both the New and the Old Testament times. Furthermore, people who suffered with low self-esteem came to Jesus to be healed. Jesus relieved them, and they really re-lived their lives. Therefore, we can at the best say that no Evangelist has ever mentioned in their Gospels that Jesus had ever encountered any couple with impaired fertility, and no such couple have ever testified their healing or otherwise from such impairment.

All the more, this raises another issue of their identity. Although the four Gospels remain silent about the issue of impaired fertility, they do not claim that there was no couple with impaired fertility. Were they considered *people anyway*? According to Huang Po Ho, "… theologically speaking, 'people' cannot be conceptualized to a set of definitions; 'people' include those who have stretched out their hands for help and deliverance."[6] Today's society, particularly the Christian society, has not understood this concept of *people*. The couples with impaired fertility do seek help and deliverance both from humans

and from God. It is ironical that these couples are at times ignored in vital places, particularly when Mother's Day is celebrated! Yes, we trace out couples with impaired fertility! Getting ignored in social and ecclesiastical celebrations and occasions is only the beginning of the plight of these couples.

**Stages the Couples with Impaired Fertility go through:**

In almost all cases couples would not have any inkling about their reproductive condition prior to their bond through matrimony. Everybody has right to think positive about themselves and their condition; but when this *right* is violated by the *reality* of the depravity of reproduction, they react differently. There is hardly any way to understand the plight they would go through, and there is hardly enough compassion to measure it. What all have been stated below are only the feelings and frustrations which usually surface among the couples with impaired fertility, but the mental trauma and psychological torture they go through can hardly be imagined, expressed and explained. Following are some of the major stages that each couple with impaired fertility go through.

1. **Joy and excitement of togetherness**: Proverb goes, "Marriage is made in heaven". Hence, each couple believe that the event of matrimony is a dream-realised reality. Depending on the cultural background a couple come from, the matrimonial celebration persists. Each day of this celebration turns to be a festivity. Some consider these *festive days* as occasions for restraint while others consider as activities. Days and months together go with such joy and excitement.
2. **Hope and aspiration of parenthood**: Unless the couples had prior acquaintances between themselves and planned for their future course of action, the recently wedded couples would always aspire for parenthood with their mutual understanding. If the couples are from joint families, their own plan might get jeopardised because of the pressure and/or demand of their family members. All members of such joint families look forward to offspring as early as possible.
3. **Delays leads to doubts**: Only when the wedded couples discover that without adopting any family-planning measure their expectation of conception is not fulfilled, they start doubting. They gradually get worried about the delay and begin doubting

their capability. This results in different ways – starting from the question of integrity through deceit to the stage of divorce.

4. **Perseverance in prayer and partnership**: In normal situations, the couples take time together for introspection, which provide them the desire to spend time to be together in the most deserving places. They contemplate and persevere more in prayer, leading to private devotion and combined prayer. Posting request for prayer to dear ones, prayer-partners, and even to most reliable friends who can become the means of their spiritual help and guidance.
5. **Communication and consultation**: Communication at this stage takes two forms – gossip and giving advice. Among the neighbours and not-so-good friends, gossip takes the leading role to humiliate this type of couples. On the contrary, among the relatives and the relied-ones, giving advice out of serious concern takes a new direction. Advice to consult appropriate physicians is a general trend, but advice to their physical wellbeing etc. also flow spontaneously.
6. **Care and counselling**: Approaching an appropriate counsellor springs out of concern and advice of the well-wishers and relatives. Although visiting counsellor, particularly in the Indian contexts, has not become yet a popular trend, couples gradually feel the need of meeting a counsellor. In some contexts a religious leader, particularly a Clergy or Cleric, provide both care and counselling to the couples as per the guiding principles of counselling.
7. **Depravity and decision making**: At this stage, the issue of inability to conceive starts taking somewhat serious stage. Couples who cannot take this issue with patience, suffer badly. They even go the extent of thinking ending their relationship or life. If counselling and care worked with them, the outcome, however, would be positive – both in attitude and expression. They realise their depravity, yet they don't think it to be the end of the world. They take decision without any delay for therapeutic remedy, if any, and seek God's intervention.
8. **Therapeutic and theocentric approach**: Therapeutic approach is considered to be the *hope for the hopeless*, and with that thought the deprived couples make multiple therapeutic approaches available within their vicinity and/or jurisdiction (e.g., In Vitro Fertilization [IVF], adoption, etc.). Some are financially highly expensive,

others are legally bound; some are socially tabooed, and others are religiously irreligious. As they contemplate on the therapeutic measure, they continue making theocentric approaches, depending on the faith-background they come from. In majority of cases, both of these approaches go simultaneously.

9. **Finance and fears**: Depending on the therapeutic steps they take, the couples experience the financial crunch, coupled with impending multiple levels of fear. All these levels of fear surface at different stages, based on *ifs and buts*. What *if* this therapeutic method would not work despite spending such a huge amount! What *if* the *could-be* child in question work against us! What *if* the child become aware of her/his origin! Are we going to be accepted *biological* parents! Finance and fears become one of the serious challenges to these couples, particularly if they came from financially deprived background.
10. **Searching scripture**: The couples usually turn to the only reliable resort, i.e., the Holy Scripture, when they are knocked out from all *doors of hope*. The scriptural verses provide altogether different message of courage and comfort in facing this situation. Searching scriptural passages from different sources (like Daily Readings, Healing Guild, Church Elders, Church Pastors, etc.) become handy to face this crisis.
11. **Divine guidance and human support**: In most cases, the suffering couples get divine guidance in different forms: scripture, prayer, dream, vision, meditation, hearing sermon, reading appropriate literature, etc. The close relatives and friends too become divine agents in spiritual low ebb. Apart from these, the couples who have already experienced the pain and suffering of impaired fertility become resourceful aids. Hence, as a final resort, the couples who have been diagnosed recently with impaired fertility either visit them or listen to their story for their own support and wellbeing.
12. **Acceptance and acclamation**: As the couples advance in age and all possibilities of having biological offspring are evaporated, they learn to accept their situation and try to explore the *good* behind such reality. There are some who find such *goodness* long before coming to this final stage of forced acceptance. Some find it even before they express their eagerness to step out for medical treatment. There are some even who find the *wellness* in every step they take in their life-journey.

**Considering Some Challenge-Posing Biblical Texts:**

Despite the fact that the couples with impaired fertility seek guidance from the Scripture at their bewilderment, they get at times frightened by some of the scriptural texts which act not as comforters but pose as complainants. Some of the texts which made the presenter angry and almost devoid of faith in God are as follows:

a) **I Timthy 2:15** – "Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" ([New Revised Standard Version, henceforth NRSV], Catholic Edition for India, henceforth CEI). This text speaks a lot depending upon the Version we are using.[7] We would like to consider this text, because it directly approaches the issue of *fertility/infertility*, with reference to women. There is no denying fact that the text talks about two faceted issues: one, women would be saved through bearing of children, and two, certain conditions have been imposed upon them. This being saved (i.e., through the act of childbearing) is conditional in four ways, i.e. the women have to have faith, love, holiness and modesty apart from their childbearing. There is no qualified statement, however, that women will be saved only when they deliver children, as if, there is no other way left open for them to be saved. Out of thirteen versions of the Bible that have been referred to at the footnote, seven provide alternative translation basing on the original Greek text.[8] Again, out of these seven, three provide footnote for other possible translations.[9]

If we consider the NRSV text literally, it would generate many questions, like: Does Paul, the author of 1Timothy, then, replace the act of salvation wrought by Christ by the act of women's childbearing?[10] Is this the reason that the Biblical writers depicted childless women with a final touch of their bearing children?[11] If *bearing child* is equivalent to *being saved*, how *great* the saving grace of God is! What, then, about the women who never bore and would never bear any child in their life? Should these women be considered *unsaved*? Does this, on the contrary, mean that Christ came to this world to *save* men only? Do women require *salvation* through Christ? If yes, how would it be rated in comparison to the act of childbearing? If no, how would they be considered *member* of the *body of Christ* (i.e., the church)? Is the saving power of Christ so weak to bring women in his fold! Does it mean that women have to be dependent on men in order to be saved? Does this mean that the Bible as a whole suffers from male chauvinism?

No women on earth, be they Christian or otherwise, would approve and accept this Biblical statement, if this is taken literally without considering its linguistic, sociological, spiritual, political and contextual background and implications. Are we aware of the implications of the literal acceptance of this verse? If considered literally, then persons like Saint Teresa, who never married and gave birth to any child, how could she become Mother Teresa not only of Kolkata but also of the whole world? Should we say, she was never saved! Two points are worth contemplating: *saving* of a person and bearing *children* of a woman. What does save mean! It might to some extent imply that "woman's spiritual salvation is helped by her giving herself to motherly duties in the home, rather than seeking to dominate the church."[12] The Greek verb (*teknogoneō*) simply communicates the meaning of "having or bearing children."[13] The Greek text has the feminine definite article, which is the only occurrence in the entire New Testament. The use of such a definite article in this text refers to the "childbearing of Mary, which has undone the work of Eve."[14]

b) **Hebrews 11:11** – This is a reference to the Old Testament, which has gone through various textual criticisms because of its Greek expression. The main bone of contention is the Greek expression (*eiskatabolēnspermatos*), which is translated as "for the laying down of seed". This cannot be the act of female, but male. It is male who lays down seed and it is female who conceives in the reproductive process.[15] We note that most of the English versions translated the text *faithfully* and kept Sarah as the subject of faith. The New International Version (NIV)[16] and Today's English Version (TEV),[17] however, gave credit to Abraham along with Sarah for the trust in God, who is always able to keep the promise. The New Revised Standard Version, although does not mention Abraham by name, but refers to Abraham with third person singular masculine pronoun.[18] Their (i.e., Abraham and Sarah) being faithful to the One who had promised, rewarded them at their old age. The only difference is that Sarah had double predicament: old age and barrenness.[19]

For F. F. Bruce, the real issue is hidden in the expression *autēSarra*. According to him, even though the feminine definite article is in Nominative Case, it should be understood in the Dative Case. In that case, he assumes that the dative iota subscript must have been dropped. He, therefore, suggests that the construction is dative of accompaniment.

Therefore the verse should read, "By faith he [Abraham] also, together with Sarah, received power to beget a child when he was past age, since he counted him faithful who had promised."[20] We note that there is a tendency among the NT scholars to support this view.[21]

It is amazing that Bruce comes back to the Greek phrase (*eiskatabolēnspermatos*) and provides its literal translation (i.e., "for the deposition of seed") to indicate that this was the reference "to Abraham's receiving power to become a father at an advanced age", because this phrase "denotes the paternal act of begetting and not the maternal one of conception, and also because Sarah's incredulous laughter (Gen. 18:12) was no sign of faith."[22]

Apart from these, there are other Biblical texts (e.g. Psalms 127:3, etc.) which appear to be direct reference to the couples with impaired fertility. But as it has been seen above, what appears to be *threat* is a threat of understanding and/or interpretation. They rather can become source of realizing the human life in relation to God's love.

**Counter Biblical Texts to Combat the Plight of the Couples with Impaired Fertility**

At the time of physical debasement and spiritual bankruptcy, the same Bible provides strength to bear the shame and suffering, and directs a new way of life. The following are some of such texts:

c) Luke 1:36-37 – This is a unique Biblical text where a *steira* (literally meaning, *barren*) woman receives a very personal, yet unpredicted and unsolicited gift from God on one hand, while on the other a public declaration of the angel on the greatness of God. The recipients of both of these great news were two women: Elizabeth who is overage and who had been a *steira* and became mother of John, and Mary who was yet to conceive by the Holy Spirit and who was to give birth to Jesus, the saviour of the world. The promise that was made is the universal nature of God, i.e., nothing is impossible with God or no word from God will ever fail (NIV). This resonates the angelic declaration made to Sarah, who was also a *steira*, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:13).

Three points are to be observed here. **One**, whether it is the case of Sarah or Elizabeth, no *steira* was responsible for their state of life. **Two**, the Lord God knew their situation and plight, and so the God

came forward to their rescue voluntarily. **Three**, God did not take any extra effort to redeem their life. God behaved in impossible situation because nothing is too hard or impossible to God. Now, if God does work in one particular situation and does not work in another, God is not accountable to anyone for such of God's activity. When one is blessed by God and the result of this blessing is visible, people neither praise that person nor remember God's grace in her/his life. But when one is not blessed to produce such fruit, the same people do not blame or even question God, they rather go on pouring countless negative adjectives on the persons who have not received it. Women who have constraint of receiving the power/gift of conceiving, face this same plight.

d) **Romans 2:11** – Paul became a vibrant believer of Christ when he realized that God works beyond any human-made boundary. According to Paul, God does not show any partiality. The Greek word used here to express God's nature is *prosōpolēmpsia*, which is a combination of two words *prosōpon* (meaning, *face*) and *lambanō* (meaning, to *receive*). The word, therefore, may literally mean, *receiving of face*. The verse may literally communicate like this: For with God there is no receiving of face. The King James Version, therefore, translates it: "For there is no respect of persons with God". In other way, it is: "God treats everyone the same" (Living Bible). The Today's English Version says, "For God judges everyone by the same standard". This is a clear indication that God shows no partiality.

The whole context of Romans 2 is a debate over the identity of the Gentiles and the Jews. The Jews are the people of God, but the Gentiles were also created by God. The Jews have been given to follow the Mosaic Law, but the Gentiles have no idea about it. At the beginning of this epistle (Romans 1:20) Paul has already declared that the Gentiles who refused to recognize God's revelation would be "without excuse". And now he declares that the Jews, who possessed God's revelation in the Law, are also "inexcusable". Earle proposed a better word than *without excuse* or *inexcusable*. He replaces these by the term *defenceless*. According to him, "… the term 'defenceless' suggests a court scene, where the defendant stands before the judge condemned because he has not been able to defend his action … So the implication here is that the self-righteous Jew was defenceless before God and would be so at the final judgement."[23] Whatever may the case,

in both of the cases the treatment will be the same for both the Jews and the Gentiles.[24]

It is amazing to note that the same verb (*prosōpolēmpsia*) has been used in three other places of the New Testament (Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; Jas. 2:1), but with pedagogical purpose. Both Paul and James are keen to show through their epistles that all followers of Christ, particularly the Church, must follow the principles of life that has been shown and taught by God. All humans should treat everyone equally without showing any partiality. The irony is that the so-called people of God are well-versed in treating humans unequally. Their treatment depends on different criteria, like financially elite, socially highly placed, belonging to the high cast, physically sound, educated, preferably potential, eligible to produce offspring, etc. Biblical teaching on "equal respect" and "showing no partiality" takes the backseat in our human society.

e) **2 Corinthians 4:16-18** – Paul's direct appeal to the Corinthians on how they should lead their lives and what should be their expectation on this earth, opens up a new horizon of Christian teaching. The entire section is offering a new principle of life. That is, a) physical suffering cannot overpower heart's goodwill; b) physical suffering affects our body even to the extent of losing weight and gradual decay, yet this is temporary; c) present suffering is temporary, but the future anticipated glory is forever;[25] d) future glory outweighs present suffering incomparably; and e) what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

What Paul is presenting here is still a greater truth with antithetical elements. Paul's unique device is using anthropological antithesis – death/life, outer person (wasting away)/inner person (being renewed), momentary/ eternal, and seen/unseen. By way of contrast, Paul expresses the superiority of life, inner person, and the unseen where the life of Jesus is embedded with. "This is not to say that Paul minimizes the pain of suffering. Rather, it is a matter of perspective. Suffering, real though it is, is ephemeral because it belongs to this age, in contrast with the age to come, which is eternal."[26] According to Paul, suffering in the form of insult or inhibition and emptiness or embarrassment, will prepare us for the anticipated glory. The pain, insult (both implied and explicit), and embarrassment of the couple with impaired fertility

cannot be expressed by them and be understood by others. Even at times empathy does not work to alleviate their pain. The Pauline dictum at such a moment is, no doubt, relieving and refreshing. This works as a challenge as well as encouragement.

This text shows three things consequently: (i) the visual verb (i.e. beholding or looking in v.18), (ii) the yet-to-come thing (i.e. the glory that has not yet come in v. 18), and (iii) the appearance of Present Tense in Passive Voice which is an indicator of God's action in the entire process.[27] The simple teaching here is that these couples do not focus on the momentary things which they are passing through, rather they focus on the thing to come which is in control of God. And it is God alone who would turn the pain into point of glory, insult into delight, and embarrassment into enjoyment. The other side of this text is that the futuristic implication does not wait for the indefinite or delayed future. It is rather a realized future. That is, people's experience is not "will be" but "is". Since God is in the process of turning the present into future, it is because of God's grace that the couples with impaired fertility enjoy the futuristic glory and delight. God only provides them the strength and courage to face the reality and embrace the realised future.

f) **Psalms 113:9**– The Book of Psalms provides different dimensional texts for considering the issue of *fertility/infertility*. We consider just one of those – Psalms 113:9. "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD" (NRSV, CE). The other versions, however, have different renderings, which have replaced the offensive and negative expressions by positive note bringing out their inner meaning.[28] The first expression, *barren*, refers to the hopeless situation of a woman incapable of bearing children. In fact, this is what the Greek word *steira* means, i.e., a woman constraint of having children. When this particular state of a woman is adjectivized with the word *barren*, this inflicts the person doubly, that is, having the state of incapability in having children and bearing the insult of not having children. In the Ancient Near East, childless woman were even deprived of living in a house and a family of her own. Psalmist made it a point in his Psalm that God provides childless woman a house to abide in as a faithful mother of children. That is, a childless woman receives a family to keep herself happy.[29]

**Findings**

What we gather from the above discussion are as follows:

1. To have a child is an aspiration of every couple. If this aspiration is not fulfilled for any reason it brings frustration, followed by pain and suffering.
2. When reason for having no children is made known to the couple, this adds along with it an extra pain of no-possibility in future at all.
3. Financially solvent couples might try to go for different medical means of having children, but couples with not so strong financially might think twice before adopting such means.
4. Family and friends might stand beside the couples with impaired fertility with concern and compassion.
5. Certain scriptural portions might appear discriminatory to these deprived couples, yet these texts, if looked at intently, provide spiritual guidance.
6. Select Biblical texts soothe and strengthen these couples in their desperation, and help them to discern the divine will.
7. Couples with impaired fertility become resourceful at their mature state to the similar type of couples at their physical and spiritual journey.

**Recommendations**

On the basis of the above sharing and discussion, the following may be recommended:

1. That the couples should be informed well about impaired fertility. There should not be any duplicate learning.
2. That the family and friends stand beside the couples with impaired fertility not with sympathy but in empathy and compassion.
3. That the In-Laws of both sides accept the reality in positive way and allow the couple to live in peace and joy.
4. That the church provide them a greater family of support and strength, and make them part of every contextual celebration.

The church must be extra-sensitive on special occasions like Mother's Day and Father's Day. The church need to emphasise rather on the *Motherhood* and the *Fatherhood* of the couples with *impaired fertility* to uphold their dignity, and their contribution to the society at large. There is a greater joy when it is shared together than excluding some and making them more deprived and deserted.

5. That the church encourage the visionaries, who are often called "paradigm pioneers", to perceive things differently. Let them envision a world in which both mothers with children and mothers without biological children will be honoured equally.[30]
6. That the church and the society must support these couples in all good they want to do for the society at large.
7. That the church creates a platform for them to express their feeling of helplessness and experience of God's grace.

**Conclusion**

There are millions of couples without children in this world. They are childless either because of their life's adverse situation or because of their impaired fertility. The mental agony they go through, particularly when they hear about their condition for the first time, is beyond human comprehension. They bear it silently all alone. They react, however, differently: some curse God, some consider it as their fate, some blame result of their earlier birth, some even count it as a cast of evil eyes fell on them during their wedding, and so on. There are very few who find divine will behind this entire episode of their lives. And those who find this, learn how to cope with the situation with positive attitude and passionate behaviour with others. They even become a source of comfort for the people with the same plight.

These people who have become positive and passionate today have not become so all on a sudden. They have gone through several stages to come to this realisation, which has in turn become resources for developing Disability Theology. If *theology* is the experience of life lived with in discerning God's very presence, and if *disability* is refusing to see the positive aspect, i.e., *ability*, amidst scores of negative forces and/or impulses, then surely the couples with impaired fertility have lot to learn, and yet contribute towards the Disability Theology in the making.

A prayer, "The springs of forgiveness", by Terry C. Falla summarises the told and untold issue of the presented paper well,

"Eternal God,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Father and Mother of us all:
*You pardon all who truly repent,*
*You forgive us as we forgive those*
*Who have hurt and wronged us.*
Let the springs of forgiveness be the source
Of our freedom, and the strength of your
Tenderness be deep in our lives.
*Bring faith, bring healing, bring peace,*
*And help us live in the confidence*
*That nothing can separate us from your love*
*In Christ our Saviour and Lord.*
Amen."[31]

**Endnotes**

1 It might communicate the identity of any friendly matching between the two individuals of any sexual orientation, social background, religious upbringing, educational nurturing, mental-cum-intellectual stamina, political coordination of ideologies, and the like.

2 In fact, through the passage of time when the impaired couples get mentally settled and accept the reality of their life situation, they concentrate more on the positive aspects of their lives. They also attempt to contribute to the society at large in every possible way. Yet, there would be certain members of the society who would not like to perceive these acts and/or contributions of these couples with impaired fertility from positive angle; they would like rather to comfortably deny even their existence. Their understanding of disability is that it is a staggering situation which has a negative connotation and therefore has to be viewed negatively only. This is more than attitude, and I call it *Applied Attitudinal Syndrome* (AAS).

3 Confessional Method is the method of research which reflects the researcher's personal lived experience. In the process of confession, the writer/researcher declares things openly her/his pains and suffering, gain and loss, joy and sorrow, and even emotional outburst. This personal

confession is made, as if, to someone who is very close to them and who is in a position to understand her/his situation well. Confessional Method does not seek solution, but shares situations. The main resources of this method is individuals and the Scripture. Understanding and interpreting the Scripture becomes means of dealing with the issue. The ultimate aim of this method is to restore the stability of the writer/researcher.

4 Some other Versions will also be used for comparative and exegetical purposes.

5 The term *Barren* (*steira*) has been used in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 25:21) to indicate women who are incapable of bearing children, or failed to conceive with no future hope. It is, in one way, lack of fertility, which is not used for men, although the same state of being may exist in them. *Infertility*, however, cannot be considered as equal to *barrenness*, which can be understood as *ceased to produce*. To be more specific, the term *barrenness* is against human dignity and divine grace. Therefore, in order to give this concept a positive meaning the term "impaired fertility" has been used. It declares otherwise ability to produce, which is equal to fertility in a wider sense.

6 Huang Poho, *Mission From The Underside: Transforming Theological Education in Asia* (PTCA/SATHRI/SCEPTRE, 2010), 134.

7 Different versions of the Bible put it differently:
King James Version: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue to faith and charity and holiness with sobriety:
Revised Standard Version: "Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty".
New International Version: "But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety".
Today's English Version/Good News Bible: "But a woman will be saved through having children, if she perseveres in faith and love and holiness, with modesty".
Jerusalem Bible: "Nevertheless, she will be saved by childbearing, provided she lives a modest life and is constant in faith and love and holiness".
New English Bible: "Yet she will be saved through motherhood (or saved through the Birth of the Child, or brought safely through childbirth) – if only women continue in faith, love, and holiness, with a sober mind".
Living Bible: "So God sent pain and suffering to women when their children are born, but he will save their souls if they trust in him, living quiet, good, and loving lives".
Phillips Modern English: "Nevertheless I believe that women will come safely through child-birth if they maintain a life of faith, love, holiness and modesty".
New Living Translation: "But women will be saved through childbearing (or by accepting their roles as mothers, or by the birth of the Child),

assuming they continue to live in faith, love, holiness, and modesty".
New American Standard Bible: "But women shall be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint".
Revised English Bible: "But salvation for woman will be in the bearing of children, provided she continues in faith, love, and holiness, with modesty".
Contemporary English Version: "But women will be saved by having children (or by the birth of Jesus), if they stay faithful, loving, holy, and modest".
Golden Book Edition: "Nevertheless she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety".

[8] New International Version, New English Bible, Living Bible, Phillips Modern English, New Living Translation, New American Standard Bible, and Contemporary English Version.

[9] New English Bible, New Living Translation, and Contemporary English Version.

[10] Except Michal, Saul's daughter, who died without any children, because she mocked David, the king of Israel, when he was dancing to honour the Lord (2Samuel 6:14, 16, 20-23).

[11] Likewise, we can consider MaaSarada and Sister Nivedita from our Indian context. They are bright examples of *motherhood* in our society today.

[12] Ralphe Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*. One Volume Edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 389.

[13] Barbara Aland et. al. (Eds.). *The Greek New Testament*. Fourth Revised Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 179.

[14] Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. International Critical Commentary. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1924), 33.

[15] Ralphe Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 427.

[16] "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise." (NIV)

[17] "It was faith that made Abraham able to become a father even though he was too old and Sarah herself was unable to have children. He trusted God to keep his promise." (TEV)

[18] "By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised." (NRSV).

[19] The phrase *old age* literally means *beyond the time of age* (*παρὰκαιρὸνἡλικίας para kaironhelikias.*), and the term *barrenness(στεῖρα, speira) means impairment to conceive*.

[20] F. F. Bruce, "The Epistle to the Hebrews" in *New International Commentary*

*on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 302.

[21] See, Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Society, 1978), 672. Leon Morris, "Epistle to the Hebrews", in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (cvcvc), 119.

[22] F. F. Bruce, ""Hebrews", in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. Completely revised and reset. Matthew Black [Gen. Ed.], (West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., 1976), 1017.

[23] Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament.*..., 140.

[24] T. W. Manson "Romans", in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. Completely revised and reset. Matthew Black [Gen. Ed.], (West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., 1976), 940.

[25] The Jerusalem Bible and the Revised Standard Version translates verse 17 towards a new direction. That is, the present troubles and afflictions prepare us for eternal glory which cannot be measured with any human assumption. The New American Standard Bible expresses, "far beyond all comparison". Arndt and Gingrich translates kath' *hyperbolēneĭshyperbolēn* as "beyond all measure and proportion" (W.F. Arndt and F.W. Ginrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Second Edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 848).

[26] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle To The Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 252.

[27] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle To The Corinthians*, 254.

[28] Let us note only two Versions and see how they translate this verse:
New International Version: "He makes the barren woman abide in the house as a faithful mother of children. Praise the LORD".
New Living Translation: "He gives the childless woman a family, making her a happy mother. Praise the LORD".

[29] There are more passages in the New Testament which are more relieving, comforting, and encouraging if they are read carefully. Some of these passages are: Ephesians 2:8-9; 2Corinthians 12:8-9; Hebrews 13:3, etc.

[31] Dipti Rani Gine, "Healing from Within: A Meditation for Mother's Day", in AtolaLongkumer and P. Mohan Larbeer (Eds.), *Women from the Pulpit* (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2014), 139.

[32] Terry C. Falla, *Be Our Freedom Lord: Responsive Prayers and Readings for Contemporary Worship. Second* Edition (Adelaide, South Australia: Openbook Publishers, 1994), 153.

# A Theology of Transformative Diakonia for Persons with Disabilities: Exploring Indigenous Resources from Nagaland

Ayangla Pongen

## Introduction

We hear marginalized people raising their voices against injustice and demanding for rights and justice. People living with disability are also one among the marginalized people demanding for rights. A few years ago, I was involved in a Care Centre in Delhi and during those years of involvement, I realized that Charitable or Development models of *diakonia* toward persons with disabilities are limited and cannot address the problem of larger social issues. Negative and judgmental attitude of the able people is found to be the major issue. Thus, a transformative *diakonia* would be more relevant since persons with disabilities can also contribute immensely for the transformation of the society. Therefore, looking at their scenario on how they are treated by the abled-people in the churches, society, government sectors and the NGOs, I would like to highlight some aspects of transformative *diakonia* referring to Nagaland context.

Theology will be a mere abstract if it is not located in a specific context of the people who are marginalized and discriminated. The world we live is in need of developing a sensitive conscience to bring transformative actions to alleviate human suffering. Those needs are always close to us and we have to respond to them theologically. In other words, the *diakonia* cannot become complete without addressing and understanding the challenges faced by those persons living with disabilities. *Diakonia* as an action in God's love must strive to transform people, system and cultures. God announces judgment upon those

who abuse power and deny justice to the poor. Jesus too challenged unjust systems and practices and called the powerful and privileged who benefit from such, to repent and be transformed by the values of love, sharing, truthfulness and humility. Transformative *diakonia* can be best understood with an image of open eyes which means to say that this type of *diakonia* is the act of giving sight to the blind and strengthening people's feet so that they are strong enough to stand on their own.[1] Hence, the paper explores resources from the Ao-Naga indigenous wisdom in attempting to evolve a transformative diakonia from persons with disabilities perspective.

One will notice that the present Christian theology is oriented towards prosperity, success and perfect-oriented faith reflection that has failed to address to the needs and issues of persons with disabilities. This is one of the reasons why persons with disabilities has been ignored for long by the churches and society. Attempting to rediscover the principle of *sobaliba* and communitarian value, the paper argues that if this traditional value system is integrated in theology of transformative *diakonia*, it would bring structural changes and transformation in the church and society.

**Social Exclusion – Location of Diakonia**

Many Societies look upon persons with disabilities as inferior human being incapable of contributing anything to the society. The traditional societies did not give any leadership role to disabled people and excluded them from active involvement of the spiritual, social and developmental life. They suffer the same attitude even in the church. The church is called to be an inclusive community by empowering all people with or without disabilities as they are all created in the image of God, but church is also one place where they experience discrimination of exclusion. In almost all societies, persons with disabilities suffer from cultural prejudices, social stigmas and taboos, social exclusion or negative theological perspectives. Often, they are regarded as inferior not only with respect to their specific physical limitations, but also the "total being" and has always treated them as a strange species altogether.[2] Consequently, the church remains silent for centuries to the problem faced by persons with disabilities due to negative construct of theology by abled people.

It is said that, in India there is a person with disability in every ten families and most of them live in rural villages. They live without

education, medical care, proper food and clothing. In most societies, persons with disabilities are treated as second-class people, objects of charity or even abandoned.[3] Socially, persons with disabilities are the most marginalized group in the society, because they are subjected to prejudicial attitudes and discriminated by the able-bodied majority.

Some of the common social exclusionary practices of discrimination faced by persons with disabilities in the society are: (a) Denial of Inheritance (b) Stigmatization due to cultural and religious superstitions (c) Infantization as they are connected with evil and sinfulness (d) Abandonment on the grounds of keeping away 'the curse,' or stigma (e) Confinement on protecting family's name (f) Illiteracy due to negligence and lack of facility (g) Negligence of medical treatment because of abled people's attitude (h) Denial of political, economic and education rights, and sometimes religious right.[4] Therefore, persons with disabilities become the victim of many forms of injustice and discrimination. The *diakonial* service towards persons with disabilities is thus crucial and important.

Mathew 15: 29-31 (NIV) talks about Jesus' healing of the lame, blind, crippled, the mute and many others who were brought to him. So, when the crowd saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, the lame walking, and the blind seeing, they glorified the God of Israel. Luke 7:21-23 (NIV) also talks about Jesus curing and healing many people from diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and gave sight to many who were blind. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them." "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Some of the biblical texts proscribe the full participation of persons with disabilities in ministry. These texts need to be read from 'justice' perspective in relation to creation in the `image of God' and 'holistic' disability'. Leviticus 21:18 (NIV) says, "For no one who has defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb".[5] Thus, we can understand from Jesus' teaching that the task of every individual is to take care of those marginalized and discriminated. However, millions of people were pushed to the margins due to injustice and that persons with disabilities became relegated to the margin of margins, because their voices were never heard and thus

they became the center of teaching of Jesus Christ.

Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, a participant from Ghana, representing the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network said, "Jesus' *diakonia* began among the marginalized and it not only effected their healing but also restored their dignity. Therefore, *diakonia* today has to relate itself among the marginalized".[6]

**Persons with Disabilities in Naga Society: Then and Now**

The Naga Primal religion was centred on the belief of many spirits. People believed in two types of spirits – malevolent spirits and benevolent spirit. The bad things and unfortunate events happen and are caused by the malevolent spirits and good things by benevolent spirits. It was believed that disabilities were caused by malevolent spirits. It is still believed and a taboo for a husband to go for hunting or kill an animal when his wife is pregnant. The spirit will cause deformities on the child resembling the killed animals. Persons with disability were thus denied to come to religious ceremonies and participate for fear of their presence would bring displeasure to God and worshippers.[7] They are regarded as cursed, result of sin and object of charity. As they were imperfect physically, they were excluded from entering the sacred place, community dormitory and were even abandoned.[8]

Disability was also considered a result of divine displeasure, for example not proper sacrificial performance by parents. Some other said that killing an enemy who possessed a special *mana* (magical power) affect the killer's children. Such was/is the conventional perception of disability among the Naga people.[9] Naga society thus consider those family with disabled child as disgrace and a punishment for sin. Disabled persons are often subjected to mockery and fun in the public talks. The parents are normally blamed, for example, carelessness of a mother during pregnancy, a senseless behavior of a father with other women while wife is pregnant that may result in babies being born with deformity or other impediments.[10]

Persons with disabilities faced many restrictions and were/are placed in the lowest strata of the society and were excluded from social involvement, like community fishing or any other kind of community activities in the village. They are also not allowed to participate during the *Moatsu*[11] and *Tsungremmong*[12] festivals. They are also not allowed to perform the feast of merit[13] for the Ao Nagas. The disabled people

are not qualified to become a village councillor, called *putu menden* (village council) which takes all the decision concerning the village affairs. They are also debarred from any respectable position in different social organizations. The case is same even today. The disabled persons face condemnation, isolation, discrimination, and are even neglected at times from the families that leads the person with disability a miserable life. They are even restricted to move freely in the community areas because abled people fear that they might also be affected.

In general, the disabled are looked down as inferior and incomplete. They are seen as unattractive and unworthy of favour and service to the people. Even though 90% of the Nagas are Christian, disabled person's participation in the religious activity of the church is almost next to nothing. There is not a single disabled pastor in the church, except one or two assistant pastors in the whole of Nagaland. Church leaders are still ignorant about the potentiality of persons with disabilities and their gifts are not recognized. Persons with disabilities are treated as second class citizens and still suffer the stigma of impurity and discrimination. Some churches especially in the rural places think that disability is related to sin and the work of the demons, and thus do not allow to participate in special function like marriage and Easter Sunday. This indifferent attitude of the abled-people leads to exclusion in social functions, religious services, educational programs, work places and marital relationships which further contribute to social and economic isolations.[14]

However, despite a very strong negative religious, cultural and traditional practices, there are also liberative traditions such as the principle of *sobaliba* (social manners) and the communitarian social life that have upheld an egalitarian way of life, self-sufficiency and protected the poor and needy from being neglected and exploited. The communitarian value system had a strong liberative potential that persons with disabilities were also taken care of and respected, supported, and treated with dignity and equality in the Naga community life. For everyone, community welfare is the first and foremost when it comes in terms of *sobaliba*. Therefore, able people are always compelled upon as well as it is the mandate of their clan to take care of person with disability, poor and marginalized and of each other.

**Rethinking Transformative *Diakonia***

Though most Nagas are Christians, the disabled persons are excluded from the mainstream society and also from the leadership of the church and pastoral care. As mentioned earlier, the church leaders are still ignorant about the potentialities of persons with disabilities and their gifts are not recognized and not allowed to be exercised. Christianity has not contributed much towards transformation of disabled people.

The stigmatization of disabled people is further intensified because of market capitalism where smartness, perfection and competition are the norms of the day. Those who cannot participate in market competition is considered as burden and they are marginalized. Disabled people are the last to be hired and first to be discharged from the market of competitive world.

Traditionally, it was understood that disability was a medical issue. The churches pursued charitable approach. This approach is very limited and make disable people dependent and object of charity. However, we realize that the issue of disability has to do with structural issue. This demands justice and a community-oriented transformative diakonia. In this case, the social attitude towards person with disability is crucial and able-bodied people need to understand that the issue of disability is not just a medical issue, but a social construct and thus a theological imperative. The *diakonal* service needs to address the social dimension of inclusivity and the attitudinal change of abled people towards persons with disabilities. In this context, Josef Vidyamadja proposed transformative *diakonia*. He argued that transformative *diakonia* is wholistic and its service is an integral part of Christian calling. The issue of disability is not only a medical, social, charitable or development issue but it is also social and political, so it needs to address the social structure. Society plays an important role and the social attitudinal change towards persons with disabilities needs to be integrated in transformative *diakonia*.[15] Hence transformative *diakonia* transforms people, repent and be transformed by the values of love, sharing, truthfulness and humility and confronts the powers and principalities of the disabled persons by comforting and challenging the injustice and the abuse of power that discriminates them from the society.

Care for the poor, benevolence towards the disadvantaged and establishing justice has its root in the teaching of Jesus. It is

not exclusively a personal service for the people of God but is also performed by a community that reaches out through activities of *diakonia* (service). Christians have been involved in different forms of *diakonal* service, but mostly confined to charitable and developmental *diakonia*. They are necessary and important but they do not address the structural unjust social structure which is often legitimized by religious teaching and practices. We need a *diakonal* service and empowerment but more importantly, a *diakonia* of building a new social structure and relationship based on love and justice. This is where transformative *diakonia* needs to be located and shaped. In other words, we need a diakonia striving towards transforming people's attitude, systems and cultures. It demands that the society as a whole need to be transformed in bringing dignity of the poor and the marginalized, especially persons living with disability. And in order to change the negative mindset of the able people we need to construct a transformative diakonia emphasizing on the inclusive community, that the society is transformed to welcome the poor, downtrodden and persons living with disabilities as loved by God.

Transformative *diakonia* or community *diakonia* should be the effort to enforce a change in the way churches do *diakonia*. The intersection of loving one's neighbor with persons with disabilities can be seen when the able people practice and treat disabled people equally without any differentiation. Therefore, transformative *diakonia* intended to bring about total change in the function and appearance of community life through simultaneous political, economic, cultural and social change. Nancy Eiesland in her book, *Disabled God*, comments that living with disability is unique to each individual, it is shaped by a dominant social milieu that devalues and discriminates against persons with disabilities. The biblical theme of charitable giving has shaped patterns of interaction between able-bodied individuals and those with disabilities. The practice of almsgiving has had equivocal outcomes for marginalized persons, including persons with disabilities. One unintended outcome of the practices of some charitable societies has been the environmental and social segregation of persons with disabilities from the Christian community rather than restoration to social and religious participation.[16] In an abled bodied construct society, people living with disability suffer loneliness, isolation and exclusion. As stated, it embraces all social, psychological, and political issues that needs to address the social structure and changing attitude of

the society which is important. Therefore, the social dimension needs to be integrated in transformative diakonia locating in the context of persons with disabilities.

**Integrating Communitarian Value System in Transformative Diakonia**

Nagas are divided into different tribes and each community has their own distinct common identity governed by their own customary law and language. Wherever they live they form their own community fellowship even today. They extend solidarity among themselves and to be not identified and neglected in one's own community is regarded as shame. Like any other nations, Nagas' ethnic identity, culture, history, religion, and politics are deeply rooted and influenced by their own concrete geographical land which basically affirms a very strong Naga communitarian culture. So, culture for Nagas is as important as person, because it is the crux of an individual's identity.

Nagas faced untold suffering during colonial rule, bamboo famine, insurgency problem, military operation, however their strong communitarian values enable them to stand together in solidarity. In spite of many condemnations, weaknesses and failures, there are many liberative positive potentials of the Naga traditions. One of the facts which is very clear among the Nagas is that, there is no beggar in the Naga society till today because of their strong cultural and social system that protect the poor and needy. Nagas understand that if a person from their own tribe or community is left begging or neglected, it is indignity for their tribe; so they protect the person. In the same manner, the downtrodden and person with disability are helped and taken care of by their family or clan. It is the duty of their clan men and women to show solidarity and render support because a person's identity was inseparable with that of his/her family, clan and village. That is how the division of the tribe enforces them to think and feel responsible that they have a larger family or community of their own tribe in which they show their allegiance to protect their own tribe men and women. So, each tribe locating in their own common land, bond by customary law and culture, it makes a tribe or a community important to help and protect those persons who are disabled or in trouble.

The Naga villages are comprised of several households belonging to different clans and that plays an important role towards the social

well-being of their tribes. So distinct is the clan from the village that it forms almost a village in itself and fortified within the village inside its own boundaries. The household are integrated into the society, by being members of larger functional units, lineages, clans, age groups and village community. Every village has unique identity to protect, help and support each other. And Nagas uphold a very strong unity, brotherhood/sisterhood, common origin and form a common communitarian society and culture. From very childhood, children are taught through stories and legends about survival, endurance, and respect for nature, between one another and all humankind. They give importance to communitarian social life and this value needs to recapture to fight against individualism and discrimination and make abled-people to give importance to take care of the marginalized, the poor and persons with disabilities. It also shows that care for the poor people through clan system in the village is very strong.The village unit protects and cares for village people especially those persons with disabilities. This is one of the reasons why disabled people, even up to number 20-50, used to live together in *Angh* (Chief of the village) house among the Konyaks (one of the tribes in Nagaland).[17] Thus, this communitarian living compelled the abled-people to take care and play a great role for the protection of persons with disability, poor and the marginalized.

The strong communitarian social structure and the value system are sustained because of the philosophy of *sobaliba*. This *sobaliba* involves the total commitment to building community, and to bring change. It calls to live out to protect community life. The ethical principle of *sobaliba* binds the community and forces people to sacrifice for the cause of community and preserve their identity as a distinct community. This ethical practice also enforces a family, clan, village and tribe members to support and care for one another in times of suffering, war, and famine; and also binds people together in the society in times of joys and sorrows. This principle of *sobaliba* hence needs to be an integral part of the transformative theology in relation to persons with disability and that community approach alone can bring structural change in the society.

In Christian teaching, *Diakonia* involves actions of care, relief and service towards the poor and the marginalized, but it goes further and addresses the root causes of injustice embedded in oppressive

systems and structures. A church becomes transformative when it engages in the overall development of people as taught by our Lord Christ Jesus. In his words and action, transformative *diakonia*, this transformative *diakonia* needs to extend beyond the boundaries of a church community. It needs to address the larger society in order that people of all races and cultural background experience love and harmony.[18] The community transformative *diakonia* will enable the disabled and marginalized people become aware of their strength to change the oppressive structure. It empowers the whole people to bring about those needed changes. We see in Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan; it is understood that the good Samaritan does the service of compassion by helping the man who was stripped down by robbers. Unless, as church and community of Christ we acknowledge the gifts of persons with disabilities, the world will remain incomplete. Therefore, practice of transformative *diakonia* should not be just an incidental help or emotional act, but it should be a task and commitment to ceaseless struggle against every oppressive and unjust system. It involves empowering both abled and disabled people for change.

The transformative diakonia or community *diakonia* should be the effort to enforce a change in the way churches practice *diakonia* and invite those who are broken, break those who are oppressing, and gather together friends and strangers into the shared fellowship of God. The marginalized people should be given the most special place, the called out one in order to give a good identity. "In God's World – Called to be One" is a divine imperative and not an option. Every person is called to strive to be one with one another not because it is expedient but because God has called into existence as one people. It is God's will that God's people be one and together - to be united and diverse at the same time. We are called to be one not because we are same, but because we are different; not because all are good or all lead to the same goal. But we are called to be one because we are all created by God in his own image. The church will not be able to realize what it means to be "called to be one", unless we listen to the voices of the peoples in the margin.[19] This reflects that every disabled person deserves the dignity and respect just as normal people receives. The values of love, healing, hope, and solidarity should be integrated in the theology of transformative *diakonia*.

## Conclusion

Transformative *diakonia* is holistic and its service is an integral part of Christian calling. It is not charitable or developmental issue, but it comprises all social, psychological and political issues that needs to address the social structure that is,the changing attitude of the society. The transformative *diakonia* of the church cannot be fulfilled unless there is cooperation among all members of the church. The church has to take the position of and for the poor and become the voice of the poor and the exploited.[20] The church and the society as a whole need to be transformed and challenged today to involve not only for the ecclesial community but to step out beyond its boundary and to look at the margins' social sphere in order to bring dignity to poor people, the marginalized and those persons living with disabilities. As the term 'transformation' points to a number of changes that have to take place in the societies, if people living in the margin are to enjoy their rightful heritage as God's creation. The transformative *diakonia* must be a theology that transcends the suffering of the people with love through God's goodness and grace. Therefore, society from its most basic unit of the family to its broader forms the church and the community should be a community of inclusion for everyone regardless of gifts and abilities by welcoming and giving the opportunity to participate and be treated equally.

### Endnotes

1 Josef Purnama Widyamadja, ed. *Jesus & Wong Cilik: Transformative Diakonia Theology with the Marginalized People of Asia* (Kolkata: PTCA/ SCEPTRE, 2015), 41.

2 Wati Longchar & Gordon Cowans, eds. *Disabled God Amidst Broken People Doing Theology from Disability Perspective* Volume II (Manila: ATESEA, 2007), 4.

3 Wati Longchar, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society," in Wati & Gordon, eds. *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective A Theological Resource Book on Disability* (Manila: ATESEA, 2007),175-176.

4 *Ibid.*, 176-77.

5 J. John Samadhanam & Prayer Elmoraj, eds. *Engaging with disabilities Resource book for Pastors and Church Workers* (Chennai: Church of South India, 2015), 23-34.

6 "Christian Service Starts with Marginalized People, Forum Participants

Say,"https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/christian-service-starts-with-marginalized-people-say-conference-participants/1397.htm Accessed on 25 January 2018.

7 Interview with Alemlepzuk Pongen, former Village Development Board Chairman of Chuchuyimlang village, Mokokchung, Nagaland India, 7 August 2017.

8 Wati Longchar, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society," in Wati Longchar & Gordon, eds. *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*., 177.

9 Ezamo Murry, "Experiencing the Disabled Deity," in Christopher Rajkumar, ed. *Sprouts of Disability Theology* (Nagpur: NCCI, 2012), 91.

10 Israel Selvanayagam, "Persons with Disabilities – An Interfaith Perspective," in Christopher, *Sprouts of Disability*., 27.

11 *Moatsu* is celebrated from May 1-3 every year. The Aos celebrate Moatsu after the sowing is over. This festival is celebrated after the stressful work of clearing fields, burning jungles, sowing seeds, cleaning up etc stretching over a week. The *Moatsu* festival is marked by peppy songs on love, dances, merry making, fun and also songs to express gratitude to the Supreme spirit for harvest and prosperity. The symbolic celebrations *Moatsu* is *Sangpangtu* where a big fire is lit and men and women sit around it putting on their best attire. The womenfolk will serve wine and meat to their menfolk. This festival is also time for young men and women to mingle. Samuel Longkumer & Moanungsang, *A Reader in Primal Religious Traditions and their Select Movement in India* (Kolkata: ESPACE, 2012), 90-91.

12 *Tsungremmong* is celebrated by the Aos in honor of *Tsungrem* (God), in all its manifestations. The *Tsungremmong* celebration is an act that seeks to renew the covenant between man and the Supreme God, (*Tsungrem*). *Tsungremmong* is celebrated in the first week of August. Strict procedures are to be followed since the Aos believed that no careless observance or lapse in the celebration would bring disaster. During the period of *Tsungremmong* celebration every household stays under strict *anempong* (*genna*) and no guest or visitors are entertained. So, also the disabled persons were not allowed to participate in the festivals. Ibid, 92-94.

13 A community feast performed by a couple to attain highest status in the society. The feast is performed for a week in some cases.

14 Samuel George, "Persons with Disabilities in India," in Wati & Gordon, *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, 31-32.

15 Josef Purnama Widyamadja, *op.c.t* 44.

[16] Nancy Eiesland, ed. *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 73-74.

[17] "The Naga Village System," http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16554/ 12/12_chapter %204.pdf Access ed. on 2 April, 2018.

[18] Patrick Oden, ed. *The Transformative Church: New Ecclesial Models and the Theology of Jurgen Moltmann,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 5.

[19] Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education - An Indigenous Perspective.* (Kolkata: PTCA/ SCEPTRE, 2012),199, 204.

[20] Wati Longchar, *Transforming Cultures and Praxis: Engaging Peoples in the Margins.* (Kolkata: PTCA/SCEPTRE, 2017), 65.

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*http://www.disabilityaffairs.gov.in/content/page/state-ut-wise-persons.php*. This statistic refers only to the state of Nagaland, but the Nagas live in two countries – India and Myanmar and 3 states within India. They all uphold similar religious traditions.

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# Part IV

# Disability, Inclusive Church and Pastoral Care

# Towards a Borderless Ecclesia for Persons with Disabilities: Envisioning an Inclusive Pastoral Ministry

S. Ekonthung Ezung

*The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but has no vision.- Helen Keller* [1]

## Introduction

The church is a called out community to build a borderless ecclesia of all, by all and for all humanity. The church has very often fortified borders that keep away the vulnerable communities such as Persons with HIV & AIDS, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).[2] The church needs to transcend the borders by showing a preferential option to the vulnerable Others. Taking into consideration the life situations of PwDs around the globe, it is significant to listen to their voices that raise important theological questions: Are we not created in God's image? Why are we excluded from the church and society? Why do people consider us as untouchables and sinners? In what ways can the church address our various needs and concerns?[3] The pastoral ministry of the church needs to address all these issues and concerns and facilitate the PwDs in experiencing the fullness of life in God without any borders. This paper is an attempt to understand the life-situations of PwDs with special reference to the Naga context in order to construct a borderless ecclesia and envision an inclusive pastoral ministry of the church. This paper also tries to bring out some pertinent tribal ethos from its cultural and religious realms for inclusive caregiving ministry of the church towards the wellbeing of the vulnerable communities.

**Etymological Considerations and Definition**

Samuel Kabue views that PwDs have been called with offensive and euphemistic terms such as "differently abled," "physically challenged," "mentally different," and "partially sighted."[4] In similar lines, Joseph George states that many of these derogatory terms in use show the attitude of the society at large.[5] In recent time, the term Persons with Disabilities is recognized and used in all the UN, Governments, and the WCC documents.[6] But, there is a continuing debate at the international level arguing that disability is not a property of the individual but social construct emerging from the interaction of the people involved and their environment.[7] This underscores that language plays a major role towards the empowerment, the liberating process, and the inclusion of PwDs and which require familiarity with and use of acceptable disability language[8] to enable them to experience life in all its fullness. As far as the definition of disability is concerned, the World Health Organization states "disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions."[9] Similarly, *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* uses the word 'disability' to refer to 'the state or quality of being mentally or physically disabled or unable; weakness; impotence; incapacity; inability to hold a certain job because of a physical or mental handicap; want of legal qualifications'[10] Thus, disability is a complex phenomenon which emerges from physical and psychological impairments and the social context in which PwDs live in.

**Socio-cultural-Economic and Politico Milieu of PwDs: A Concern for Ecclesial Engagement**

Millions of people around the world have some type of physical, mental, or emotional handicap that severely limits their abilities to manage their daily activities and social life.[11] The World Health Organization (2011) finds that over one billion people or 15% of the world's population have some forms of disability.[12] Around 690 million people in Asia and the Pacific are at risk of exclusion from economic and environmental development including employment, political participation, education and social protection.[13] The 2011 Census report, data on disability released by the Government of India, showed that over 26 million people suffer from some form of disability i.e., 2.21% of the total population.[14] The state of Nagaland as per the 2011 census, have a disability population of 29,631 with various forms of disabilities[15] but the figure could have been more since then.

In many Asian societies, PwDs faced discriminations with regard to inheritance, the ordination of PwDs for ecclesial service,[16] non-acceptance in healthcare facilities, recreational facilities, marital relationships, and a broad range of other human rights violations.[17] Their plight has been compounded by an interaction between disability and poverty.[18] The condition of PwDs in India is aggravated by the sheer magnitude of its huge population living under the poverty line.[19] The condition of PwDs in India shunned by the society and sanctioned by the religion is very often being feared as evil, cursed, and spiritually afflicted.[20] Over and above, the more serious discrimination is the exclusion and neglect of PwDs from decision-making,[21] Government policy, legislative actions, schemes, and provisions. This is an infringement of human rights as it fails to provide equal opportunities for all the citizens of the country.[22] On the political participation, some countries even deny PwDs the right to vote or seek elected office.[23] These are serious indications of exclusion of PwDs and a deterrent to building a just society.

**Nagaland as the Social Location for the Diverse Challenges of PwDs**

The presenter would like to specially mention the state of Nagaland as the context for understanding the various challenges faced by PwDs. In Nagaland, many families still hide their children with disabilities away from society due to embarrassment and social stigma. Nagas do not abandon or ill-treat anyone in the family, who are disabled, but the mindset of the people is very negative as they think that PwDs cannot do anything.[24] Diethono Nakhro[25] believes that the negative attitude of focusing on the person's disabilities has aggravated the suffering of PwDs in a society that disapproves of imperfection.[26] Nakhro in an open letter addressed to the former Chief Minister of Nagaland (T. R. Zeliang) has unraveled the challenges faced by PwDs in public buildings and "spaces"[27] apart from the development landscape due to poor awareness of disability, failure to implement existing laws, and discrimination in income-generating activities.[28] There are also no rehabilitation centers, vocational and resource centre for PwDs in Nagaland. They have been left at mercy with no help coming from the government except few private clinics and non-governmental organizations.[29] Such institutions are needed to empower PwDs to be self-reliant and self-dependent in all aspects of their life. The

state government through its various agencies also needs to properly allocate/channelize the central funds to address the plights of PwDs.[30] On the political front, PwDs are still completely invisible in politics and to politicians. Even as voter demographics of ages are included in the State Election campaign promises (2017), PwDs and disability issues are nowhere in the picture.[31] This shows the apathy of political leaders on disability. The exclusion of PwDs can be eliminated to a large extent if laws are implemented strictly as per the various PwDs Acts [32] However, Nagaland has failed to properly implement the PwDs Act 1995 and the RPwDs 2016 as well. According to Akum Ezung, PwD Acts in letter and spirit.[33] These are just a summary of the extreme exclusion, neglect, and indignity that exists in the Naga society and the world around. In such a time as this, the church needs to be an agent of change in the society and make efforts to build a borderless ecclesia for all humanity without any distinction and discrimination.

**Building a Borderless Ecclesia for PwDs: Towards their full Inclusion and Participation**

The presenter would like to derive the imperatives of the borderless ecclesia, by applying theological and pastoral perspectives as the methodological framework. Basically, the presenter would focus on the relevant theological ideas and interpretations of theologians and construct the principles of inclusive ecclesia with biblical nuances which ultimately creates a room for innovative pastoral perspectives and paradigms.

**1) Embracing Unity in Diversity in the Church**

The church which is derived from the Greek *ekklesia* (assembly) and equivalent for the Hebrew *qahal* (congregation)[34] needs to embrace the unity in diversity of members of the body of Christ. Paul's analogy of the body of Christ in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor.12:12-27) affirms such a metaphor. It takes every part to make up a body; therefore, the church cannot negate its caring ministry to the PwDs due to their *Otherness* as all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Herbert *Spencer's* "Organismic theory of society" also explains the social structure as a *living organism* with different parts but cannot survive or exist except within the framework of society.[35] Similarly, Martin Luther's definition of the church as "the communion of saints" entails blending with the vulnerable Others in the fellowship of love on earth

rather than in heaven.[36] Samuel Kabue, EDAN, Executive Secretary succinctly expressed the mission of the church in the following words:

> The communion of the churches in unity and diversity is impaired without the gifts and presence of all people, including persons with disability. The mission of the church is to proclaim God's reign of justice and peace and is less than credible if the churches do not actively and visibly receive the diverse gifts of all its members, including persons with disability.[37]

The multiplicity of people with various gifts makes the church special (Rom.12:4-5). The anthropological explanation of God's creation as good is articulated by Augustine,[38] while the human tendency is to classify PwDs as "Other" but God sees people without any discrimination. The church needs to permeate the message of full inclusion of PwDs as exclusion only epitomizes otherness.[39] It is in this context, Letty M. Russell's *Church in the Round*[40] and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Discipleship of Equals*[41] emphasize the ministry of the church as that of a fellowship in/with differences. The church needs to transcend and affirm the differences to make ecclesia a communion of all people as the beauty of the church lies in embracing the unity in diversity of God's creation.[42]

**2) An Inclusive Ecclesia of All, by All and for All**

The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) of the World Council of Churches which stands on the vision of *A Church of All and for Allurges* the churches to address the inclusion, active participation and full involvement of PwDs in the spiritual and social life of the church and society without any hatred, ignorance, prejudice and cultural misunderstanding.[43] The inclusion of PwDs is not an option but a defining trait of the church. The inclusion of all members around a common table of hospitality[44] by the church will lead to a relationship of mutuality and partnership.[45] The relationship of mutuality entails understanding reality and of relating to one another as partners[46] and interdependent to God, persons, and creation.[47] The mission of the church, therefore, needs to model towards helping people experience the happening of the church in the most unexpected places.[48] George Zachariah in his article, "Church: An Inclusive Community of Hospitality, Fellowship and Solidarity" calls for a rainbow community that embraces the whole humanity by extending hospitality, fellowship,

and solidarity to the vulnerable *Others*.[49] The church needs to reach out to the vulnerable communities in the public sphere as exemplified by Jesus when He shared meals with His disciples and people from all walks of life regardless of their earthly conditions. The Parable of the Banquet (Matt. 22:1-14) points towards a communion with those on the edge of society (Lk.14:21b).[50] The witness of ecclesia in the public sphere can become transformative when it starts a counter-hegemonic movement from below to de-centre the church[51] and also participate in the movement of resistance to build an inclusive community of all, by all and for all.

**3) Fellowship in the Brokenness of PwDs**

The essence of the church lies in entering into the fellowship of brokeness fragmented by disabilities/vulnerabilities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly pointed out that Christ exists at the center of fellowship with humanity in all its pain and suffering, acting vicariously and redemptively on behalf of the world.[52] Jürgen Moltmann also declares that the suffering of God on the cross is the direct result of the divine decision/willingness to suffer out of genuine love [53] for humanity. Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection suggest that God is changeable, capable of suffering and imperfect insofar as God is open to creation and willing to suffer pain for its redemption.[54] Kazoh Kitamori believes that the cross is the way to understanding the pain/love of God as expressed in the death of Jesus.[55] This suffering God is relevant to PwDs who face various forms of human-made norms and restrictions. It is only in communion with the vulnerable *Others* the church can become a whole church.[56] Letty M. Russell rightly stressed that the calling of the church as a witness to God's intention must bring about a world of justice, peace, and integrity of the natural world. Russell went on to state that there are a lot of "missing persons" in the world whom God wanted to care for them.[57] It is in this context, the church ought to enter into fellowship with the brokenness of the missing persons through the ministry of empathy, acceptance, hospitality, solidarity, and justice.

**4) A Transforming Ecclesia through Advocacy and Agency**

The church is an agent to promote justice, heal broken lives and to reconcile the estranged. The 1978 Pastoral Statement of U.S Catholic Bishop on PwDs not only affirm for their full inclusion in the church

and national life but strives to increase public sensitivity and support in their rightful demand for justice and equality. PwDs have not only rights within the church but also to a welcoming attitude from fellow Christians.[58] Although many churches are actively involved in social services and other developmental projects yet PwDs are hardly visible in their very own congregation and community. The church needs to model itself towards accessibility and acceptance of every human being while sensitizing the congregation to the various needs and gifts of PwDs. The church can also promote partnerships with the government organizations,[59] and advocate justice with and for PwDs in places where important political and economic decisions are being made that affect their lives.[60] The church needs to put their hands in the wounds of PwDs, and become their witness, advocate, and catalyst for change and empowerment. The church not meet all the needs of PwDs but can build a caring community besides empowering PwDs to become the agents of transformation since the rightful agency gives the right and apt directions to build an inclusive ecclesia.[61]

**5) Affirming the Full Humanity and Dignity of PwDs**

The classification of the order of creation as perfect and imperfect by the classical theological scholarship still holds bearings on the present theological perception and articulation. Thomas Aquinas' view of the created order still continues to influence the ecclesial and societal perception of life. Aquinas developed a hierarchical view of creation where humans are the most spiritual and rational beings which is followed by non-human animals, and finally plants. Being less sublime than humans are considered "less perfect" and serve the needs of the "more perfect."[62] Aquinas notes that only rational creatures can proclaim God's goodness in a distinctive way, by their capacities of knowing and willing.[63] Longchar was critical of such understanding as it has made PwDs the imperfect creation of God without bearing God's image since any form of disability would make a person less than human. In this hierarchical order, PwDs are at the periphery of God's grace,[64] and such a notion contradicts the Kingdom value.

Reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther have also thought that children with disabilities might be an incarnation of the devil, and Luther even suggested drowning them. Some even burnt them at the stake.[65] The church is understood only for the so-called "perfect people." However, the goodness of God's creation permeates to the

entire cosmos, including PwDs who are considered as misfits in the society. According to Russell, God's welcoming of the stranger for misfits and our partnership in this welcoming action would provide a way of understanding their experience and also be welcoming to all people.[66] They are Human beings created in God's image even though their bodies or minds do not conform to what society judges as normal.[67] It is only in this acknowledgment, the dignity, and worth of PwDs is restored notwithstanding their limitations of physical or cognitive faculties.

**Envisioning an Inclusive Pastoral Ministry to PwDs: From Exclusion to Inclusion**

The Bible tends to equate disability with divine punishment or evidence of immoral behavior. In the Old Testament, physical disability reflects spiritual disfavor as a result of sin, while in the New Testament PwDs are viewed as possessed by evil or cursed. In the New Testament, Jesus' disciples' correlated disability with sin and this attitude may be indicative of prevailing wisdom of the time. These views are still reflected in many modern faiths.[68] However, there are select passages in the Bible that express sympathy for PwDs. The Israelites were instructed to refrain from cursing PwDs and to fear God (Lev.19:4). The law of love commands everyone to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev.19:8), showing kindness and love to PwDs, for they need care and protection.[69] There are also direct and indirect references to disability throughout the New Testament, providing an insight into the heart of God regarding PwDs. Obviously, God gives prior attention to PwDs and the same attitude is expected from the church.[70]

A Christian theology of caring towards PwDs would stimulate a theological and ecclesial imagination to incorporate PwDs into the goodness of creation.[71] If God could accept PwDs with all their limitations, why should anyone reject them due to their disabilities and socio-cultural norms? H. Richard Neibhur asserts that culture has to be changed according to the situation, time and space, as denying the dynamic reality of culture denies the growth and ability of women[72] as well as those with disabilities. Many Christians often correlate disability with sin and the work of demons as well as a curse/punishment from God due to the past sins of parents/grandparents. As a result, PwDs are treated as second-class people, object of charity or even abandoned.[73] The ministry of Jesus transcends all these cultural norms to show

His preferential option to the vulnerable communities. The pastoral ministry of the church needs to facilitate transformation in the society by entering into the pain and suffering of the vulnerable Others.[74] In recent times, the church has become more engaged in ministry towards the PwDs. The image of the church as a body is becoming more relevant today as the church tries to be an inclusive church for all of God's creation.[75] Basing on the various issues faced by PwDs around the globe, especially with reference to Nagaland, the pastoral ministry of the church may envision some of the innovative ministries to foster an inclusive ecclesia of all, by all and for all, especially with, to, and of the PwDs:

**a) Supportive Care and Counselling:** Many PwDs go through emotional distress which springs mainly because of existential anxieties that are apparent through questions like: Why should I suffer like this? Why only me? Why should God allow this suffering in my life? Such questions are also found in the Bible, which are mainly directed towards God.[76] In this regard, supportive care and counselling will help PwDs to handle their present condition in reality-oriented ways. According to Howard Clinebell, the goal of supportive counselling is "to help persons continue to function at an optimal level, however, limited, in spite of their difficult and unchangeable life situations."[77] Supportive counselling is needed to enable growth in persons to handle life situations constructively by making better use of their personality resources and relationships.[78] PwDs may be helped to stabilize, undergird, nurture, motivate or guide to enable them to handle their problems and relationships more constructively[79] or accept their situations in a realistic way. This will strengthen their ability to cope as well as gain perspective to use their psychological and interpersonal resources however limited more effectively in coping with their life situations. An empathetic relationship helps in strengthening a person's coping abilities,[80] because such an approach would send a positive message of "someone cares us."

**b) Diversity and Inclusiveness in Worship:** The presence of the sick, poor, and PwDs in the church is an important reminder of the ministry of Jesus. The church can be a witness to the world by including the same kinds of people that Jesus embraced and included during His earthly ministry.[81] The able-bodied must not assume that PwDs have nothing to offer to and/or participate in the church and society. God has designed every individual with certain abilities and interests in

service to Him and to others.[82] There are many PwDs such as John Milton, Helen Keller, Beethoven, Stephen Hawkins and Fenny Crosby who excelled in life against all odds.[83] Biblical figures like Moses and Paul were also used by God with all their disabilities. The church ought to acknowledge the gifts which PwDs can bring into the faith community by including them in worship activities such as door greeters, ushers, singers, or even worship leaders.[84] The church may also organize 'Disability Sunday' not only to create awareness on the various challenges the PwDs face but also to fully include them in the church worship and service. Such inclusions will provide an entry point into the faith community. However, there are many churches that often fail to recognize the worth and dignity of organizing programmes for PwDs or including them in the church worship and service. There is also a need to remove some of the architectural, attitudinal, liturgical, communicational and aspirational barriers[85] that the PwDs face in order to affirm the diversity of worship in the church.

**c) Promoting Tolerance and Acceptance through Bible Study and Seminars:** Since time immemorial, the negative view on disability has not been adequately addressed by the church that has often remained a mute spectator. Any negative view on disability needs to be dispelled by the church through organizing a bible study that promotes tolerance and acceptance of the *Other* by the able-bodied. The de-construction of a negative view on disability can be done through dealing with the various theological issues during the Bible Study conduct by the church ministers. Such discourses can help a cross-section[86] of people in the community to develop a positive mindset towards disability, caregiving, and PwDs in the society. From time to time, the church needs to organize workshops and seminars on PwDs to raise the consciousness of the people about disability. Seminars on disability should include topics on the various challenges of family/primary caregivers who are confronted with stressful situations. Such discourses can help concerned individuals/institutions to develop their proficiency in human psychology and handling crisis situations. Thus, all these life-promoting activities can construct a creative space of mutual acceptance and tolerance to the vulnerable *Others*.

**d) Social Presence and Social Participation:** Caregivers and PwDs have little time to engage in social and recreational activities. As a result, loneliness, social isolation, and diminished social support are

widely reported which contribute to the depressive symptoms and other adverse mental health consequences on caregivers [87] and the PwDs as well. Involvement in recreational activities is a factor in facilitating the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual wellbeing of a person. The more active, mentally and physically a person is the better quality of life will be.[88] Churches may organize recreational activities to help PwDs and caregivers experience socialization and strengthen their coping mechanisms. The church may regularly organize creative programmes such as festivals of dance, song, music, painting, and handicrafts to demonstrate the creative skills in PwDs. Special Sports' Ministry for the PwDs is another forum to display their talents and physical prowess. Such a platform would not only help PwDs to be visible in the public space but would educate the general public the gifts and contributions that PwDs can bring into the church and society. Such events would enhance the self-esteem of PwDs and also motivate them socially and psychologically.

**Tribal Ethos of Caregiving vis-à-vis Cultural and Religious Resources**

The Naga traditional ethos of caregiving may enrich our knowledge and understanding as well as add more impetus to the quest for building a just society. The caregiving and empathetic tribal ethos would counter the hegemonic and dominant socio-cultural and religio-political forces and promote the life-giving and life-sustaining values. Further, this potential tribal ethos can help the people to explore the alternative values that are inclusive, egalitarian and just.

**a) Searching for the Disabled God in a Tribal Deity:** Among the Lotha Naga tribe of Nagaland, there is a belief in *Sukhyingo*, one of the godlings whose neck is crooked. *Sukhyingo* had his counterpart *Ngazo*.[89] These two godlings held the portfolio of plenty, charity, and compassion toward humans. Both of them were also in need of their own provisions:

> One day they went together to dig the burrows of the bamboo rat. *Sukhyingo* was more authoritative than *Ngazo* and that day he got enough of that creature for meals. *Ngazo* got only one and he expressed dissatisfaction. *Sukhyingo* then told him that even that one bamboo rat was a gift from him to *Ngazo*. This enraged *Ngazo* as it was the fruit of his whole day's labor and not a gift

> from *Sukhyingo*. They ended up in wrestling bout where upon *Ngazo* twisted *Sukhyingo*'s neck, causing him permanently disabled. This did not stop *Sukhyingo* from engaging with human welfare. However, because of his crooked neck, he blesses most of those he happens to see. When *omon*, meaning spirit, precedes the name *Sukhyingo* (*omon-sukhyingo*) it becomes the name of the omnipresent godling. There is no time and space where this *omon-sukhyingo* is not present and seeks justice in all human dealings and relationships. He becomes sad when people fail to practice love, justice, and compassion due to disability, poverty, and misfortune.[90]

*Sukhyingo* in that sense is a deity who bears disability himself. It is in this context, one can search for the disabled God in a tribal deity (*Sukhyingo*) and whose disabilities did not prevent him from blessing and protecting the vulnerable *Others*. This is also true of the resurrected Christ who presented His impaired hands and feet to reveal the Disabled God. Such an image would help PwDs to relate and identify with a God who Himself is disabled. To Nancy Eiseland, the primal image of Christian God is a disabled God through Jesus' crucifixion and wounds and the promise of grace through a broken body. Accepting the disabled God may enable reconciliation of PwDs with their own bodies and Christ's body, the church.[91] The church needs to move beyond the traditional/theological understanding of an abled God by re-symbolizing of a disabled God from a given context such as a tribal deity who himself is disabled to reach out to the PwDs. God can become the lowest creaturely state such as a poor, a beggar, a disabled person, a Dalit, a tribal, a woman, or in any form of the creation.[92] The ministry of the church must be rooted in the brokenness and woundedness of Christ to enable PwDs to experience the holistic healing power of Christ that flows from Christ's disability on the cross.

**b) Tribal Communitarian Spirituality:** One of the typical marks of the pre-colonial tribal society lies in the superiority of the communitarian practices in all their activities. Nagas are separated into various tribes and clans and which is governed by their respective customary laws/languages. This forms the basis of their unique identity and unity. The communitarianspirituality motivates the members to be inter-dependent to each other in all aspects of life, and it enabled every member to enjoy equal rights and opportunities. In the field, they go together, work

together and come back together. Even when they go to the jungle to collect firewood, wild fruits, and vegetables, they go in groups. Besides the individual hunting, there are community hunting and community fishing during which the entire *Khel* (Sector/Colony) or the village work in unison and carry out the project. The communitarian spirituality was further strengthened by the various community games and sports viz., high jump and long jump, spear throwing, wrestling, stone throw, pole climbing, tug of war, etc. On important occasions, people from various *Khels* will compete against each other. The community will support/cheer their teams and will rejoice in victory and console each other in defeat. Even during bereavement, it becomes the responsibility of the tribe, clan, and *Khel* to comfort and support the bereaved families to overcome the crisis situations. For this reason, it is very rare to find a person with a disability left unattended and uncared as it brings disgrace to the community. The allegiance to the family, clan, and tribe is a strong unifying factor that propelled the members to think for each other's welfare and wellbeing. Such communitarian ethos needs to be recaptured to fight against individualism and discrimination against PwDs. The tribal communitarian spirituality can form a theological basis to include PwDs in the ministry of the church since the essence of ecclesia is realized only in the inclusion of the vulnerable Others.

**c) Life-affirming Values in Taboos:** Taboos are understood as socio-cultural restrictions in the tribal worldview. Taboo can be termed as *sarisapvü* in Lotha which means prohibition and forbidden.[93] There are positive and negative implications for understanding *sarisapvü* practiced in the tribal world. On a negative view, according to Ezamo Murry, the animistic culture and faith believe that disability is a curse from God. Even for religious offerings and sacrifices, all the animals have to be perfect. However, there are positive values in *sarisapvü*, especially with regard to the caring aspect towards PwDs in the tribal culture. In the tribal society, children were taught not to laugh at PwDs as the same fate will be transferred to the mocker. They were advised to assist PwDs wherever possible to win the spirits' favor. This is akin to God telling the Israelites to take care of the PwDs. It is also forbidden to mistreat a person with a disability or imitate their behavior lest the spirits will transfer the same disability to them. A pregnant woman is supposed to be very cautious in her speech and conduct to avoid the spirits from causing disability to her fetus as well as obligated to observe rituals of the faith appropriately to avoid a child born with a

disability. Further, if a person plucks and eats grains before the parents pluck the first fruit and prays for the gift to the spirits, the eater will have his mouth-twisted. When it comes to leadership, a ruler of the village who fails to deliver justice will have his children born with abnormalities, if not stillborn or untimely deaths.[94] There are *sarisapvü* related to showing due respect to elders/respectable persons with fitting address otherwise it will incur the wrath of the spirits where the offender's lips will be eaten up by rats.[95] These *sarisapvü* are agents of social control/responsibility, and it can help develop a community of mutuality and equals as it protects PwDs through cultural practices, values, and beliefs.

**d) Tribal Folklores for Articulating an Inclusive Ecclesia:** Tribal folklores are potential resources for articulating an inclusive ecclesia. It is true that all the folklores are not liberative as it also perpetuates discrimination and subjugation of the vulnerable Others. However, there are liberative values present in the tribal folklores to develop an inclusive community of equals. Therefore, the liberative folklores will be discussed to counter the dominant forces that try to marginalize PwDs in the church and society. The Bible does not only teach about caring the vulnerable in distress since the Lotha folklores are filled with rich elements for preserving the whole cosmos as well as compassionate caring for the vulnerable such as the "Two brothers" and "A Leprous Woman-Mongtsülo." The Lotha foreparents told of two brothers where the youngest (rich) ignored the eldest (poor) and kept all his care for his friend.

> One day the younger brother decided to test his friend and took him to the forest to collect wild red berries. He climbed up the tree along with his friend, and while he was picking and eating the berries smeared himself all over with the red juice. He pretended to fall down from the tree and lay on the ground. His friend climbed down and was petrified to help him… and went away by telling him to send his brother. His brother rushed to the place and said, "My brother when you were alive, you scorned and neglected me and kept all your love and affection for your friends." With these words, he picked him up to carry him, but the younger brother told his elder brother that there is nothing wrong with him. He instead carried his elder brother home and thereafter the two brothers loved one another… there is nothing in life equal to the love of one's own relations.[96]

This folklore illustrates two elements of caring attitudes towards the injured/unnatural deaths. The action of the elder brother reflects total caring for his brother; however, the so-called friend who was not blood-related demonstrated a reservation to pick up the injured/death owing to socio-cultural taboos. The younger brother's friend was frightened to lift him up lest he was afflicted with *Myuk* (evil emanation) and therefore went away from the scene. But the elder brother rushed to the scene and took care of his injured brother. Such an attitude is required by the church to transcend the fortified walls of socio-cultural taboos and religious dogmas in caring for the vulnerable Others.

Another story of the yore is a leprous woman by the name *Mongtsülo* who was left behind by the villagers in the fear of running away from a human-eating tiger that killed a group of nine (9) women in a single day. Eventually, a courageous man *Ramphan* killed the tiger and cajoled the villagers to return... But they did not pay heed. Therefore, *Ramphan* ran after them and meanwhile caught up with a leprous woman on the way who was left behind by the villagers/families. The woman asked *Ramphan* to interpret the meaning of an incident where a poisonous snake said, "Snake-plant, snake-plant, *Mongtsülo*," and glided over her leg. Ramphan told her to crush up some leaves of the snake-plant and apply it to her leg. And when she applied the ointment on her leg, the leprosy was completely cured. *Ramphan* also took her as his wife.[97]

The above story portrays a ferocious tiger devouring helpless women in the field. The tiger represents the dominant forces in the present times that ignore and/or try to tyrannize and discriminate the vulnerable communities. On the other hand, the resilience, resistance, and persistence of *Ramphan* (his wife was among the nine women killed by the tiger) in killing the tiger is a powerful metaphor to challenge and uproot the empire of oppression towards the vulnerable in the church and society. Besides, the role of the snake, snake-plant, and Ramphan cannot be negated as it brought healing to the stigmatized and unwanted woman. The uncaring attitude of the society and the family is also shown in their actions of leaving behind the woman amidst dangers to fend for herself. These uncaring attitudes are still prevalent in many churches and societies around the world. Under such circumstances, should the church remain silent or move to action? The church needs to transgress its borders to be an agent of healing to the distressed persons on the edge of society through its empathetic love and concern. The healing task of the church is not only about

physical healing but showing love and concern that can heal the lives of those whose loss, vulnerabilities and disabilities cannot be restored and reversed. There is also a need to counter the perpetrators of unjust system and structures by constructing an alternative narrative of equal co-existence and mutuality of all humanity without any distinction and discrimination. Thus, the Lotha Naga folklores can also inform the pastoral ministry of the church towards building a just and inclusive community.

## Conclusion

The discussion in this paper helps us to understand the various challenges the PwDs face in the church and society. The paper also explored the Naga cultural and religious resources as alternative values to construct an inclusive ecclesia. The ministry of the church requires divine caring of the entire cosmos exemplifying the nature of God. Every time the vulnerable Others are brutalized; the soul of the church is wounded. God had shown the preferential option to PwDs who have been isolated, marginalized, and discriminated on the account of divine punishment or evidence of immoral behavior. There are many biblical passages which support God's care for the PwDs. It is, therefore, unbiblical to label PwDs as misfits since everyone is created in the image of God. The goodness of God's creation should be a criterion for the full inclusion of PwDs in the church. The church can find its pastoral identity and relevance by journeying with the vulnerable communities, and the tribal cultural and religious resources can also add more dimensions towards the pastoral ministry of the church. It is in this aspect, the church needs to move into action to address the various challenges of PwDs in order to create a borderless ecclesia of all, by all and for all communities.

## Endnotes

1 Helen Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. In 1882, she was stricken by an illness that left her blind and deaf. Anne Sullivan helped her make tremendous progress with her ability to communicate, and Keller went on to college, graduating in 1904.

2 Hereafter cited as PwDs.

3 Wati Longchar, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability,* eds., Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans (Kolkata: ATESEA, 2014), 175.

[4] Samuel Kabue, "Exclusion through Perceptions and Attitudes towards Disability," in *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, Quarterly Newsletter* (April-June 2013): 2.

[5] Joseph George, "Pastoral Care and Counselling to the Differently Abled Persons: Challenges and Responses," in *Disability Discourse for Theological Institution*, ed., Wati Longchar (Jorhat: ETE¬WCC/CCA, 2006), 38.

[6] The person in question is created in the image of God with all rights and dignities. Ezamo Murry, *Introducing Disability Concern: From Exclusion to Inclusion* (Jorhat: by the Author, 2017), 3.

[7] Samuel Kabue, "Church and Society Response to Disability: Historical And Sociological Perspective," in *Disabled God Amidst Broken People: Doing Theology from Disability Perspective,* eds., Wati Longchar & Gordon Cowans (Manilla, Phillipines: ATESEA, 2007), 1.

[8] Kabue, "Exclusion through Perceptions and Attitudes towards Disability," in *Ecumenical Disability*…, 2-3.

[9] Impairment is a problem in body function; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in life situations.Geeta Chopra, *Child Rights in India: Challenges and Social Action* (New Delhi: Springer, 2015), 217.

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[11] Tulika Kar, "Human Rights Perspective for Differently Abled Persons," in *Rights of Disabled Women and Children in India*, ed., Anil Bhuimali (New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2009), 95.

[12] Dana Dunn, *The Social Psychology of Disability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015),14.

[13] *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy*, Published by the United Nations, 2018, iv.

[14] Roji T. George, "'(Dis)abled Jesus': Reading Jesus, His Mission, and the Jesus' Community from a (dis)ability Perspective," in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, XLVI/2 (December 2014):118¬119. The 2011 census recorded seven (7) types of disabilities such as seeing, hearing, speech, movement, mental retardation, mental illness, and any other multiple disabilities. *Census of India 2011: Data on Disability*, published by Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, New Delhi, http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2014/disability in india2011data.pdf . Accessed on 27-12-2013.

[15] Record as per disability data census 2011 Nagaland furnished by the social welfare department, Govt. of Nagaland, Kohima, 29th January, 2016.

[16] Disabled women are often sexually abused/raped and in some cases killed by the rapist(s) or even by family members, to relieve them of pregnancy and social stigma. Longchar, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability*…, 176-177.

[17] Wang Zhijiang, "A Study on Legislative Inhibition of Discrimination on the Basis of Disability," in *Confronting Discrimination and Inequality in China: Chinese and Canadian Perspectives,* eds., Errol P. Mendes and Sakunthala Srighanthan (Ottawa, Ontario: The University of Ottawa Press, 2009), 250.

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[20] Treatment/training may be understood as defiance to the will of Allah or as interference with a person's karma. While almsgiving to beggars is pious behavior, and Hindu religious bodies/trusts do not think it part of their duty to help PwDs as they consider the handicap due to the victim's misdeeds in his/her previous life. George, "Persons with Disabilities in India," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*…, 32.See also, conflating disability with sin, disability as virtuous suffering, and showing charity. All these themes are a disabling theology. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 71-73.

[21] Zhijiang, "A Study on Legislative Inhibition of Discrimination on the Basis of Disability," in Confronting Discrimination and Inequality in China: Chinese and Canadian Perspectives…, 250.

[22] Samuel George, "Disabilit(y) Ethics: A Search for 'Different' Paradigm in Christian Ethics," in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, XVIII/1 (June, 2016): 84. (74-91)

[23] Zhijiang, "A Study on Legislative Inhibition of Discrimination on the Basis of Disability," in *Confronting Discrimination and Inequality in China: Chinese and Canadian Perspectives*…, 248-249.

[24] "Are Differently-abled Persons 'Disabled' in Nagaland?" *The Morung Express*, November 4, 2017, 1.

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[26] Diethono Nakhro, "November 20 is NBCC Disability Sunday," in *Nagaland Post,*November 18, 2016, 6.

[27] Diethono Nakhro, "Executive Director, CAN-Nagaland and Member, National Committee on the Rights of PwD," *The Morung Express*, December 3, 2016, 7.

[28] "Often ignored, Nagaland's people with disability reaffirm hope," *Eastern Mirror*, December 4, 2017, 3.

[29] District Rehabilitation Centre (DRC) at Dimapur has stopped functioning all of a sudden (since 2011) due to lack of funds from the concerned department. Interview with Akum Ezung, President, Dimapur District Disabled Persons Parents' Association, June 1, 2018.

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[31] Diethono Nakhro, "Disability: The missing issue of Election 2018," *The Nagaland Post*, February 25, 2018,6.

[32] "End Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Nagaland," *The Morung Express*, May 5, 2017, 1.

[33] Interview with Akum Ezung.

[34] Lewis S. Mudge, "Church: Ecclesiology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition, ed., Lindsay Jones (Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2005), 1770.

[35] Cited by Rajendra K. Sharma, *Social Change And Social Control* (New Delhi: Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2007), 34.

[36] The naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, those who have wives and children, those who live in shame. Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry*, eds., Eric W. Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehmann, volume 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), XVI.

[37] *Gift of Being: Called to be a Church of All and for All*, published by Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (September - December 2014): 5.

[38] Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine: His Contextual and Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 56.

[39] Stephen Harold Riggins, "The Rhetoric of Othering in the language and Politics of Exclusion," in *Others in Discourse*, ed., Stephen Harold Riggins (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 3.

[40] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993), 25.

[41] "Ekklesia is best rendered as democratic assembly/ congress of full citizens." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Discipleship of Equals: Reality and Vision," in *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership*, ed., Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 2-3.

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[44] Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the church*…, 12.

[45] Letty M. Russel, "Good Housekeeping," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed., Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1990), 230.

[46] R. L. Hnuni, *Vision for Women in India: Perspective from Bible, Church and Society* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2009), 161.

[47] Russel, "Good Housekeeping," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*…,231.

[48] George Zachariah, "Towards a Communion of the Multitude: Living God, Renew, and Transform Us," in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XLIX, No. 1 (June 2017): 181.

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[61] The various issues of PwDs can be integrated in the bible studies, Sunday school lessons, and sermons during regular worship services and what they can contribute to the faith community. Valdez, "Disability: Church and Advocacy," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability*..., 211.

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[65] Romel W. Mackelprang and Richard O. Salsgiver, *Disability: A Diversity Model Approach in Human Service Practice,* third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

[66] Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Differences*…, 13.

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[78] Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling…,* 177.

[79] Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling…,* 176.

[80] Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling…,* 177.

[81] David W Anderson, *Reaching Out and Bringing In: Ministry to and with Persons with Disabilities* (Bloomington, Indiana: WestBow Press, 2013), 79.

[82] Anderson, *Reaching out and Bringing in: Ministry to and with Persons with Disabilities…,* 79.

[83] Ezamo Murry, "Ministerial Formation to Serve Disabled Persons," in *Disability Discourse for Theological Institution,* ed., Wati Longchar (Jorhat: ETE-WCC/CCA, 2006), 30.

[84] PwDs do not want to be the object of charity, pity or helplessness. Rather, they want to experience belongingness in the faith community and willingness to serve others in spite of their limitations. Valdez, "Disability: Church and Advocacy," in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective: A Theological Resource Book on Disability...,* 212.

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# Ministry among Persons with Disabilities

Limatula Longkumer

**Introduction**

Do we practice in reality "A Church of all and for all" in the church today? In one of the EDAN workshops, we were looking for a few wheel chairs and I thought it would be very easy to borrow from nearby churches and institutions. To my surprise, I found it very difficult to arrange from the churches because most of the churches are not equipped with these facilities. Moreover, it made me to think about building facilities and so I began to survey the rooms, doors and infra structures, to my surprise it was not disabled-friendly in many ways. Many buildings and conference room shows our insensitivity towards PwDs. We talk a lot in theory about inclusive ministry from disability perspective but in reality we have failed to practice inclusive community for all. This failure is both theological, sociological as well as physical realities. Wheel chair or pram, rams in the church premises and institutions are still a far dream in many churches and institutions even today, forget about healing of the whole well-being of persons with disabilities.

No doubt there are awareness about PwDs in theological circles after the introduction of EDAN program and disability teaching discourses, seminars and workshops in the regional, national and international levels, but frankly speaking the ground reality in the church ministry is different. Ministering to the disabled persons (children, youths and adults and senior citizens) is an aspect of ministry which is still less popular or almost nonexistent in Christian ministry till today. Many churches do not consider healing ministry to the disabled as important, even though a special Sunday is arranged once in a year.

This is only a tokenism, which cannot be counted as inclusive ministry. Perhaps, ignorance, forgetfulness or difficulties encountered (by some individuals as well as churches) may be a hindrance in ministering to the disabled people.

Disabled persons, whether in America, Europe, Asia or elsewhere in the world can be more easily described than defined. They are in one way or the other different from persons who are considered normal by greater segments of the population. This deviation may be mental, physical, behavioural or social. More often, persons with disabilities feel alienated, marginalized, embarrassed, stigmatized and in some cases by the treatment meted out to them by the church and the society at large. In the words of Samuel Kabue, it is due to "centuries of misunderstanding and discrimination of people with disabilities."[1] The reasons for misunderstanding and discrimination can be due to cultural practices in which disable persons are regarded as second-class people in the society. Disability is connected to sins, curse and shame. Most of the cultures in Asia have a negative attitude towards PwDs. On the other hand, we have developed a theology from abled perspective for the abled bodied persons. Therefore, theology from the perspective of persons with disabilities is almost silent in the Christian tradition.[2] This exclusive theology and cultural practices have been reflected in doing Christian ministry and so we minister only to the abled people. It is sad to note that there is very little place for the disabled people in our mission and ministry. The abled people side-lined PwDs in worship, liturgies, preaching and doing mission. We need to affirm that persons with disabilities are essential to the wholeness of the Christian community. "They are people created in God's image, possessing dignity, value, and purpose."[3] They are people who not only need physical and material help but also recognition as full members of the human family and require spiritual care and nourishment.[4] Hence, this paper highlights some of the practical steps towards inclusive Christian ministry for PwDs.

**Inclusive Christian ministry**

The Good news of Jesus Christ is to be shared to all persons. Jesus Christ our example par excellence did ministry to all people with varying degrees of disabilities in His days - be it in cultural setting and society. During His earthly ministry, Jesus offered a ministry of healing to the disabled, which consequently, expanded the frontiers of

His purpose. He loved them and had compassion on them wherever He found them and these did not exclude the healing of their diseases. It is remarkable to note that throughout the earthly ministry o Jesus Christ, He did not despise, and neglect the disabled.[5] His very purpose of incarnation is explained in this verse, "*Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*" (Luke 7:22 RSV) This verse summarises inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ while he was on this earth.

For the disciples of Jesus, healing was integral part of their ministry. One of the most outstanding encounters of the disciples with the disabled in their days is found in Acts 3:1-12. This passage gives a vivid report of a lame beggar who was healed at the Beautiful Gate. All the examples cited in the preceding lines relate to instances of physical healing: restoration to soundness, wholeness and health. Church is God's ekklesia, a called out community where all people of God are welcomed without discrimination or exclusion; it is an assembly of equals where everybody is welcomed, accepted and appreciated. God calls the Church to the ministry of healing so that the truth about God as revealed in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ is manifested in the entire world as His witnesses (Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:18).Christ's ways of concern, love and compassion is thus the foundation for ministry to people with disabilities within and beyond the Church. We also need to know that PwDs is not found only within the church but everywhere. Inclusive community and ministry should embrace all people of God. Appropriate facilities should be made available to all so that disabled people regardless of religious persuasion feel welcomed, warmed and loved. The PwDs are the Church, not just guests, they are insiders not outsiders of the Church. They are the subjects but not the objects to be side-lined or rejected. Therefore, they do not need to be served, but to serve. They are not "the others" in the Church, but parts of the Church. Therefore, we need to include and accept them as they are in the ministry, but should not regarded them as the persons with special needs who need extra care and attention.

**Inclusive Church**

We need to admit honestly that churches have not been inclusive but often exclusive towards PwDs. Inclusive church demands affirmation

and recognition of the equal right of persons with disabilities. Inclusion means accepting them as active subject, talented and creative in their own capacities for ministry. They should not be regarded as persons who are burdensome. "To be included means to be considered equals with each other in a parish/local church, to be treated with dignity and respect, just like all the other members of a congregation."[6] Inclusive church should thus include the following concerns:

**Access:** The first step to inclusion is providing access to PwDs. Acess can be in the church premises, school buildings or community halls, etc. Church building is the first gate to worship and it allows participation in the life of the church. Many churches do not have enough access for persons with disabilities. This is the hindrance for PwDs and they do not feel welcome to join the church. It is a fact that many church buildings have many steps or high steps to climb without ramps, pews are very high, hard, and stiff, which are not comfortable for persons with disabilities. Inclusive church involves sensitivity to the needs of the PwDs. Samuel Kabue stated what does accessible church means, thus saying:

> A fully accessible church should permit the persons with disabilities access to the sanctuary so that they are able to participate in all aspects of the church activities. Fully accessible churches should have programmes for intellectually impaired, some sign language interpreters for the deaf, siting that can permit wheelchair users to sit with their families and should also assign Sunday readings to blind readers who can read Braille and are willing to do so as a way of encouraging participation.[7]

Acessible means physical/facilities which are friendly to disabled and the space for participations in the church -liturgies. Let us think of our own churches and institutions, are the facilities and infrastructures are disabled friendly? Welcoming? or blocking them to come!

**Acceptance:** Providing mere physical access does not guarantee that the church welcomes persons with disabilities. Welcoming means accepting wholeheartedly persons with disabilities as part of the church.[8] They are not strangers or members with special needs who need extra care but they are full members of the church.

Acceptance has to do with public attitudes. How do we regard and view at them? They are the most socially marginalized group in

the society and church, due to able people's negative attitudes and prejudices towards them. Attitudes are formed through socialization and experiences. Negative attitudes towards PwDs are formed due to inherent cultural and theological practices. Therefore, they are subjected to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts by the able-bodied.[9] This negative attitudes regarded the disabled people as shameful, sinners, curse, and a sign of demonic activity or a lack of faith.[10] This attitude is still prevailing in our community practices. Until and unless we get rid off this negative attitude we cannot practice inclusive ministry. The whole problem is the abled peoples' attitude towards the PwDs which blocks them to welcome in the community.

**Recognition:** Inclusive church ministry must recognise and appreciate the gifts, abilities and talents of the PwDs. We need to recognise them as they are as unique individual person with creativity. They are capable in their own ways who can contribute a lot for the growth of the community. The church must help them to develop their talents, to make use of their gifts with fulness in a productive way.

**Inclusive Liturgy:** We need to formulate inclusive worship liturgy for everyone. There is no need of special worship service for persons with disabilities.The worship should provide languages that are suitable for everyone with different kinds of disabilities such as hearing, sight, intellectual, and physical disabilities.[11] Jennie Block recommended a theology of access to liturgies, which includes rereading of text, new liturgical and sacramental formulations. She contended that "the identity and mission of the church are explicitly tied to who is present and who is absent."[12] It means without the presence of persons with disabilities the Church cannot meet its identity and mission. Therefore, we need to transform our worship to be inclusive.

We also need to be careful in language usage and postures. Some postures and gestures we use during worship can exclude some persons with disabilities. For example, in our worship postures/gestures like often standing and sitting several times may be difficult for PwDs. Therefore, we need to be careful in language useage. We may say, "please stand – if abled." Another example can be "kiss of peace" where everyone is asked to shake hands with the person sitting next to you, how can a person without hand can shake hand? Or during Eucharist the presbyters may say every member to come forward to receive the elements? Our Eucharist also divide the people between

holy and unholy, abled and disabled. Who is missing in our Eucharist table? How can a blind or deaf, wheel chair persons can participate? The worship leader must be sensitive to persons with disabilities when he or she asks people in the church to clap their hands, stand or to dance. We need to consciously rewrite liturgies in the churches from an inclusive perspective.

Another serious problem in our liturgy is the confession of sin. The confession of sin has to be worded carefully in our liturgy because the present confessional prayer is conditioned by existing moral theology and doctrine of sin which gives the impression that PwDs should confess their sins in order to be cured and forgiven from their former sins. Many parents are ashamed to show their children with disabilities in public because of the moral approach. Disabled children also stay inside the house and do not go to church due to some people's insensitive attitude.

Preaching is another area we need to strengthen. The preacher's sermon influences the way PwDs interpret the passages. We have been interpreting and preaching the Bible only for the abled people and from an abled perspective. The preachers should be careful not to use moral approach which judges persons with disabilities as sinners. Instead, the preachers may use social and solidarity approaches to include persons with disabilities. We need to develop reading the Bible from disability perspective. Biblical passages need to be reread and reinterpreted to be able to identify the roles that the Church and the community to fully include and explore the capabilities of the PwDs in their search of belongingness.

**Church as a healing community:** There is confusion between healing and faith in our churches. Healing is understood in terms of physical healing, but not the wholeness of the whole being. In many charismatic revival meetings, there are healing ministries or camps where they recognize healing as a sign of faith. This makes people to think that those who are not healed have no strong faith. Many persons with disabilities are brought to these kind of healing ministries to be healed, to become "normal" persons. However, not all of them are cured. Is it a sign that they do not have strong faith? How can we explain the concept of healing to people with perennially disabled people (physically handicap, blind, deaf and dumb, etc)? What is healing for them? What is faith for them? For some, physical healing may not

be possible and so healing for them is developing the mechanism of sustaining their lives.

Dimensions of healing reflect physical, mental, social, psychological, emotional/behavioural, and spiritual healing. Healing should not be equated only with physical healing. It can be emotional, spiritual and moral healing. Healing is total wholeness of the well-being of a person. Healing ministry to the disabled includes encouragements in whatever circumstances they may be, acknowledging the struggles of the disabled is important. This includes their feelings (of alienation, marginalization, embarrassment, self-pity, low-self-esteem, shame and so on), disappointments, and contentment. The Church needs to consider seriously how to meet the needs of the PwDs who are in the community. Like every other persons, they need to be loved and accepted, they need to be challenged and successful, and create opportunity to know Christ as Saviour, and grow spiritually in a constant loving Church atmosphere. Everyone desires to have a purpose in life, so also the PwDs. Knowing that the PwDs can make contribution if opportunity is given, a proper organization and coordination of people, resources and programmes are needed to carry out effectively the healing ministry for people with disabilities.

Some practical steps for healing ministry may be mentioned below:

**1. Dissemination of information on disability ministry:** Informing people or advocacy (Church members) is one of the surest ways of accomplishing the needs of the disabled and bringing awareness to the general church community is a tire necessity. If people are aware of the special needs and interests, they are more likely to show compassion, love, understanding and commitment to the disabled both in and outside the church. Educating the church members on the importance of disability ministry and encouraging all people to have a positive and welcoming attitude to PwDs.

**2. Recruitment, mobilization and training of workers for disability needs of the church:** Ministering to the disabled persons is not an easy task. It requires interest, patience, commitment, faithfulness, enthusiasm and stamina. Flexibility and a sense of humor are key ingredients in ensuring a successful Christian ministry. Equipping and training through discipleship whose primary purpose is instruction and expression toward developing leadership qualities among disabled

children, youths, and adults and even others. Educators need some skills, psychology, counselling and medical information along with spiritual resources to understand their needs and feelings in order to help them.

**3. Provide opportunities and facilities:** Many disabled people do not have access to education, health care and jobs. Many of them remain uneducated, poor and dependent. Mission and ministry to PwDs involve finding ways and means to provide access to education, health care, and jobs avenues. We need to help and bring equal opportunities for them to discover their gifts and talents, and this will enable them to become independent and be able to serve others as well. To do this we need to recognise and affirm that disabled people are capable and creative. They have immense potentials to develop, and make contribution to the church and society. Slow learners can be helped through these type of activities:

**Games:** Games and games-based learning for disabled have been a part of education for decades. They can provide the fundamental needs of learning by offering enjoyment, motivation, creativity, social interaction and so on. Providing games-based learning activities for growth can make a difference in the life of disabled people.

**Music:** Music adds meaning to learning. Pairing music with words lends extra meaning and reinforces memory. Keeping music simple with appropriate use of melody and harmony makes it appealing to slow learners because it exempts the challenge of difficulty and complexity for learning process. Those who are gifted in singing can also be encouraged to develop music as their career. This is the way churches can help them to develop their potentialities.

**Dance:** Dance spurs memory. "A picture is worth a thousand words." People remember a very small percentage of what they hear and see. Choreography which is also an integral part of dance can be used to teach disabled persons. A teacher can choreograph the Lord's Prayer or any other story or lesson in the Bible and achieve effective memorization on the part of the students.[13] Dance can also be a good physical exercise to coordinate the muscles.

**Painting/fine art and carpentry:** Painting and drawing have been an expression of innermost thoughts and feelings. They are also seen as integral aspect of communication. They are vehicle through which persons can express their thoughts and feelings. Teachers can

effectively elicit self-expression even for severely disabled students by being cognizant of their limitations while remaining open and accepting and encouraging them to engage in artistic expression like painting, art works, etc. Some of the finest artistic works and handicraft come from disabled people. Recently, I saw a video where one Bhutanese man who has no hands, but owned a wood craft shop and making beautiful wooden crafts with his two legs. I don't think many abled people can do such things. Some are very good in making artificial flowers, decorations and art works. It is not only displaying their inner talents and feeling, but such things can help to develop self-support and self-reliance for them. In one way, they get satisfaction, and on the other hand, they become independent and self-support.

**Christian education**

The Sunday school is a good strategy through which disabled persons can be ministered to. lt is an avenue through which God's Word can be provided for spiritual growth, encouragements and healing to hurting souls. Churches need to develop Sunday school curriculum for disabled persons.

Many churches require confirmation or baptismal lessons to become full-fledged member of a church, then only a person is allowed to partake in the Holy Communion. Usually, catechism for confirmation or baptismal lessons talk about church dogmas, which requires intellectual abilities to grasp. This is a challenge for persons with intellectual disabilities. The inclusive church should provide catechism/confirmation/baptismal classes that meet all needs and lead the people to confirmation as a requirement to receive bread and wine in the Eucharist. A special curriculum for PwDs needs to be developed.

**Disability ministry to the families**

The Church is the ideal place for children and adults with disabilities and with their families. Where else can families find unconditional love, acceptance and hope for today and tomorrow? But why these families and their children are not found in Sunday morning worship! The Church needs to develop a deliberate ministry for the families with disabled persons. Churches may minister to families through the following ways:

**Care through constant visitation:** The basis for family visitation is

integral part of pastoral ministry. It is portrayed in the example of Jesus Christ and it was His method (Matthew 9:35). He visited the homes of the people. His visitations were more than social calls. They were for encouragement and inspiration. Homes of families with disabled should be visited periodically to offer encouragement and healing. How many Pastors/Presbyters are visiting the disabled families in our locality?

**Prayer:** Prayer is vital. Churches need to constantly pray for them. A ministry of prayer to families and the disabled will reinforce their faith in the living God.

**Material help:** Wherever or whenever required or needed, some financial, material or physical needs or rehabilitation can be provided (for very poor families) by the churches. Churches should mobilize the community to help the needy people in the community.

**Referral:** Cases that proved difficult can be referred to places where they can equally be helped, such as social welfare agencies, medical centers, etc. This can be initiated by the churches. There may be some families who find it difficult to handle by alone or who do not have any idea how to go about, those people must be helped through showing ways and means.

**Offering counselling**

Counselling with the physically disabled require specific skills in addition to professional counselling skills. For instance, if one is counselling the deaf and dumb, the counsellor requires the knowledge of sign language. For counselling a blind client, one also needs the knowledge of Braille. This will make counselling more effective and less time consuming. A counsellor who lacks those skills should refer clients to appropriate personnel.

Church's healing ministry should not only take into cognizance the needs of people with disabilities but also proactively develop practical strategies for meeting the special needs of the person. There is no doubt that ministering to the needs of disabled persons may be a tasking or nearly an impossible experience but we can do everything with the help of God.

**Conclusion**

For centuries, we have developed exclusive ministry and ignored

PwDs. As a church, we have done injustices to them. Inclusive Christian ministry means accepting, recognising and giving access to PwDs. It also means doing justice by including persons with disabilities in the whole life of the church activities where they can fully participate according to their gifts and talents. Persons with and without disabilities make up the body of Christ. Thus, we must break down the dichotomy between "us-them" and "normal-abnormal" distinctions. We must also remove the negative attitudes and prejudices, but appreciate one another as created in the image of God. By way of conclusion, let us retrospect the following action plans:

1. Let us seriously think of changing church infra-structures and facilities for disabled friendly structures.
2. Let us rethink and rewrite and renew liturgies and worship from an inclusive perspective.
3. Let us take concrete plans to engage in Special educational ministry for the disabled.
4. Let us think how our churches can be involved in active advocacy for the disabled in our communities.
5. Let us plan how churches can partner with government, NGO's, other faith based communities to respond to the needs of the disabled.
6. Let us take steps to facilitate congregation members to participate in ministering to the disabled.
7. Let us make regular visits to the homes of PwDs to show solidarity and caring ministry.

**Endnotes**

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[2] Wati Longchar, Gordon Cowans, eds. *Doing Theology From Disability Perspectives* (Manila: ATESEA, 2011), vii.

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[4] Samuel Kabue, Esther Momba, Joseph Galgalo, eds, *Disability, Society, and Theology: Voices from Africa* (Limuru, Kenya: Zapf Chancery, 2011), 8.

[5] Ogbomosa, "The Disabled and the Healing Ministry of the Church: Christian Educational Perspective", 70.

[6] Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Beyond Accessibility*, Cited by Tabita Kartika Christiani, "Becoming an Inclusive Church", In God's Image (June 2017):44.

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[11] Tabita Kartika Christiani, "Becoming an Inclusive Church," 46.

[12] Jennie Block W, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People With Disabilities* (New York, Continuum, 2002), 121.

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# Living Together in Household of God

Arulampalam Stephen

**Introduction**

I am Arulampalam Stephen. I was born in Jaffna, Northern part of Sri Lanka, in 1972. When I was nine months old I lost 40% of my sight; now I am almost totally blind (90%). I am aware of this handicap and I have accepted it as I have accepted my own self as I am. Often I have revolted against God and his Providence for making me "incomplete" and asked him WHY? I received no answer, only – at times – a soft murmur, "Let my grace be sufficient."

From the ages between five to ten I attended our village school, which was entirely dominated by the able people. My parents did not like to send me to the school with the other able or differently able people, because they were not ready to accept the plurality of humanity.

In 1995 on the 5th of December our house was demolished. My father's right leg was amputated. My mother and my brother became the victims of the war. In a way my whole family became disable people in their mind, spirit and body.

After finishing my secondary education I went to the Theological College of Lanka for formation from 1997 to 2001.

After my ordination, as a deacon on the 25th of November 2001, I was sent to Jaffna Northern part of Sri Lanka as a Chaplain (school for deaf and blind) to work in the midst of War and poverty. Presently I am attached to the Theological College of Lanka, Pillimatalawa, involving in the ministry of teaching, and administration since 2010.

**Who is disabled? What is disability?**

The convention adopts a social model of disability, and defines disability as including; Persons with disabilities include those who have long – term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

One Billion People, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability. 80% of persons with disabilities live in the developing countries, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The World Bank estimates that 20% of the world's poorest people are disabled, and tend to be regarded in their own communities as the most disadvantaged.70% of people living in poverty worldwide are FEMALE! Women with disabilities are more likely to be poorer, less healthy, and more vulnerable to abuse than men with disabilities or non-disabled. Women with disabilities are recognized to be doubly disadvantaged, experiencing EXCLUSION on account of their gender and their disability. All members of society should enjoy equal rights and opportunities and are able to fully participate in civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres of life.

**Disability forms, either natural situation or human-made disasters**

Sri Lanka is a multi-faith and multi ethnic country, yet majority of the people follow Buddhism. According to Buddhism,the concept of KARMA and its influence impacts human life. Because of this reason the disable members of community are generally oppressed and isolated by others in the society. However, in this article I would like to focus on the war in Sri Lanka, very specially Jaffna (Northern part of Sri Lanka), and how this war creates disability situation in mind, body and spirit.

*Karma* (Sanskrit, also *karman*, Pāli: *kamma*) is derived from a Sanskrit term that literally means "action" or "doing". In the Buddhist tradition, *karma* refers to action driven by intention (*cetanā*) which leads to future consequences. Those intentions are considered to be the determining factor in the kind of rebirth in samsara, the cycle of rebirth.[1]

**Buddhist understanding of *Karma***

*Karma* and *karmaphala* are fundamental concepts in Buddhism.

The concepts of *karma* and *karmaphala* explain how our intentional actions keep us tied to rebirth in samsara, whereas the Buddhist path, as exemplified in the Noble Eightfold Path, shows us the way out of *samsara*.

**Rebirth**

Rebirth is a common belief in all Buddhist traditions. It says that birth and death in the six realms occur in successive cycles driven by ignorance (*avidyā*), desire (*trsnā*), and hatred (*dvesa*). The cycle of rebirth is called *samsāra*. It is a beginning less and ever-ongoing process. Liberation from *samsāra* can be attained by following the Buddhist Path. This path leads to *vidyā*, and the stilling of *trsnā* and *dvesa*. Hereby the ongoing process of rebirth is stopped.

***Karma***

The cycle of rebirth is determined by *karma*, literally "action". In the Buddhist tradition, *karma* refers to actions driven by intention (*cetanāa*) deeds done deliberately through body, speech or mind, which leads to future consequences, the *Nibbedhika Sutta*, *Anguttara Nikaya*.[2]

Like the Jain and Hindu ideas, Buddhists believe *karma* can affect this life, and can carry over into the next. Actions from past lives affect the state of their current one, and the actions that people take now will affect their coming one. *Karma* is a natural order of things; it is not a punishment or reward from a god. Those with negative *karma* may be reborn as animals or into a hell, while those with positive *karma* will be reborn into a heaven. Even if Buddhists are born into a heaven, they attempt to escape the death and rebirth cycle, since they believe nothing lasts forever. Some Buddhist writings hold that not every action is a result of *karma*, and some events naturally occur, but modern Buddhist thought diverges from that concept.[3]

**Sharing the stories of disable people**

**Story - I**[4]

A family was at the coconut garden of Kilali. They were having their lunch at 1 pm, children were fed and the adults were with the parcels. Suddenly, there were few helicopters. All were in fear.

Within a moment, few were injured due to the shooting from the Helicopters. After they left, people slowly came out and gathered

together. An elderly person said very clearly, 'This is our life. We cannot get away from it. So, we should know how to face this situation. That's all'.

We were not sure that whether all accepted his view, but there was a dead silence.

**Story - II**[5]

The students of the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts are sitting for the GCE (O/L) examination in the midst of fear and difficulty due to the aircraft bombing. The parents and the Educational community made request to stop the bombing during the time of examination.

**Story - III**

Meaningless Chorus:

This is the day // ,e;ehisNa//

That the Lord has made// fu;j;ju;gilj;jhu;//;

We will rejoice // fsp$UNthk;//

And be glad in it.// kfpo; nfhz;lhLNthk;//

A boy, who was severely injured in a bomb blast, responded to the above chorus from a refugee camp in Nelukulam, Vavuniya, saying:

This is the day //,e;ehisNa //

That the Lord has never made// fu;j;ju; gilj;jhu; //

We will cry// khubg;Nghk; //

And be lament in it. //mOJ Gyk;gpLNthk;//

**Story - IV** [6]

**Stories on Prayer:**

<u>Answer to Prayer</u>

A poor woman went to the police station and asked them to release her only disable son who is working in a hotel. They said that her son will be produced in courts, she can take appropriate legal action, and if her son is innocent, he will be released. She did not know what to do. When she returned from the police station, she saw a kovil (temple), and went there, cried lamented and prayed: 'God, please release my son'. A worshipper heard her cry. He was working in human rights commission. So he was able to take all necessary steps legally and her son was released. She thanked that person and God.

Prayer in Life

A priest said in a sermon as follows. 'Prayer is very important for life. So come to Church every Sunday. Whether the shelling or bombing takes place or whether you have to do agriculture or fishing, does not matter, come for prayer'. Soon after the worship, a school boy said aloud to his father, 'Appa (Father), when we go to fishing we pray; when we begin to prepare the lane for agriculture we pray; when we hide ourselves in bunker during the shelling or aircraft bombing we pray; do we need to come to Church every Sunday for prayer?'. A woman said, 'Thambi (Boy), we pray to God throughout our life and we depend on God even we come to Church, so continue prayer throughout your life'.

These Experiences tell us how war created disability not only in their body but also in their spiritual journey. Therefore, people challenged their prayer life and try to give new meaning for their soul in the context of war. However, we need to work for peace and reconciliation with justice.

**Building the Communities**

We live in a pluralistic society in which different religions and ethnic groups, while maintaining their separate identities, strive to participate in a common civic society. The differences can be a source of interminable conflict and tension, but it can also be an opportunity for mutual enrichment and creativity providing for each group and help realize how much their lives are bound up with members of the other groups. Mutual acceptance is at the heart of the gospel of forgiveness: the communities that enrich and widen their horizon by mutual acceptance and solidarity.

The church talks about its mission in the context in which it exists. If the church's mission is contextual then it cannot be blind to this new context of socio-political, economic and cultural challenges. While the world-wide church struggles for fullness of life, the poor in the two thirds of the world cry for the right to life. Samartha says that building community is like building a good city, it takes time, effort and planning. One needs to lay pipelines to bring in fresh water as well as gutters to drain off the waste. A city needs places to do serious work as well as parks and playgrounds and meeting places.[7] In the light of this statement building a community is the necessary mission of the church in the context of creating the new Theology from the person with disability perspective.

**Stigma**

Society functions by categorizing and stereotyping people. Geography, economics, employment and recreation all determine a person's social identity and status. Thus, communities establish social norms, placing people within particular groupings in order to determine their standing in society. Anyone who cannot conform to these "normative expectations"[8] becomes stigmatized and potentially discriminated against.

Postmodern culture is obsessed with body image and normalcy. Our media saturated world constantly bombards us with images of bodily 'perfection'. Any deviation from this perceived normality is received with disdain. People with impairments are therefore often stigmatized in society. This is manifested in a variety of ways, such as inaccessibility to public buildings, difficulty in obtaining employment or outright ridicule. Ironically, although postmodern society rejects bodily difference, it also champions inclusivity and tolerance. Society today is careful of language and attitudes surrounding race, gender difference and disability, however, oppression and exclusion still exists and is often systemic.

A person is said to be oppressed or stigmatized if she or he is held back physically or psychologically from the goals she or he aspires to or the norms of society.[9] Oppression can occur at all levels of society such as, economic, social and religious. Weiss Block identifies three patterns of thought and behavior that stigmatize and oppress people with impairments.[10]

Firstly, oppression can occur through the domination of non-disabled people. This is often well meant and unintentional. However, non-disabled people may make decisions on behalf of people with disabilities, without consultation. This has happened time and again in church settings where adaptations have been made to the buildings without discussion with the very group for which the changes are being made. This suggests to people with disabilities that they are not capable of making decisions and puts them in a position of obliged gratefulness. By not providing access to the sanctuary the church could be accused of using power and domination to minimize the choices people with disabilities can make.

Secondly, oppression can occur through our choice of language. Language can often be used in a derogatory way to devalue and

ridicule. Even when unintentional, language can be demeaning for the person with impairments. One interviewee referred to people with disabilities as "People like them". She did not mean to be cruel but her choice of words undermines the value of the person.

Thirdly, oppression can occur through an attitude of low expectations. We often assume that people with disabilities cannot achieve as much with their lives as other people. This is often the motivation for 'good news' stories of people's accomplishments despite perceived disability.

Religion sadly, has also been used to oppress people with impairments. Eiesland states that Christians with disabilities are either viewed as, "divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero".[11] It certainly seems that Christians with impairments are either seen as someone more than human, such as, a prophet, an innocent and as special or they are viewed as less than human such as, possessed by demons, lacking in faith, sinful, invisible, or broken. Much of this comes from poor biblical interpretation and Christian teaching. This kind of thinking seriously undermines a person's humanity as someone created in the image of God.

As a result of such systemic oppression from both society and the Church, people with disabilities often feel like second class citizens, they suffer from low self-esteem, feeling undervalued and overlooked from years of subtle persecution and practices. We must therefore, closely examine how our practices are unconsciously informing our theology and vice versa. We must address these issues if we are ever to break the hold of stigma over people with disabilities in the Church today.

**Why is a Theology of Disability Essential?**

Theology comes out from a particular context that context helps us to understand the nature and the action of God. Revelation of God, Bible, tradition, experience, history and other religious tradition directly or indirectly contributing in the formation of theology. This particular theology helps us towards liberation, therefore theology of disability helps a person or a community to create God in his or her image and get away from the social stigma.

The miracles of Jesus in healing disabled people are not always regarded by disabled people as offering them hope, but on the contrary

are looked upon as encouraging an attitude of charity and of mission towards them. Many disabled people feel that their human dignity is taken from them by the expectation that they should, as Christians, be healed by Christ. This brings us to the connection between disability and sin. This describes a cosmic history falling into three distinct periods. In the first period, the created universe was in a state of blissful perfection. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were in a state of perfect humanity, unblemished in their bodies, in their relationships with each other and in their communion with God. The second period runs from the fall of Adam and Eve through to the second coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment. The Bible is almost wholly concerned with this second period, which is the story of redemption. It is the period of grace, including the election of Israel and the calling into existence of the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The third and final period will be the consummation of history, when once again pain and evil will be banished and human beings will again be in perfect communion with God in a restored creation, much more enduring than the first condition since the human state will be transformed by the vision of God.

**Theology of Access and the Victim of the War.**

A theology of access is one such attempt to develop a theology that creates full inclusion within the church community. Weiss Block proposes that the purpose of a theology of access "is the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Body of Christ".[12] Creating access for those on the margins is not supplementary to the Christian faith. But is an imperative of it. "The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of access; creating access for those on the margins is a Christian mandate". The process of creating an accessible community is demanding and costly: financially, emotionally, ethically, physically, spiritually and theologically. It requires church congregations to examine critically their practices, beliefs and assumptions, to study them in light of the gospel and to come up with strategies for change in their practices.

Weiss Block acknowledges, "A theology of access demands that we search our community with truth and face the serious reality that some people of God have been systematically denied access to the community".[13] Christians therefore must also admit that we are individually responsible for excluding people from participating fully in church life through our attitudes and actions.

Weiss Block admits that the practical realities of inclusion are daunting. Developing a theology of access will require the Church to consider who it is and what it stands for. It will challenge the Church to redefine long held theologies, traditions and beliefs. It will put strain on limited financial and human resources as church buildings are modified and adapted. A theology of access will potentially lead the Church to develop new models of hospitality and mission in areas that they had not anticipated or expected. Yet this is surely the challenge of the gospel, to "make disciples of all nations,"[14] regardless of race, gender or ability.

**Creating inclusive Community**

Disability issues are historically low on the Church agenda. From biblical times, people with disabilities have been stigmatized and intentionally excluded from participating fully in church practices and worship by restricted access and theological assumptions regarding impairment. The Bible itself has often been used to oppress people with impairments and keep them from fulfilling their God given calling in the church. Yet the fact remains that disabled people continue to be a minority in most church congregations. It is important to develop a theology of disability amongst the congregation. Unless churches take this seriously people with disabilities will never feel fully integrated, included and welcome in the body of Christ.

The Church must confess its role in the systematic exclusion of people with disabilities in society. The Church must take steps to encourage the active participation of people with disabilities in worship and it must allow positive readings of scripture regarding disability to be heard form church pulpits. This will educate the congregation and enable people with impairments to connect their lived bodily experiences to their faith. Within disability studies the language used to describe people with disabilities has become particularly important. Terms such as "the handicapped", "the crippled" or "the disabled" generalize and often stigmatize large groups of people. Such terms demean the value of the human being and oppress people socially.

**a) Image of God and Disability**

There is a traditional teaching of the image of God among Humans. Patrick Mcardle describes the theological link between *imago Dei* and Humanity. This theological construct positions human as a

perfect individual who has rationality and autonomy. These dominant perspectives are missing among the disabled. And the image of God in Jesus, individual, male, whole, celibate, no defects of mind or body communicates the theological inconsistency in the nature of God. Therefore he opines that theology should engage with the brokenness of humanity, which is a mirror to humanity and this brokenness is not to be eliminated but to be celebrated. He introduces 'mutual vulnerability; and 'inter-subjectivity' which has the potential to confront the inconsistencies. Mcardle quotes the relational encounter of Immanuel Levin as that for the one who confronts the other is an essential 'other' who pleads not to be rejected and, ultimately, not be killed. He says the face of the other, one is confronted by his/her own vulnerabilities and frailties. John Swanton travels in a different path that says there is a shared experience of oppression and there are no individual impairments. All the experiences are melded together in the shared oppression. Therefore there is collective experience for all the disabled.

Samuel George quotes Nancy Eiesland's view that disability is not to be seen as a distortion of the image of god but rather that human beings reflect the disabled image of God. The image of God is manifested in all humans with dignity and value. It is not dependent on what one accomplishes or contributes but the dignity and value. It is not dependent on what one accomplishes or contributes but the dignity and value are permanent which are the essential attributes bestowed by God. Every human life is sacred and every human is to be treated with honor. There is a distortion of value in understanding the image of God.

**b) Disability and the church**

Churches in Sri Lanka engage with the marginalized. The charitable projects and mission outreach projects have been evolved from the vision to serve people with Disabilities. But the church often ignores the struggles of the disabled. In Nancy Eiesland' opinion, for the disabled, the church is like a 'city on a hill'- physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable. The church is beautiful and broken, impaired but powerful, complex and gifted. The Church incarnates the disabled God through Jesus who embodied commitment to justice, who challenged all structures. The integral mission becomes possible only when the voices of the disabled are heard, their experiences are honored and their

gifts are allowed to flourish. The task of the ecumenical movements is to side with the disabled to have a right space within the church not to passively support the structure of the society that alienates the disabled

### C) The Nature of Spirituality

Human spirituality is that which transfigures and transcends the biology of the human. When we speak of transcending the biological, we refer to those potentials of the human being which enable him or her to make the biological organism instrumental to non-biological purposes. These potentials include abstract thought, imagination, empathy, the ability to represent biological experiences symbolically, and the capacity to integrate experience and knowledge around a significance or a meaning which goes beyond the pleasure and pain of the individual. Language and money are the two finest achievements of the human tendency towards the spiritual, because being relational in their character, they articulate and facilitate the experience of solidarity with other people. The capacity of the human will to become integrated with others, or to dominate others, as the case may be, is incarnated in money and in language.

When we speak of spirituality as transfiguring the biological, we refer to the fact that the biological is never left behind by transcendence. The body is not the anti-thesis of the spiritual but its organ. We should not contrast the spiritual with the material, nor should we regard the spiritual and the biological as being on altogether different levels. Rather, we should speak of transfiguration: the material infused with the spiritual, the body becoming the form of inter-subjectivity.

In Christian faith, the typical representation of spirituality is to be found in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mk 9:2-8). The body was not left behind but shone with radiance. This could not occur to an isolated body, but only in the context of others, and of the speech which links person to person. This is why Jesus is seen on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, and they are speaking with each other (v.4). Even the resurrection does not leave his body behind (Lk 24:39, Jn 20:6f), and with the ascension, the transfigured body is raised to universality (Acts 1:9). The ascension into heaven of the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11), the figure of the resurrected Christ (Jn 20:27) and the bodily assumption of Mary all indicate that Christian faith confesses a biological spirituality, and believes in the resurrection

of the body as the fulfilment of human potential (Rom. 8:23, 1 Cor 15:42, Phil 3:21).

Nevertheless, the body is transcended as well as transfigured. This takes place when the body of the other person is valued like my own body, felt like my own body, and even loved as my own body (Eph 5:28). The body which is not transcended remains encircled within the membrane of the skin. Egocentricity is the enclosed body. The senses, although they appear to open the body out upon the world, do not do so unless they are met by the answering sense of the other. In the reciprocity of eye contact, or skin contact, or conversational contact, we transcend the biological nature which is transfigured in the process.

**D) The Role of the WCC in promotion of Inclusive Community**

The World Council of Churches (WWC) has produced a theological document regarding disability. The statement, entitled "A Church of All and for all", is a foundational report, released in 2003, for all denominations exploring disability in their own contexts. It offers pointers and insights on major theological themes. Its aims are to enable churches to interact with disability discourse and to equip the Church to address issues of inclusion, active participation and full involvement of all people in the spiritual and social life of the church. The report addresses theological issues of the *imago Dei*, healing and the image of the disabled Christ. However, most importantly, the document attempts to address and apply disability theology practically in the context of worship; offering some advice on how to be fully inclusive in worship. Finally, the statement offers a vision of the Church as a fully inclusive, hospitable place of welcome without discrimination.

Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris's book, *Making a World of Difference*,[15] examines the main themes and issues of disability theology. They dedicate their final three chapters to practical solutions for the inclusion of disabled people in the life of the church. This includes a charter for healing and intercession[16] as well as "ten ways for churches to do something practical" for people with impairments in the church.

*Copious Hosting*, by Jennie Weiss Block,[17] develops a theology of access for people with disabilities. Whilst Eiesland's liberation model focuses on the rights of the impaired person within the church, Block's approach applies to a broader cross section of the church and is therefore more inclusive.[18]

There is a vast wealth of literature examining disability from a biblical perspective such as the collection of articles combined in *This Abled Body*,[19] or the collection of essays in *Human Disability and the Service of God*, which focus on theological and biblical implications of disability in contemporary church life.[20] Whilst these books offer both theological and biblical studies to the subject of disability, as well as, practical suggestions for the inclusion of people with impairments, very few attempt a practical application of their theological theories.

**E) Blind Christ**

This inherited set of attitudes and beliefs is ambivalent towards blindness. On the one hand, blind people are thought of as helpless, pathetic, useless, ignorant or even stupid, insensitive and incompetent. On the other hand, blind people are sometimes regarded as being strangely gifted. They have amazing memories and may have a weird kind of foresight. Blind people are regarded with a mixture of admiration, compassion and horror. A sighted person, sharing these attitudes towards blindness, who loses his or her sight transfers inwardly all of the previous images and assumptions about blindness. The blinded person now has feelings of horror and compassion towards the self. All the helplessness and ignorance which were imputed to other blind people now recoil upon the self. Thus blindness is a shattering blow to one's self-esteem. This is reinforced by the attitudes of compassion and horror with which the blind person is now greeted by relatives, friends and above all, employers. In the light of this when I read Bible, I identified Jesus Christ also a blind person. Gospel according to Mark Chapter 14: 65 says "Some began to spit on him, saying to him "Prophesy" These guards also took him over and beat him." This passage indicates about the blindness of Christ. He asked them who strikes me. This question asked by a blind person.Therefore Jesus became blind in order to understand my community.

**Conclusion**

The church needs to witness the vulnerability of God and the God who is disabled through Jesus on the cross. The crucified image as a suffering servant is an empowering and liberating image for the disabled and all those who care for the disabled. The wrong notion of perfecting and ability is to be replaced with relational encounters of all human begins.

Inclusion and accommodation are not the solutions for accepting the people with disabilities, but envisioning new methodology and mission to have multi spaces where all can have equal rights to participate. It is here that the ecumenical churches in Asia along with other communities stand as an alternate ethical community that recognizes the realities of people with disabilities.

**Endnotes**

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# Ramp:
# An Inclusive Renovation towards an Accessible Church and Society

Glory Cynthia Shinde

**My Story**

I, as a Person with Disability (PwD), have gone through several questions and challenges. Some of them are like:

- You as a PwD, do you have at least space in your congregation/ church?
- Do you have any space and role to participate in the life and work of your congregation?
- Does your congregation consider you as human being?
- Does the congregation feel that, having me is a burden for them?
- Does my congregation expect me to be at my house?

On the other hand there are squashing questions like:

- Why do you need a public appearance since you cannot walk or climb?
- Don't you feel that you are hindering others by your presence?
- When you are not capable of doing something, why are you disturbing others?

The third type of treatment is when the society becomes so sympathetic towards me and says:

- Can I help you?
- Sit here, I will do for you...
- Do not move anywhere...What do you want... I will buy for you and the like are charity oriented approach....

All these questions and treatments make me more sick and frustrated. Actually, those have become the harsh realities of the lives of the PwDs.

**In my personal life**

I am known as a caring mother, a responsible spouse, adorable daughter, a loving sister, a modest friend and a supportive colleague. Yet with all the admiration, however, my life in the public spheres, faces lots of challenges. I am not allowed to go as I wish... I am not expected to do certain things, which other normal people do. Many a times I get scolded by others and feel ashamed. I thought, I could get comfort, love, recognition, fellowship and acceptance if I go to Church.. My experience, however, had been other way round I felt, I was deserted by the attitudes of my fellow church goers and the leaders to the maximum extent. The attitude and treatment of my congregation stressed me with more feelings of loneliness, lowliness, powerlessness and dependency.

Let me come to my present professional life. In many places, I was rejected for appointments and placements due to my disability. Sympathetically a few offered the placement; unfortunately, I could not take up since there were no disabled friendly environments and structures. So, I had to stay at home despite all my educational qualifications.

These experiences and treatments made me realize my vulnerability and challenged me to articulate my own Disability-Theology.

**Disability Theology Taking Shape**

I, as a PwD wrestling with a few faith questions:

- Why am I disabled?
- Am I created by God? That too in God's image? If so, would God also have the same image that I bear today?
- If Church is the body of Christ, why is it not considering me as a full human?
- Am I not worthy enough to minister or to be ministered to?
- Don't I have a Right to worship and participate in the life and work of my Church?

While struggling to find answers to the above questions, I was offered a position to serve as the National Coordinator for a programme called 'Indian Disability Ecumenical Accompaniment' (IDEA) of the

National Council of Churches in India (NCCI). The conversations, readings, listening to the stories, contemplation, working environment and experiences here in NCCI helped me to polish my thoughts further to articulate my own theology. In fact, you might not value or accept this exercise since a theologically untrained PwD doing theologies with expected academic and intellectual standards. Therefore, you would not find footnotes or bibliography, because it is a faith expressions and experiences of the PwDs.

I remember the quote from a well-known theologian and a scholar of our times K. C. Abraham, who was a father of a disabled child. He says, only three sects of people could articulate the authentic theologies of the disabled. One, by the people with disabilities, two, the family members, and the third the care givers.[1] So, if we would like to have an authentic theology of the disabled, it should have been articulated by the above sectors.

With this note, I wish to inform you all that, this paper aims to review a few theological positions, missional and ministerial challenges of the PwDs by exploring possibilities to facilitate local congregations to be disabled-friendly congregations.

**Disabling Framework**

Disability is a physical status of some individuals were born or made disabled. In the social process every human is influenced by their stereotypical and pre-conceived notions and understanding. The lives of the PwDs become vulnerable and difficult. As the social institutions like race, class and gender manipulate the attitudes of the people who are not black, poor, or female, in the same way the concept of disability increases the prejudices against the so-called abnormal by the normal.[2] Such attitudes further disable the PwDs to become more vulnerable and discriminated. By shun making the disability visible the PwDs, evaded themselves from the social process that had the power to affirm their identities and presence. The disabling framework of the normal, which access the social symbolic world of PwDs leads them to make social barriers with PwDs.[3] Hence, the theological fraternities should strive hard in eliminating such discriminative framework which is against God.

**Rights of the PwDs**

The Disability Rights movement in India started in 1970. With this beginning, NGOs have sprouted up across the country for each kind of disability such as the visually impaired, hearing impaired and so on. The year 1980 saw a shift in the policy frame of the welfare / charity model into a developmental model allowing the PwDs to participate in the developmental process. However, with its limitations it was practiced only by the affluent sections of the society. Later the 1981 census included only three categories of disability and again the 1991 census totally left out the PwDs from the purview. It was only in the year 2001 census after a prolonged advocacy that the Disability questionnaire was added at the last moment and the Indian Communities finally accepted that only 21 million of its citizens were PwDs (where only 5 categories were included). After a convincing protest of disability activism movements the 2011 census revealed that 26.8 million people in India suffered from some or the other type of disability.[4] Disability as a social issue that effects the disempowerment, exclusion, isolation, attitudinal employment and educational related issues, which obstacles to genuine inclusion.

All creatures including humans are inter-dependent who look for fellowship, relationships and participation in the community life with the entire creation. Moltmann describes this as 'cosmic community'. In the community, the existence of every being is relational and communion with one another is mandatory including the excluded communities like PwDs. There used to be a life-style known as 'care for others'. But, some of our missional and diaconal interventions today contradict to the will of God by establishing homes and hostels for them as part of our mission. This approach uproots from their basic right of living in communities and facilitating the communities to forget and ignore their responsibilities.

Instead, whether our mission works extend such enthusiastic comfortable environment with the families and to the communities, so that the excluded and vulnerable communities being taken care by the families and societies at large. In fact, the displacement and dislocation from the families and communities to be with group of strangers will lead them towards the social isolation.

This is a denial of right of the PwDs to live and survive with the community. Thomas Reynolds writes, "If the notion of place is

fundamental to our identity as persons, the experience of displacement yields suffering undermining or blocking our desire for meaning and value."[5]

**Charity vs Rights:**

The Church and society at large are looking the PwDs as charity objects. Have any of our missional interventions attempted to defend, affirm and promote our Rights?

a) **Right to Worship:**

Mostly, the post-modern thinkers and activists see Human Rights framework to establish social justice. As a Christian PwD, I wish to indicate that the very PwD who has a faith in God has every Right to Worship and participate in the very life and work of the Church or their respective holy shrines. But, because of ignorance and lack of importance most of the churches are not accessible. If church is not accessible, it is violating the right to worship of a certain people and it restrains access even to listen to the word of God and preach the Word of God.

b) **Right to Access:**

When we talk about accessibility, we are focusing on the physical and structural accessibilities of constructing ramp, installing rails and elevators. But providing access to the singing, reading scriptures and listing to the Word is too important by providing accessible tools including literatures and interpretations.

In most cases, even the theological articulations and faith expressions were also not received properly. I wish to challenge: how many of our seminaries are disabled-friendly, accessible and inclusive by structures and nature?

**Identity Crisis**

Most of the non-PwDs are addressing the PwDs as special people or differently abled and so on. But disability is my identity and I would like to be called as person with disability. I would go to the next level of asking the non-PwD communities: Who are you to change my identity?

It has become another social construction, which is hierarchical, and dominating. As you cannot change your gender, I cannot change my identity. So, allow me to be as I am.

**Distinctive Theologies and Challenges**

Theological understanding of disability is folded in the traditional erroneous articulation of the image, attributes and characteristics of God. Function of a person fitting into this understanding is considered as normal or abnormal. With this understanding, disability is stigmatized as an imperfection in God's creation and divine punishment for sin and a catalyst of suffering for God's grace in the redemption process.[6] Biblically conceived mythical notion of God's nature, perfection and personhood as sacred wholeness is felt incomplete and lacking in PwDs. They are also represented as objects for the non-disabled to demonstrate their faith, compassion and charity substantiating the theological stand of sharing God's love with the less fortunate.

Disagreeing with this understanding, certain theological disciplines make an effort to formulate a subsidiary theology for disability. Those efforts had a great impact in understanding the issues related with disability and comes out with theological insights to deal with the disability issues.

With this radical theological understanding, disability is tagged along with God's love that is just, inclusive and accessible. The disability professional Jennie Weiss Block's viewpoint using her 'theology of access', "gospel of Jesus Christ is gospel of access; creating access for those on the margins is a Christian mandate"[7] validates this claim. Saying this she views disability as an issue of exclusion by oppressive structures. Jesus' ministry had accessibility for all regardless of the barriers, and it challenged the oppressive structures. "The sensitive and compassionate attitude of Jesus to PwDs is often contrasted with the gross neglect and marginalization of these broken people by the disciples and the crowd. The crowd and the disciples are found to be blocking the access of persons with disabilities to Jesus… Jesus overcomes the attitudinal barriers of segregation shown by the main stream and welcomes the PwDs to him."[8] Doing this, Jesus sets a biblical mandate for inclusion and accessibility, which is embedded in the Triune God. Not only His ministry but also Jesus on the cross symbolized as the disabled God, who has undergone pain and rejection unwilling to use the power and being in solidarity with the disabled. It stands in opposition to the perception that image of God is perfect. Disability denotes the disabled image of God as perfect image. Eiesland quotes Rebecca Chopp, "The most astonishing fact is, of course, that

Christians do not have an able-bodied God as their primal image. Rather, the Disabled God promising grace through a broken body is at the center of piety, prayer, practice, and mission."[9] Eiesland's liberation theology of disability again deals with the social model of disability, in which God is seen to be in solidarity with the vulnerable disabled. According to her, any theology of disability is not only for the disabled but by the disabled, which creates new ways to resist the theological understanding that devalues disability.

**Disabled-friendly Ecclesiology/Inclusive Ecclesiology**

In the postmodern Christian context, which focuses on the 'retrieving and embodying rather than merely proclaiming', ecclesiology sensitive to the disability concerns and the ministerial implementation of it is hardly found in the faith community. The bottom-line for the disabled friendly ecclesiology is accessible and inclusive in nature. It demands to undertake an operating mode of paying attention to PwDs and other excluded communities by showing the acts of care, assistance and accompaniment. The churches are deficient in taking efforts for the well-studied analytical data of PwDs in the church, pastoral care and counseling for the PwDs and their families.[10]

The inclusion of the PwDs, which is lacking in the church and society is comparatively connected with Kathy Black's 'theology of interdependence'. Theology of interdependence makes a call for the faith community to act symbiotically in line with God for the well-being of all as the fellowship of faith.[11] Yong writes, "Since the Holy Spirit, who has traditionally been marginalized – known as the shy or hidden member of the Trinity is actually the one who acts as the champion and advocate of all people, especially the poor, the weak and the oppressed and who initiates them into the body of Christ.[12] The vulnerable who are most honoured by God is central to the identity of the body of Christ. The spirit-empowered pneumatic and charismatic mission of the church as the fellowship of spirit ought to be inclusive for the PwDs. There are no obstructions in fellowship of the Spirit as the agents of the ministry and the recipients of the ministry. Therefore, the inclusive pneumatological ecclesiology approach to the disability was found well appropriate.[13] The inclusiveness dealt here is setting them an equal participatory space and full access in the faith community. Black's theology of access forms a ministerial module affirming this equitable place of disabled in the Christian community as a unique group

oppressed by the non-disabled. This stigmatization causes the people with disabilities to isolate themselves as a protection mechanism in the fear of being ignored or discriminated. The oppressing infrastructures, stigmatized Bible texts and liturgies, homiletics, religious services that block the disabled to the leading role required to be the primary focus of the ministry of the church to be reconstructed.[14] Stanley Hauerwas opines, "the church is measured not by the norms of modernity but by how well it embodies the life of Christ, how extensively it welcomes and is constituted by the weak, and how prophetically it holds up the mirror of the gospel to an unbelieving world."[15] The church is commissioned to move from accessibility to integration, and from integration to inclusion. Moving from project mode to an authentic inclusion mode of rights to participation and leadership it has to make space for PwDs to rediscover themselves. Need for reconstructing our structure of faith that ministers or accompanies the PwDs affirming their theological and spiritual worship is the urgent task of the Church ministry and mission.

**Ramp: An Inclusive Renovation towards an Accessible Church and Society**

Ramp, the structural invitation of the church, begins a way to be welcomed physically into the structural form of the church. Church's concern for the PwDs is gradual in the process of letting them to be present in the church. Therefore, this ramp limits my access into the church just as a mere spectator. The ramp, which I analyzed in this paper, is the faith experiences of the PwDs. It is an inclusive image that soothes the spiritual reception of the PwDs into the church. My faith experiences as the member of the body of Christ serves as a ramp tool to enter into the full participation of the church's spirituality. And it invites the church to take up the mission of becoming an accessible community of the excluded shaping the church's theological insights with the disability theology. 'Ramp is an Inclusive Renovation towards an Accessible Church and Society,' which makes possible the theology of wholeness and justice affirming equal rights to experience the fullness of life as one body of Christ and to take pleasure in the richness of the Church.

**Conclusion**

Persons with disability, who are created distinctively in the disabled image of God, have the honour to share the sufferings of God in the

world. The agonies of the persons with disability raises a theology, which responds to the issues related with disability. Theology from the vulnerable is the most effective theology for the centuries long. The Disability Theology from the disabled can be the powerful theology through which the identity of the disabled is justified and the rights of the PwDs in the church and the society are brought to light. The notion of charitizing the disabled is shattered to facilitate their rights to survive with families, rights to access education, employment and right to worship in the church. The accessible church and the society is obliged to look forward to using this accessibility and faith experiences as a ramp to give an open space for the PwDs to be an active part of the church and society with all rights.

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# Disability and Pastoral Care

Ezamo Murry

John Pierce has defined disability objectively as, 'the effect of an antipathetic environment upon an individual with impairment'. Impairments might be genetically inherited; developmentally acquired; and accidentally resulted. Some impairments can be caused by medical conditions; some by life style; and others by violence and wars. Types of disability are various including physical disability, mental disability, and intellectual disability. It has been identified by the UN that 10% of any population are persons with disabilities of one kind or the other.

The accepted term for the person with disabilities of some kind is a '*Person with Disability*', abbreviated the PwD, and hence the same expression in abbreviated form or the full form is used in this writing. As the present term has come through several nomenclatures in the history of disability concern, it will help us also to examine each of those earlier terms.

1. ***Handicap:*** This was among the early terms used to refer to the person with disabilities. The term seems to have come from a beggar's community who went round begging with their caps in their hands (later became the opposite, hand in cap, or handicap). The person with disabilities is certainly handicapped in certain functions but they would not consider themselves as beggars, nor totally disabled. Certainly, persons like Helen Keller, John Milton, Fanny Crosby, and Stephen Hawkins would not like to be considered beggars nor disabled. This term ceased to be used in referring to the persons with disabilities. Even the word "disability" is more wholesome than disabled because anything disabled goes out of function.

2. ***Disabled Persons***: When we say a nation disabled the rocket system of another nation it means that the rocket system is completely smashed and of no use any longer. So also a disabled car remains in the warehouse and it is not reused. The above listed personalities were not disabled persons but they had some kind of disabilities and yet living in the society to contribute as much as they can do. In John Milton's words, *those who only stand and wait also serve*. Any existing person, even without overt contribution to the society also is a person of worth in the purpose of God. At any case a person, able or not able, is a person of value in the eye of the Creator. Therefore, the term 'disabled person' is not often used to refer to persons who have some disabilities.

3. ***Differently abled persons (DAP)***: In trying to assign some positive connotation to the person with disabilities the care takers at one time used this term, especially in the circle of the World Council of Churches. People begun to feel it did not describe the persons with disabilities correctly as no two persons in the world are equally enabled but they are all differently abled. In spite of the presence of some positive sense the term no longer remains a unique term to apply to the persons with disabilities.

4. ***Impairment, disability, handicap***: the loss or abnormality of a psychological, physical, or anatomical structure, or function causing functional limitation to perform those activities usually carried out by the organ or system affected (P. Way).[1] This is to say *impairment is the cause* of defect that results in *disability of the part affected*, and the affected part of the body is *handicapped for functioning*. This shows that no person is totally impaired, or totally disabled, or totally handicapped.

5. ***Persons With Disabilities (PwD)***[2]: This is the currently used term in all the UN, Governments, and the WCC documents. There is an acknowledgement of the presence of some disabilities in the person that takes the person realistically. The persons with disabilities themselves acknowledge there are some disabilities in them. The most important point here is the term 'person' which counts the person in question as a living being created in the image of God with all rights and dignities, as a rightful person. This does away with the chance of calling the person as a case, or even by using the kind of impairment s/he has as the person's name [blind, deaf, lame, and dwarf]. Two internationally

known persons with disabilities, Samuel Kabue (Kenya) and Arne Fritzson (Sweden) jointly wrote two books on disability which are considered gems on disability theology and have the following to enlighten us in this regard:

The term "differently abled" was used over a long time during the World Council of Churches' most active period of disability work. It had to be discarded because it was understood only within the ecumenical family and especially in churches and organizations closely related to WCC. There is still some remnant of it among certain groups within the ecumenical family. However, the term in use at the WCC since 1997 have been "persons with disabilities"[3].

Since the Churches national (NCCI in India) and international, Governments and NGOs (including the UN) have their documents with this term 'persons with disabilities' or 'person with disabilities' it is appropriate for us also to use the current usage, "persons with disabilities" and abbreviated PwD. This would mean the translators of such a term in different tribal dialogues should also see that this idea is maintained. We no longer see in the public places notices like "for the handicapped" or "for the disabled", rather we see more of "disability". While euphemism works well, in some corners its overuse can hide the actuality.

## 5. Models used to view disability

i. ***Medical Model and Social Model****:* In brief the society is said to see disability in two ways, Medical Model, and Social Model. In the medical model the society sees the person with disability as a sick person who needs change and healing in the person. The focus of change is, therefore, in the person with disabilities, not in the society. The medical model assumes that with treatment a cure is possible. Such a model assumes the person is dependent, and in need of help. Such a view of the person with disabilities heighten the use of inappropriate language to refer to the person, including circumlocution like 'less able'.

ii. ***Moral Model***: Those who hold this model believe that the disability is a sign of divine displeasure or punishment requiring forgiveness or healing.[4]

iii. ***Social Model***: The social model sees the disability as the result of the society's failure causing the disability. Structural maladies in the society such as *physical surrounding, societal organizations, cultural*

*sanctions and beliefs, and religious fundamentalism/perfectionism* that degrades and excludes the person with disabilities are the cause of disability. Here the required change is in the society to improve the life of the person with disabilities. According to this model disabilities arise from the society's assumption of facilities, policies, and priorities. Changes in the social environment would reduce disability and its effects on the individual. Here, the Church as a social institution is inevitably involved in this process.

**Pastoral Care:** The word 'CARE' is said to have originated from a German root (*chara, charon,* or, *merimna* in Gk) meaning, to minister to a person in sick bed or in bereavement.[5] It implies a person taking care of, or look after somebody or something. The expressions 'caring' and 'uncaring' describing someone's behavior indicates that person's positive or negative character. A caring person speaks caringly and does thing caringly. John Patton, an authority in Pastoral Care says that caring is a fundamental part of the human spirit quotes Anni Dillard thus:

> In the depth of the human being, underneath the violence and terror of which psychology warns us, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name…the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for one another and for our own life together here. This is given. This is not learned.[6]

Pastors are generally expected to be caring persons. The author of the Letter to Philemon is said to be a very caring person who wrote caringly and in sympathy with both the offender (Onesimus) and the offended (Philemon). God is understood to be a caring God who cares for people leaving them in comfort, security and peace (1 Pet.5:7). Even in situations of extreme pain and loss like that of Job's, God is declared as the one who cares for the people (Job 10:12). The Lord Jesus, while on earth with his disciples met life threatening event in which the disciples called for this caring attribute He had. They said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mk.4:38).

**Caring work,** is such a noble act and healing effect that the officials and the benefactors of the people talk of 'President Care', 'Director Care' and the 'elderly care'. Many centers of human activity are named, "Care Center, Medical care, Pre-natal care and Post-natal care", as labels of appeal and attraction. With Christ as the Chief caregiver

Christian ministers are care givers in the name of Jesus.

When we speak of 'Pastoral Care' the caring ministry is even more sublime because it originated from the Chief care giver, Jesus Christ. The general pastoral care can be seen in the model David showed us in Psalm 23, highlighting the tasks of feeding, protecting, leading, comforting, restoring the weary soul, and being with the sheep in times of peril. David the shepherd described the shepherd's task before king Saul (1 Sam.17:34ff). Such is the care giver's task in the real sense. It consists of toughness, fortitude, peril, and acts of dedication and sacrifice for the benefit of the people cared for.

Jesus described the caring work of the Shepherd in his parable of the lost sheep (Lk.15:3-7). In the story, the general care of the shepherd over all the sheep is portrayed. It also portrays the particular attention given to recover the lost member of the fold is also portrayed. The care giver rejoices when the lost is found and reunites with the original status. This nature of divine care is extended by the care givers to the needy persons. Hence the adjective 'Pastoral' precedes the caring ministry. This caring ministry is a part of the total ministry of the church.

One of the pioneer exponents of pastoral care, Seward Hiltner,[7] held that pastoral care include all that the pastor does as a church minister, such as, organizing the believers to a fellowship (*koinonia*), maintaining and administering the fellowship as a functioning group; communicating; guiding and feeding the group with the Word of God; and extending counseling to the members of the group. Human needs are increased today but the generic idea Hiltner had identified are those three major areas of the pastoral care: *Healing; Guiding*; and *Sustaining*.

A brief explanation of each of these three traditional functions of the pastoral care giver may help understand their intents and help in further expansion following the contextual needs:

i. **The Healing Task in Pastoral Care:** This task of the pastor seeks to help people become whole as well as re-become. It is the process of restoring functional wholeness that has been impaired as to the direction or schedule. Among the impairments of various types can be those caused by viral infections; developmental deficiency; accidental crisis like war situations; lack of nutritional elements; unjust treatments by fellow humans; causes of one's irresponsible behavior; and, healing

the mental and spiritual irregularities. The pastor can heal physical brokenness to some extent; heal mental and spiritual brokenness to some extent; heal relational brokenness to some extent, but the pastor is not often trained in medicine. When the needed healing is beyond the pastor's capability s/he must refer such persons to another competent person in the community. The pastor can pray and heal some, but s/he cannot always depend on the prayer. The person should be sent to other healing servants of God, such as doctors, lawyers; social workers; counselors, psychotherapist; and psychiatrists, as the case requires. Many self-confident pastors neglect the ministry of referral and land the needy persons in greater trouble. Howard J. Clinebell goes a step forward to say that healing restores the person from brokenness and leads the healed person to a step beyond the previous state. The healed person is led beyond the former state to a new direction. In modern pastoral practice the healing task should involve pastoral psychotherapy; spiritual healing; and marriage counseling and therapy.[8]

ii. **The Sustaining Task in Pastoral care:** In the words of Hiltner, sustaining care becomes the order when healing is not possible, or, healing is, at least for the time being distant in a situation. John Patton has a similar belief when he said, "Although there is no such thing as Pastoral Cure, there is Pastoral Care. And that may be enough".[9] In the case of ministering to the bereaved family healing is not literally possible for it would mean bringing back the dead to life. There the alternative mode of ministry- sustaining the person to bear the loss by way of human company, spiritual nourishment, and words of comfort to assuage the pain and loss. Some approaches followed by the general care giving profession like, hospice; palliative care, will come under this mode of care. This approach is sometimes referred to as a ministry of "standing by". Overwhelmed by the condition Job was in, his counselors friends extended this support by just standing by without words for at least seven days. In such a situation the presence of the minister/pastor is a great comfort to the person(s) undergoing bereavement. The community's support by their mere presence, doing the chores, receiving the calls, bringing in the newspapers, and such small services without preaching means so much.

Among the Tribal people Sustaining Care is well done. Whenever death or sickness occurs in a person or family, it becomes the community's burden to help fix many daily works of the bereaved family

by the community. As soon as the news of death is heard the community gathers at the house where death occurred and begins singing, making funs and laugh periodically. If the deceased person had some favorite song the singers keep singing those songs. If such event in the family obstructs urgent works of the family, like sowing, weeding and reaping of the field the community does the work for the family. In the case of bereavement there are some professional mourners among some tribes who have the traditional expressions in such moments and stay with the bereaved family. This brings great relief to the mourning family as they also ventilate their pain (facilitating catharsis). If a family faces natural calamity affecting their source of sustenance like, burning the house, failing harvest of the year, the community will contribute in kind and cash to rehabilitate the family in trouble. This, in a sense, is also a sustaining care extended by the community because healing in such situation is not possible. *It may also be noted that among the tribals the men folks are not expected to display their emotion, especially crying in public.* This may be due to the culture where men are expected to be brave and alert, to be able to fight and defend the village.

iii. **Guiding Task in Pastoral Care:** The major work of the pastor is in guiding the people, including spiritual guidance; guidance in behavioral adjustments; pre-marital guidance; family life education; marriage adjustments; guidance in career selection; and guidance in various situations the congregation find perplexing. Hiltner spoke of a professional guidance which is without element of coercing. He called this kind of guidance an *eductive* guidance (not to be confused with educative care). The word 'eductive' comes from the root *educare*, meaning digging out the interest and potentiality of the seeker instead of forcing the seeker to comply with what the guide gives. Education in general is meant for this task, not banking knowledge on the learner but bringing out what the learner has by nature. Many pastors, by virtue of their office will think authoritatively and attempt to direct and coerce the parishioner to comply with what they suggest. This is not a pastoral guidance but an authoritarian directive. To make the point clearer we may illustrate it a bit: A tourist coming to India asks the guide what s/he should visit first. The authoritarian guide may point to the Taj Mahal telling that it is one of the wonders of the world and so the tourist should give priority to visiting it, or point to such other prominent place to visit first. On the other hand, an eductive guide would unfold

the places of interest to the tourist and then ask him where s/he would choose to go first. Here the tourist will certainly choose wisely what s/he had been looking for: religious centers, literature and art centers, science exhibits, slum areas, or even shopping malls to make sure s/he takes home a souvenir from India. This will facilitate the tourist to have a satisfactory visit to India.

Similarly, a young person coming to the pastoral guide seeking guidance in his/her perplexed situation in career selection, mate selection, and for choosing the place of study. The pastoral guide should find out what is in the interest and potentiality of the seeker as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed area and make the youth choose from his/her interest.

The common guidance given to the young tribal seekers is to give the proverbial advice of the experienced elders. It is always a directive or authoritarian guidance. The tribal youth also have the cultural implication of listening to the elder. If the advice giver happens to be the pastor it becomes more binding. The young seeker has no choice in most cases. One who is interested in cross-cultural marriage is strongly advised to respect the protocol of endogamy. One who is interested in Theological studies is advised to go for more lucrative profession, medicine, engineering, or other mechanical branches. The youth are obliged with fulfilling the wishes of the elders, the church, the parents, whether they are interested or not. Only few trained pastors act as educative guides.

iv. **Reconciling Task in Pastoral Care:** A decade after Hiltner identified those three basic tasks two researchers, Clebsch and Jaekle,[10] found Reconciling task of the pastor majoring during the time of persecution. Many Christians at that period backslided in the face of persecution from the Roman authorities. The half-hearted Christians had to re-commit their faith in Jesus. There were also broken relationships between men and women, broken relationships in the social relations which had to be mended through reconciliation. Today, the world faces moral laxity, material attractions, disloyalty in courtships, alienations in human relations, above all, alienation from God. This increases the task of the pastor to engage in works of genuine reconciliation, not rhetoric or cosmetic slogans. In his book, Reconciliation DeYoung made a strong remark on the superficial activities in the name of reconciliation. He wrote, “What has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Costly

reconciliation is the Incarnation of God".[11] The pastor's reconciling ministry should include 'relational bridge building' in congregational partnership across divide; pulpit swaps; choir exchanges; unity services; and reconciliation rallies.

v. **The Nurturing Task in Pastoral Care:** This task of the pastor is identified by Howard J. Clinebell[12] emphasizing the task of training new members of the Christian life, or religious education. It includes the task of pastoral care through the developmental stages of a person. The pastor takes the responsibility of training or enabling the people to help them use their God-given potentialities throughout their life journey. This task includes counseling and education of the people. The pastor counsels the members of the church through education (educational counseling). Hiltner did talk about 'Nourishing' the organized body to develop it to an organic body. He said "Nourishing tends to be dominant in corporate worship, but it is not absent from pastoral counseling or religious education".[13]

vi. **The Empowering Task in Pastoral Care–** In line with the general awakening in the world for human rights, humanitarian acts, educating the preliterate sections in the societies the church has also incorporated these concerns in its ministry. This concern is in the basics of the church ministry even as Jesus declared his manifesto for ministry (Lk.4:18-19). The international community through the United Nations have the agenda for empowering the powerless, feeding the hungry, providing shelter to the slum dwellers, assisting the backward nations to stand by their own feet, lifting 'the girl child' or the women of the society to the level of all citizens, helping the infants to grow more healthy, and lifting the stigma on certain groups of people in the society. In India, the slogans of empowerment include, "makan, kapada, roti" (house, clothing, bread) for all. Other slogans of empowering include, '*bedi bachao, bedi parhao*' or, save and educate the `girl child' or, 'education for all'.

In the Bible, one of the important ministries of the prophets was the empowerment of the downtrodden. Isaiah commanded the people to 'learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; and to plead for the widow' (Is.1:17). Again, Isaiah spoke of the alternative for fasting, as 'to lose the bonds of injustice; to undo the thongs of the yoke; share bread with the hungry; bring the homeless to

your house; and to clothe the naked' (58:6-7). The intent of the Jubilee has that end, to set the slave free. The liberation theology has also has the objective of freeing and empowering the oppressed. This is only a flying remark on the important theme of empowerment in the Bible.

Let us close this definitive part of Pastoral Care by citing two scripture passages Hiltner used to locate the Biblical injunction of Pastoral Care.

*The first* is, from Jesus' parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk.15:3-7). The Shepherd looks after the whole herd of 100 sheep as a good and a faithful shepherd (Pastoral Care). The shepherd extends an overall care, leading; feeding; protecting; comforting; and regenerating. A day comes when a certain sheep gets lost in the wilderness. There the shepherd leaves the 99 and plunges into the unknown seeking the lost sheep. When he finds the lost sheep he rejoices and brings it back to the fold (a special service of Counseling rendered to the lost and made it whole again).

*The Second*, is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan saw the wounded human, alighted from his donkey; knelt beside the wounded human, gave the traditional first aid and lifted the wounded person and seated him on his donkey. Giving the comfort of riding his donkey to the person in need he walked by the side, guiding the needy person to the inn. As he had to go further he paid in advance the expenses for treatment and told the inn keeper to take care of the patient. If anything more spent, he told the inn keeper, he assured paying him on his return. Hiltner suggested that three major tasks of Pastoral care (Healing; Sustaining; and Guiding) were fulfilled by the Good Samaritan as he attended to the wounded person.

Caring is a function that brings strength, consolation, comfort, and assurance of safety to a person. It is a common human duty to care for each other. Caring is an act of service, a divinely assigned duty to one another. God who cares for all assures the world that God cares, especially for the humans. Humans are entrusted to engage in a reciprocal care for each other. Someone rightly illustrated the caring connections humans have, saying in heaven the arms of the people are without folds so that any person willing to eat should feed the other so that the other feeds him/her in turn. All humans, with disabilities or otherwise are potential caregivers. Henri Nouwen, has testified that

he received much care from Adam, the person with severe autism he was assigned to care in a day care center. This is to say caring for the other is not a prerogative of the non PwD but it is a reciprocal human potential the Creator had given to one and all.

When we say, "Pastoral Care" there is a string attached in the expression. One end of the string is attached to the Chief of the shepherds, Jesus Christ. Care giving originates from that Good Shepherd who cared first for all the sheep (persons) unconditionally. As the word 'pastor' is derived from the word 'shepherd' the attribute of a 'caring person' goes back to Jesus Christ the perfect Shepherd. All that the shepherd does can be explained by the word care/caring. David the best shepherd had eulogized the shepherd's care in Psalm 23.

The word 'pastoral', the adjective form of the pastor, or shepherd makes a huge difference. It indicates that our caring ministry is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ the Shepherd, and for that matter it is a part of the church's total ministry. Caring work as a general human task will have a lot of similarity with Pastoral care, but the latter has some distinctive mandate: to care in the name of, and in the nature of the care shown by the Chief Shepherd.

When pastoral care is extended to the persons with disabilities it is done keeping in mind that the PwD is also a caring member. The care so given is, 'pastoral care with the persons with disabilities'. The idea that the non PwD is better than the PwD and so the former alone has the capability to care for the latter is wrong. The care giver stands beside the PwD to extend any service that the PwD needs but not within his/her ability at that moment. Caring ministry is a team work, the PwD and the non PwDs are both engaged in the service. In caring context there is no room for stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. Isaiah the prophet condemned the human act of exclusion and oppression (Is.61:1-2). The prophet also assured that God is seeking to restore the most vulnerable group including the PwD (Is.35:1-7).

We see the working together for good in caring about the PwDs in God's plan. We see the serious steps taken by the national and international organizations. We see the WCC/EDAN working together for extending more care to the PwDs. When God is actively working to restore the person with disabilities we should join God in this care and sustaining of the PwDs. Pastoral care by its essence is to communicate

our humanness to the whole people of God and the persons with disabilities in particular.

There are not many chances of the pastoral care giver to heal the disability physically but the pastor can cooperate with the personnel and agencies working on the preventive lines. The most the pastoral care giver can do is in the sustaining care, to continue in what John Patton called, "relational humanness" and providing all possible support, walking in the shoes of the affected.The pastoral care giver will coordinate with the family of the PwD and other caring professionals. Where guidance, nurturing and empowering are in order the pastoral care giver will facilitate such means of support and engage the PwD in reciprocal care where such conditions are available.

**Postscript**

We have seen the recent decades where disability concern has drawn the attention of the international, national, and the Church everywhere to the neglected lot of the Body of Christ - the Persons with Disabilities (PwD). The Indian Parliament has passed laws on The Rights, Inclusion, and Equal Participation of the Persons With Disabilities (1995, 2016). The Churches all over the world have also been awakened by these secular and human rights movements to realize that, in fact, the Church as the Body of Christ with varied parts of that Body should have been the one to initiate such a movement. The Church – the Body of Christ is to value all God's creation as equally important and direct her mission to these, to the least, and help recover the God given dignity of life to all. The Church in India, through the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), the Nagaland Baptist Council of Churches (NBCC), has initiated some awareness programs, such as seminars on disability, and one Sunday every year observed with relevant topics to preach in the churches. The following few talking points are put forward to widen our horizon on the subject.

Human desire to be whole, perfect and flawless is natural but to achieve it we cannot bring God the Creator of varieties under the human legislation of uniform civil code. Variation is the intent of the wise Creator in forms, temperaments, apparel, dimensions, mental, and spiritual aspects of the created. Cecil F. Alexander's hymn, "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small…the Good Lord made them all" is point to that effect. Christian thinkers more

oriented with what is called 'theodicy' tend to question the Creator as to why an Almighty and loving God allows pain, sickness, hardship, and death, including disability. Others who are more oriented with 'cause and effect' order of things would take disability as a result of sin committed by either the person with disability or by the family. This line of thinking puts God as the avenger, a tit for tat ruler. In either case the fact that disability is in the agenda of the Creator is negated or questioned.

Disability is a part of God's intentional and purposeful creation and all that God created is good. Moses was a person with disability. God and Moses stood at a crucial moment, the urgency of delivering the people of God from Egypt. Moses was not willing to venture because he knew his disability and he reported this to God. Humanly thinking God should have removed all difficulties from Moses and used him. God just said disability was a part of God's good creation (Ex.4:11). God did provide an alternative for the person with disability, Moses, by appointing Aaron to be Moses' mouth piece. God would heal the disability one day but God allowed the disability to remain till such time (Is.35:1-7).

Paul, was such an outstanding witness of Christ, a missionary to reach the whole of the gentile world. Paul had a disability like thorn in the flesh for which he prayed at least three times to God to remove it from him. Humanly thinking God should, first of all, remove all impairments from Paul before sending him. God was not in a hurry to call for miracles to heal Paul. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you. My grace works in weakness". In other words God wanted Paul to be in his natural state and depend on God's grace.

We can think of many more such persons with disabilities who must be praying with tears and sweat without an expected answer. They should not think that non-healing is a challenge to God's power and not the least, a disfavor of God. Throughout history there have been human attempts to conquer human impairments, even forcefully praying for miracles to heal them. Wherever there is a call for healing in revival meetings there humans flock around and seek healing. Many miracle workers also come up and invoke God to speed up healing of these imperfections and disabilities. God can, but God will not exhibit God's power every time it is called for by humans. Jesus also used miracles judiciously, but not every time he was challenged to exhibit it.

He himself was a wounded healer. He was counted among the persons with disabilities for our sake. Jesus had to pray earnestly to remove the sorrow and pain if it was possible but he left the choice to the Father. John Milton must have prayed much for the recovery of his sight if he was to do what God assigned him to do. Later, he realized that even those who only stand and wait also serve God. Pause a while and think: if John Milton; Helen Keller; Beethoven; Stephen Hawkins; and Finny Crosby, to cite a few, did not have disabilities of some kind would they have actualized in life as they did? God at times works through disability, for a change. God can work through non-healing, wounds, stigmatization; betrayal; and even through crucifixion. Humans think the Good God should always heal, raise all the dead; defeat all enemies; give everything to those who ask for anything. Such a God will be just a yes-man, or a magician!

Let us conclude this rumination keeping in mind that the persons with disabilities are very much inside the good creation of God. Whether a person's disability was caused by developmental process or by accidental causes they still bear the image of the Creator. The Creator's wish is that there be no walls between the persons with disabilities and the otherwise have the same right to dignity of life, right to equal participation and inclusion in the society. This is more so in the community called the Church. While on earth, God wants us to live in cooperation with the natural law but humans constantly appeal God to remove all imperfections and irregularities. There are constant calls for fasting, prayers and healing, some of the initiators even claim to have powers of miracles. Healing has become the dominant themes in religious gatherings. Worshippers gather to ask God for favor, not to worship. If a religion is centered on healings, heroes, and miracles, that religion is folk religion and such religions do not go much beyond the needs of the individual. God's will is not to heal always but to let God's grace triumph in this world of weakness. Non-healing is not a sign of God's weakness; it is an arena of God's love, power, and witnessing.

**Endnotes**

[1] P. Way, "disability" in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, Ed. Rodney J.Hunter* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 99.

[2] For serial 1-4, see also *Introducing Disability*, Ezamo Murry (Jorhat:Author,2017), 1-4.

[3] Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability* (Geneva: WCC publication, 2004), x.

[4] John Pierce, "Disability" *The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies*, Ed. Wesley Carr (Grand Rapids: William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 99.

[5] Origin of the word 'care' in the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of English*, 8thEdition.

[6] John Patton, *The Context of Pastoral Care: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville/Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 16.

[7] Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (*Nashville:Abingdon*,1958). Hiltner's work may appear rather foundational but the concepts he developed in this field remain very helpful. The students may modify them to suit today's contexts. As human needs increase due to changes these modes of ministry may also keep changing.

[8] Howard J.Clinebell, *The Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 43

[9] John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), Dedication page.

[10] William R.Clebsh and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*, (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall,1964),

[11] Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Reconciliation, Our greatest Challenge, Our Only Hope*, (Valley Forge:Judson Press. 1997), xviii.

[12] Howard J.Clinebell mentioned this in his revised edition of *The Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville:1984/1967).

[13] Hiltner, *Preface to*...1958, 201.

# Spiritual Direction for the Traumatized People with Disabilities

Sang Pil Im

## Introduction

From my ministerial experience, particularly from counselling ministry, I have noticed that many of the Koreans with disabilities suffer from low self-esteem. They usually try to understand what is wrong with them or what have caused them to come to this state of physical deformity. It is obvious that people with disabilities have spiritual yearnings and thirst, and yet at times they find they are deprived of it because of the discriminative society and inconsiderate church. I, therefore, believe that spiritual direction based on praxis is one of the alternatives for the Korean people with disabilities to cope with their sufferings. It is also necessary to assist them in their spiritual journey. Spiritual direction calls us to personal, relational, communitarian transformation. Spiritual direction brings forgiveness, healing, cleansing, reconciliation and renewal.

## What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is an interpersonal relationship in which one person assists others to reflect on their own experience in the light of who they are called to become in fidelity to the Gospel. In spiritual direction spiritual companionship might include helping someone learn to pray, listening for or noticing God's activity, discernment for decision making, becoming aware of images of God that influence a relationship, and bringing wounds or life patterns to God for healing. In spiritual direction, the posture of the director and directed together is to listen contemplatively for 'the God moment' and 'the God

seed' present in the experience so that the individual might receive it consciously and savor it. The whole of life is raw material for the dialogue between a director and a directed in spiritual direction; they share their experiences of life such as sadness, joy, delight, loneliness and anxiety. Body language, unspoken words, and the tone of voice are also important. Consequently, spiritual direction could be a place where suffering people with disabilities learn to love and honor their experiences, even the painful things that are part of their oppression.

Spiritual direction and psychotherapy are altogether different in their nature and approach. According to Dyckman and Carroll, the first process of spiritual direction concerns the objectification and articulation of experience.[1] Second is the interpretation of those experiences through the eyes of faith, an interpretation sometimes called discernment.[2] Spiritual direction thus assumes that the person is already a whole, but may be has not embraced their wholeness fully. It is based on the intimate engagement of two people with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and focused on spiritual growth.Incidentally it brings issues of psychological health into it. However, psychotherapy assumes that the client has a problem/issue that is preventing them from leading a healthy life and focuses on psychological health. Clinical distance becomes crucial to them in bringing about objectivity and change.

Storytelling is a particularly important way of spiritual direction for people with disabilities. Storytelling has its own unique dynamics which reveals the sacredness of a story. One of the ways we know each other is by storytelling. Telling their story gives suffering people with disabilities authority over their own suffering reality so that they can relieve their emotions and identify their problems realistically rather than repressing and directing them into themselves. They can share any of their stories dealing with the pains, insights, and spiritual quests from their lives. They may experience their independence after telling stories, because there is nothing now to hinder them.

Storytelling for people with disabilities will be an effective way to heal and to experience their own consciousness without any need of depending on others. People with disabilities will be able to share their stories of suffering coming from disseminative patriarchal social systems/ orders. They might discover certain commonality, crying and laughing in their stories.

Also, Spiritual direction for people with disabilities should be

founded on an incarnational theology: 1) God became human to teach us how to embrace life and live fully. 2) God of Cross is present in every event, in each moment of life. 3) Hope is accepting the reality of God's presence in these moments of life. It is necessary to engage the present day reality of life, awakening to our true selves. Wholeness rather than perfection becomes the goal of the spiritual life.

**Holistic Christian Spirituality**

In order to successfully perform spiritual direction, one has to have holistic spirituality and world view. Holistic spirituality brings liberation for a creative and human life. That is, it seeks social justice and peace for all oppressed and exploited peoples. God is a liberator who acts on behalf of struggling peoples.

Holistic spirituality as a spirituality of liberation includes all of life. It says that the ways in which people live every aspect of their experience, including politics and merchandising as well as prayer and meditation, are significant. It also means a commitment to people as well as to God. Spiritual life thus would mean that personal encounter with Jesus Christ and personal encounters with neighbors, particularly the poor and the oppressed, are inseparable.

Christian spirituality thus is a pilgrimage or a journey to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was a person involved in historical conflicts as well as a person who went to quiet places such as deserts and mountain tops for prayer. Therefore, Christian spirituality, as the following of Jesus Christ, is not only about having prayer time in a quiet place but also about going into situations of turmoil. The following of Jesus Christ is a commitment to a concrete suffering situation. Christian spirituality thus includes all the domains of human existence - ecology, economics, politics, health, prayer, sexuality, education and so on. There is no longer any distinction. "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."[3]

**Contemplative Attitude**

Contemplative attitude is an important element for authentic spiritual direction. St. Gregory the Great described contemplation as "the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love" based on the intimate experience of God's presence.[4] Contemplation is both the fruit of reflecting on the word of God in Scripture and a precious gift of God.[5]

Through contemplative attitude, people reclaim the experiences, behaviors and decisions that have impacted their whole life, and create an environment where they can discover ever more deeply their unique vocation rooted in their deepest experience of God. There are creative exercises for contemplative attitude: imagination, body remembering and calling upon the unconscious imagery that lies deep in the core of their beings. These exercises help lead people to the split off parts of themselves: the child, the adolescent, the ones who made choices and decisions that they may no longer remember, but the effects of which they are still living out today. This might be part of the spiritual discipline people are invited into. Emphasis would be placed on experiential practice and insights which assist people's process of conversion. This would help people to access their unconscious mind more fully, pay greater attention to their imagination, listen to their inner child, and discover the lost and disowned parts of themselves that are crying out to be reclaimed. Sometimes a person will be grateful and sometimes a person will not be grateful. However, a person should remember two things: first, that person is always in charge. If he or she feels resistance or anxiety around a certain exercise, tries to honor this and give oneself time to be with whatever it is that is alive in one at a given time and remember that he or she is responsible for his or her physical and spiritual health. Second, a person should pay attention to his/her responses or reactions. That is very important for the contemplative attitude so that a person will personalize these voices. And then a person can interact with them and listen to what they are saying.

This contemplative attitude will contribute to learning to accept one's own inner mystery with tolerance, acceptance and even trust, which will lead to an appreciation of the process which does not immediately result in product. Such learnings will lead people to wisdom. In the contemplative attitude, one will be challenged to be patient – the patience of the pregnant mother as she waits for the birth of her child, the patience of the universe as it waits for unfolding. This is the cost of transformation. This contemplative attitude is to help people create a sacred space where they can engage the memories, the chaos and their effect on their life. People can discover unique ways of coping when things are difficult and embrace the pain and the joy that is their daily chores. This is the process, not the product. With great personal patience they will perhaps someday come to love the process

as the treasure that leads them to God, mystery hidden deep with their being.

**Their Experience as a Threshold for Spiritual Direction**

This Spiritual Direction must be grounded in the lived experience of people with disabilities. However, their experience has been neglected to make the non-disabled people's experience the order and the norm of society and church.

It is very important to attend to a person's experience because any spiritual direction is based on experiences, and people express their experience of faith and life and discern its movement in spiritual direction. Spiritual direction thus helps people to keep awake and clarify experiences of their life that they were less aware of than before. Therefore, for spiritual direction for people with disabilities it is necessary to have an awareness of the cultural and religious situation and experiences of people with disabilities, and an acknowledgement of the harmful effects of the discriminative society in which we live.

Therefore, it is very necessary that people with disabilities reflect on their experiences for that their full human dignity and personhood to come to light. People with disabilities need to illuminate and interpret experience that was lost in the symbols, texts and laws of the traditional church. This awakening to their experience might contribute both to free themselves from tradition that has oppressed them and to bring new meaning to traditional symbols and texts.

Many people with disabilities have lived their lives in suffering, covering their essential self over mud. However, they can begin to uncover their experience covered with mud. For instance, some people with disabilities whom I know try to reclaim their own experience for their spiritual growth and release their inner voices such as anger, happiness, and sadness so that their life, thoughts, feelings and words are unified as they tell their suffering story to their spiritual director. Like them all people with disabilities should speak out with their own voices and should find the horizon of their lives.

I believe that the suffering experience of the people with disabilities can be their sweet home of joy and love even though their home is always as a site of struggle. Their suffering no longer is seen as an experience in which God is absent but an experience full of divine revelation. Such experience does not need to be romanticized to be

appreciated, but struggle with the experience itself reveals God's presence in their lives. However, many have been shamed with their suffering discriminative style of selfhood puts the blame for suffering on the people with disabilities themselves. Therefore, it is the first step in spiritual direction for the people with disabilities to help them find their true self so that they can find beauty and honor in their experience.

**Spiritual direction in Praxis and Conscientization**

They do not have their own ears which can listen to their own voices, experiencing a kind of chaos in their inner life. They always have shown fatalistic attitudes toward their suffering and self-depreciation and low self-esteem which is derived from their internalization of the knowledge that the patriarchal church teaches them. Thus, their lives seem like "a private hell". Therefore, it is necessary to find a breakthrough which will guide them into liberation and freedom. I think spiritual direction for the people with disabilities should focus on giving them opportunities in which they can experience their own identity that comes from their development in self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-esteem. For that, I believe, first of all, praxis and conscientization are the core elements of spiritual direction.

According to Freire, praxis unites subjectivity and objectivity rather than maintaining subjectivism and objectivism. Praxis has the twofold movements of action and critical reflection upon action. Praxis needs a dialectical process from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to then recreate and transform people's oppressed reality. In other words, praxis demands the unity of action and critical reflection, of theory and practice in which people can avoid both dangers of verbalism and activism. Not only can theory become simple verbalism without practice, but also practice tends to become blind activism without theory. Consequently, the process of praxis is to recreate, transform and reintegrate the reality dialectically, objectifying the reality. Thomas Groome tells us that praxis is a process of critical reflection.

Therefore, praxis must be a method of authentic spiritual direction. In spiritual direction as praxis, the directed are capable of awakening their self and their world. Spiritual direction should develop the directed who can think critically and act honestly and truly. Directors invite the directed to question the system they live in and the knowledge being

offered to them, because spiritual direction should be political so that the directed can be transformed.

Freire pointed out the importance of critical consciousness for the oppressed (the poor, the marginal) because the oppressed become aware of themselves in relation to the structure of oppression by their critical consciousness. Emphasizing critical consciousness, he highlights several levels of the consciousness of the human being. The lowest level of consciousness is 'intransitive consciousness' in which people are preoccupied only with their basic needs. They do not know how they can change their situation. They cannot even think of their condition as good or bad. The second is 'semi-intransitivity'. This level of consciousness prevails in people of the third world. People only can know the facts of their situations, following and depending on the dominant society cultures. The third is 'semi-transitive' or naïve consciousness, popular or populist consciousness. In this level, people cannot be silent any more. People might have some kind of critical insight so that they begin to question their reality in a naïve way. But they can be manipulated by the powerful voices. Finally, the highest level of consciousness is 'critical consciousness' that can be achieved through the process of conscientization. People at this level can interpret their problems and have confidence in themselves, and are actively taking responsibility in the society. Also, for Freire, there is a development of conscientization that awakes critical awareness. In conscientization as a way of critical reflection, people come to know the true nature of things as they are in critical dialogue with their reality. People thus have a critical attitude based on the faith that people can recognize their reality as well as have power to transform it. This conscientization means transformation of people's whole life, not parts of it.

The process of praxis itself is the conscientization. Therefore, "Conscientization is more than a simple *prise de conscience*. While it implies overcoming false consciousness, overcoming, that is, a semi-intransitive or naïve transitive state of consciousness, it implies further the critical insertion of the conscientized person into a demythologized reality."[6] There can be no conscientization of the people without a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by the proclamation of a new reality to be created by human beings.[7]

In spiritual direction, conscientization provides self-transcendence

and awareness for the directed so that s/he can experience God's love and presence in liberation and freedom, beginning to love and honor themselves. Moreover, the directed will be empowered by conscientization to express his or her own voice and thought to others. Consequently, they experience being the subject in history. At the same time, they will change their life experience from oppression to liberation in spiritual direction as a process of conscientization.

In spiritual direction based on a co-intentional and mutual relationship, director and directed are both subjects in critically unveiling reality and in recreating knowledge. For dialogical relations, director and the directed should be equal in the relationship. Directors thus help the directed and learn from the directed. For this, directors need love, humility, faith, trust, hope, critical reflection. In spiritual direction, the directed develop their critical awareness. They share their ideas, debates, interests and work. It will be a place to experience praxis and conscientization. Spiritual direction becomes a process of moving from an uncritical consciousness of what forces are at work in the life of the directed and in society to a true critical awareness of the dominant culture in their society. Spiritual direction is an encounter between directors and the directed in which the directed come to know their concrete context, and then transform themselves and the world. This process of spiritual direction is a long-term journey from oppression to liberation.

Meanwhile, Freire emphasizes a dialogical and 'problem-posing method' of education for the process of praxis and conscientization. He describes the importance of a problem-posing method for liberation, compared to a method of "banking education" which is the method of education used currently in schools. According to Freire "banking education", by which teachers minimize or annul the student's creative power and stimulate their credulity, serves the interests of the oppressors who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. They do not teach people to consider their reality.[8] According to Freire's theory, Korean church congregations have been educated by the banking concept where teacher is a narrating subject and the students are listening objects. The ministers as teachers of the church taught their congregations by this method. This has since been the Korean style by which teachers crammed students with their knowledge. Therefore, Korean congregations, especially the marginal

rejected their own experience. However, the 'problem-posing method' breaks with this style. This problem-posing method helps students to maximize their creative power and critical thinking. They develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world.[9]

Therefore, directors have to remember 'problem-posing education' for spiritual direction, because directors who are oriented by 'the banking education method' might contribute to the oppression of suffering people rather than helping to liberate them. People with disabilities can change their distorted faith and theology into their own faith and theology that deals with their sufferings.

Meanwhile, it is very important that the director should be aware of the possibility of trauma in the spiritual direction. People with disabilities may be traumatized by physical abuses and spiritual abuse and suffering effects such as emotional numbing, flashbacks, damaged connection with others, damaged sense of self, damaged world view, depression, anxiety, fatigue, shame, and hyperarousal. Therefore, the director involved with such people with disabilities needs to understand how profoundly the dynamics of trauma affect the life of the directed in their understanding and experience of God. And the director should help the directed affirm the ways in which God's transforming love may be working in a variety of therapeutic processes in which the religious dimension may remain only implicit.[10] Also the director needs to familiarize the directed with the psychological dynamics that typically interact with spiritual issues related to her/his suffering situation such as abuse and addiction. This dynamic often functions at an unconscious level in the life of the directed and relationship between the director and the directed.[11]

## Considering Spiritual Direction for Traumatized People with Disabilities

Henceforth, I will explore the things to be considered in spiritual direction for the traumatized people with disabilities. It is very important that spiritual directors should learn the characteristics of traumatized people because they have very special attitudes towards their life.

### Characteristics of Traumatization

1. Emotional numbing
2. Flashbacks - nightmare
3. Damaged connection with others

4. Damaged sense of self
5. Damaged world view - World is not safe for them

**Results of Traumatization**

1. Chronic fatigue
2. Depression
3. Anxiety
4. Survivor Guilty
5. Shame, Inferiority, Complex
6. Hyper sensual
7. Constriction

**Important issues that spiritual director should consider for authentic spiritual direction**

1. Problems of trust
2. Problems with boundaries
3. Difficulty with needs
4. Compulsive behaviors, making sex easier, habitual theft, runaway, violence, self-harm
5. Problems with anger, isolation, mood swings, low self-esteem.

**Conclusion**

When I reflect on my ministry experience, it is hard to find the spirituality of liberation which Jesus Christ proclaimed in his ministry to his disciples and people in the Korean church. Patriarchal dualistic theologies have controlled and manipulated Korean congregations. Moreover, pastors who are educated in fundamentalist view of Christian faith annealed suffering situation of congregations. In this miserable reality, people with disabilities were forced to suffer even greater suffering. They have no avenue to express and resolve their suffering therefore they might feel physical and spiritual yearning and thirst. They need ways of transformation to cope with their sufferings. This suffering situation of the people with disabilities leads me towards compassion to console and help them to resolve their sufferings. Therefore, I proposed a spiritual direction for people with disabilities in praxis and conscientization that would be helpful towards consoling and coping with their sufferings. I think spiritual direction is very important for awakening their consciousness as a process of liberation from the individual level to the collective level. I believe that in the process they can experience a kind of new life that can heal their

wounds and they can emerge with the power for envisioning a new future. Thus empowerment would lead to ultimate harmony even in their society. Therefore, the healing process has to be continued in Korean church and society. It is the responsibility of the Korean church and society to give all people (without any discrimination) ways to experience liberation, freedom, equality and peace.

**Endnotes**

1 Kathrine Marie Dyckman, S. N. J. M. L. &Parick Carroll, S. J. *Inviting the Mystic Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 22.

2 *Ibid*.

3 NIV, Colossians 3:11.

4 Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: A Cross Road Book 1994), 39.

5 *Ibid*.

6 Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom,* (Massachusetts: Harvard Educational Review. 1970),46.

7 *Ibid*.

8 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed,* (New York: Continuum, 1993),54-55.

9 *Ibid*, 65.

10 Driskill Joseph D, "Spiritual Direction with Traumatized Persons" in *Still Listening*, 19.

11 *Ibid*.

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# Part V

# Disability, Bible Reflection and Journey of Life

# Compassion with Disabled

Samuel Ngun Ling

The gospel writer Matthew says, "when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He then said, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:36 NRSV). To re-paraphrase this text, I would like to put in this way: When Jesus saw the crowd of different peoples, women, men, adult and children and able and disabled peoples, he was deeply moved with compassion. Some commentators said that the meaning of the Greek language, *splagchnistheis* for compassion is a very strong word, the *bowels* that can be moved up because of pity and deep compassion. Do we ever have a deep compassion for others that can move up our bowels? Perhaps, we do not. In order to have such a powerful compassion for others, we must be deeply touched inside our hearts by something very painful.

Jesus was moved to compassion by the world's pain, moved with compassion for the sick (Matt.14:14), for the blind (Matt. 20:34), and for those in the grip of the demons (Mark 9:22). In all human afflictions, Jesus is also afflicted. The pain of the oppressed has strongly moved Jesus to a deep compassion to the point of helping them liberated from their pains.

Secondly, Jesus was moved with compassion by the world's sorrow. The sight of the widow at Nain, following the body of her son out to burial, moved the heart of Jesus (Luke 7:13) and said to her, do not weep. He then touched the dead man and said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak and then gave him to his mother. From this story, we can learn that it was the

deep compassion of Jesus that moved him with a great desire to wipe the tear from every eye.

Thirdly, he was moved to compassion by the world's loneliness. The sight of a leper, banished from the society of his fellow human beings, living a life which was a living death of loneliness and universal abandonment, called forth His pity and His power (Mark.1:41). After the leper was made clean, Jesus commissioned the healed leper to go and show himself to the priest and to offer for his cleansing what Moses' law has required, for a proof to the people. Why this man needs a proof to the people because he needs his human dignity back to life and also to have communion with peoples.

All the above examples have shown how Jesus was moved to "living compassion" by the suffering of the disabled peoples such as the sick, the blind, the demon possessed man, the crying widow and the leper. *I would like to bring this issue of "living compassion" that empower us to love the unlovable, the undeserved, the lonely, the neglected and the marginalized.* We cannot love the disabled peoples without such living compassion. When I say about compassion, perhaps, some may argue that every Christian has compassion for others. Yes, he or she may have compassion. But what kind of compassion that he or she has? Does his or her compassion draw him or her to action for the needy? I would like to say, compassion without action is dead compassion. There is none other than the apostle James who strongly feels the need to integrate faith and action in Christian life. He explained saying, "What does it profit, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?.... You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder" (James 2: 14-16, 19).

All Christians believe that God is love. Even every religion claims that love is the foundation of life. But love without action is dead love. Love of lips is not qualified to be real love it is just love of lies. "If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen," said John (1 John 4: 20 NRSV). Jesus' love and compassion are not lies because they moved him to action. His love and compassion moved his hearts, his eyes, his bowels, his hands,

his legs and bodies to act for the suffering. This is living "love and compassion."

Let me bring more examples into focus from the Bible to point to the issue that I would like to bring into substance. As we all know, the story of Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-35 is concerned mainly with giving help to a "living man," and that the possibility of the man being dead is not raised in this text, hence it is the heartlessness of the priest which is at issue. It seems in this story that the priest and the Levite feared another ambush by the robbers. Since the priest and Levite abandoned the victim, they were not better in actuality than the robbers. Kenneth E. Bailey writes saying, "The robbers hurt the man by violence. The priest and Levite hurt him by neglect." The essential point here is the fact that every priest who passed by asked himself, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But once the Good Samaritan came by, he reversed that question and asked himself, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him? This is a kind of deep compassion that Jesus had. Such a deep compassion makes the Good Samaritan unique from the first two travelers. Real compassion comes from God and is the divine attitude and also acts of Jesus Christ. The goddess of Mercy in Mahayana Buddhism is named *Bodhisattva*. The Chinese translation of this is, "*kuan-in*,' which means "hearing the suffering voices in the world." The Samaritan, like the Buddhist Bodhisattva, heard the unfortunate victim's inner voice with a compassionate heart and his actions. Jesus tried to introduce this kind of Samaritan to Jewish audience.

**Compassion and Disability Discourse**

Everyone has compassion for disabled peoples. But many times compassion alone cannot save them. Compassion must go along with action. Compassion without action is dead. It is life, not a theory. To be compassionate with someone means to share life with him or her.

**Disability of Religions**

Globalization today creates the so-called "global village,'' that is, a world without religion. It is therefore considered to act as "money-theism" or "the religion of the market," to borrow the words of M.P. Joseph, an Indian theologian. This "religion of market" is losing the human face, causing the gap between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the oppressed, between the social classes, and between neighbors within the same locality.

The rich neighbor may no longer see his or her poor neighbor who lives near him or her. But he or she will rather have a g-talk with his or her rich fellow who lives far away from his or her home. While globalization gets us closer to each other in terms of information technology, it can also make people who live near farther and farther, leaving behind the unbridgeable gap between friends or neighbors.

**I must become a neighbor to all**

Loving neighbor cannot be sustained merely by the intellectual understanding of identifying oneself as a neighbor. It is the praxis of mercy, love, compassion and action of care. Like the lawyer in the Bible, we may think of ourselves that we do not lack the right knowledge concerning our faith and Christian ethics. Neither do we lack assurance that we will live if we do what we are taught. However, the question that the lawyer posed to Jesus about inheriting eternal life is still ours today. We know the way leading to eternal life but we have not yet experienced the journey. What we need is not to possess more knowledge or better intellectual concepts of the faith but to receive the imperative words of Jesus which says, "Go and do likewise."

I must become a neighbor to anyone in need at any time. To fulfill the law of neighbor means that I must reach out in costly compassion to all people, even to my enemies. I then need to go beyond the bounds of my own ethnic or religious group to become a true neighbor with compassion. Let me give an illustration here. During Anglo-Burmese wars, Karen Christians had mistakenly taken sides with British imperialists to fight against Burmese Buddhist nationalists and independence fighters. This remains an unforgettable historical stigma for Burman Buddhist nationalists, which to this day has yet to be recovered but unfortunately Karen Christians would have never confessed their faults and they would instead divided among themselves and Christian Karens have remained until today fighting against the central government for freedom. This colonial wound has fully internalized hatred and tension between Burmese Buddhists and Karen Christians.

The question here is: how could an enemy become a good neighbor? People can forgive but never forget. We need a daring courage to forgive others, although we could never forget the past. In fact, we must begin our faith journey with Jesus who warns us to "Love our enemies, and

do good thing to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us" (Lk.6:27-30). The parable of Good Samaritan gives us a dynamic concept of the neighbor. The question, "Who is my neighbor?" is reshaped into "To whom must I become a neighbor? The answer then is – everyone in need, even an enemy.

**A New Mission Paradigm for a New World**

If we acknowledge a religiously pluralistic nature of our world today, our Christian mission practice ought to undergo change. A conviction that is growing in many circles of theologians is that we need to move away from a triumphal model of mission to a partnership model. In a situation where God's gift of life is continuously threatened, vitiated and destroyed by war, religious fanaticism, economic exploitation and other forces of death, we need to reflect on God's mission of life-giving. Our mission is to discern God's acts and testify to them in our lives. The clue to our discernment is the Biblical witness, especially the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we have a task in interpreting these by our words and actions. Biblically speaking, *God is a God of life and to believe in God is to participate in the life-giving activity of God.*

Mission is an endeavor of the Christian community to celebrate and to enhance God's gift of life. The essential character of life, which the community shares with other human beings and nature, is inter-relatedness. In responsibility to one another and to nature, life is preserved and God's purpose for it is fulfilled. To believe in the God of life is to affirm the supremacy of life over death. This also means "any assault on life-hunger, destitution, squalor, oppression or injustice, is an attack on God and God's will for the life of humankind. A denial of life therefore is a rejection of the God of life." The demand of the God of life in Christ, the rationale for mission, is a demand for life abundant. "Where Jesus is, there is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life and eternal life."

Second, the *God of the Bible is a liberator God and faith in the liberator God calls for struggle against all forces of oppression.* Liberation is not the invention of Latin America or of Marxists. It is a central affirmation of the Bible. The living God of the Bible is a liberator God. Only in solidarity with the victims of the system and with broken people can we testify to the liberating power of God in

Christ. The cross is the sign of solidarity. Jesus washes his disciples' feet is another sign of solidarity. Admiring Christ in the church does not necessarily mean following him. The worship of Christ without participating in his life, his sufferings and his death has become the peculiar form of piety today.

Third, the *God of the Bible is also a God of justice*. Justice in the Bible is not about balancing rights, duties and rewards. It is not even about an absolute equality. It is about just relationships. Exclusion and marginalization are two forms of injustice that in turn distort our relationships. It is a mission imperative that we struggle against them. Life cannot be lived in full without justice – without the inclusion of the powerless. "Power that is not shared or transformed into love is pure domination and oppression." Life is what we share with others. Life in all its fullness is given to us in Jesus Christ. It is Life for others. We witness to that life, enhanced by love, liberation and justice.

In conclusion, religious pluralism is theologically as well as missiologically important. We need a life-affirming mission which gives a basis for the cooperation of all religious traditions and secular ideologies with the church. We are at the threshold of a new era of religious cooperation. It can be usurped by forces that exploit religions for selfish aggrandizement. God has created one world with diverse peoples living in harmony. Loving and caring relationship with one another is an urgent task committed to each and every one of us.

# Respect and Kindness for the Disabled

S. Temjen Imchen

Let me begin my short message by stating that God has a plan for every human being on this earth. God is always putting the divine plan into action for whatever God has created. We - as parents, people living with disabilities (PwDs), and theological educators - are all given a part to play in this journey of hope for the people who need our care and support. We must do everything that we can to alleviate pains and agonies of the people with disabilities. For those with a disability, the trust that God has placed upon them to bear this affliction is amazing. They were not chosen to be less than anyone. They were chosen to be stronger, courageous, and, therefore we should have admiration and respect. Let me share a few insights from the Bible on PwDs.

**1. Respect but not Abuse:**

Leviticus 19:14 reminds us that "*You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.*" What it means by "not revile the deaf" or any person with disability is not to abuse or criticize, or say unpleasant things to or about someone. It is to show respect to them. As Christians, we are to take care and make sure that our journey does not cause another to go astray. Understandably, there are those who are just about to begin a relationship with Christ, and when our behaviour in any way happens to stop them, there is a possibility that they could be lost and not gained. Winning the heart of those people in need of care is our God given task. It is significant that we take utmost care on walking on our path, and must not become a stumbling block or a constraint to those who are just beginning to see or hear for the first time.

**2. Showing Loving-Kindness (*hesed*) to the Disabled**

By reading 2 Samuel 9:1-13, we find king David's kindness to Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the disabled son of Jonathan, who was the son of King Saul and a special friend of King David. When Mephibosheth was five years old, his father Jonathan was killed in the battle. Fearing that the Philistines would seek to take the life of the young boy, a nurse fled with him to Gibeah, the royal residence, but in her haste she dropped him and both of his feet were crippled (2 Sam. 4:4). He was carried to the land of Gilead, where he found refuge in the house of Machir at Lo-debar. Later on, king David sent royal messengers there, and brought Mephibosheth and his infant son Micah to Jerusalem, where they resided and received king's favour. David's kindness to Mephibosheth restored not only the broken relationship but also gave him back his dignity - wealth, possession, respect, all that was due to him as a grandson of late king Saul. In the same way church's concern should be to restore the humanhood and dignity of the PwDs by embracing and accepting them wholeheartedly as equal members of the church designed in the image of God no matter what impairment rather than seeing them merely as objects of charity.

**3. Healing the Sick Comes from the Heart of Jesus**

The life and ministry of Jesus was a ministry of healing the sick and giving hope to the people in dire situation. We remember a good example of healing in Matthew 15:29-31. This passage highlights the heart of Jesus towards those who are disabled. His heart hurts at the sight of so many needy people. The God of the Universe aches for our pain. So he begins to heal and continues to do so, bringing Glory to His father. Whether or not we are healed in this life or the next, our pain does not go unnoticed by God. He hurts for us, but knows how quickly a time will come where we will all stand before him and be healed, today and for all time to come.

**4. Disability is Never a Result of the Lack of God's Love**

The Bible says that disability is never a result of falling from God's favour, or a lack of love on His part. We discover this affirmation in the Gospel according St. John 9: 2-7.

Any word to the contrary is against all that the Lord stands for. But God does have a plan for us all that will ultimately result in his Glory.

It is our job to decipher how our lives, our bodies, and our minds, can bear witness to His grace. Whatever it is that we have been given, it has been given to show light in some way.

**Conclusion**

In one way or the other, we are all afflicted. We all have areas of our hearts, bodies, and minds that just don't work the way we want them too. We believe that, quite possibly, if God knew the truth about the extent of our injuries, He would turn away in shame or disgust. But this is not the way our God operates. He sees us all as perfectly formed, beautiful beings. He joined us together in our mother's womb, exactly as we were to be. He is not seeing as we see, but as the Lord only can. In the eyes of God, there are no disabilities, only children chosen to fulfil a different task. Therefore, the continuing mission of the Church today is to journey with them and provide hope to those people in need of care and mercy. That is justice. All that God asks is that we help one another in journeying with His own children, who are created in God's image. Amen!

# Give Relief, Support and Honour: Reading from Disability Perspective Leviticus 21:16 – 24; Mark 9:43 – 47

Walis Ukan

*"16 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 17 Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. 18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, 19 or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, 20 or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. 21 No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. 22 He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. 23 But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them. 24 Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel." (Lev 21:16-24 NRSV)*

*"43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell." (Mark 9:43-47 NRSV)*

Twenty years ago, a severe car accident hurt vertebral column of my dear wife, and she could not recover and became paralyzed below

the waist. From then on, my wife has to rely on a wheelchair. As a husband, I started to experience the life, distress, inconvenience, pain and suffering of being disabled with my beloved wife. This experience has been accompanying with me till now.

The "blemish" recorded in Leviticus 21:16-24 is often interpreted to exclude disabled people and women from temple service. Sometimes it is interpreted in terms of `holiness'. Disability is seen as sign of sinfulness. Women's monthly menstrual period is seen as unclean and unholy. Such wrong interpretations have become sources of exclusion in the church and society even today. We need to ask ourselves: Does the text suggest the disqualification and exclusion of the disabled and women to be priests? Does it also mean the total exclusion of the disabled? Does it imply sinful nature of disabled people and women?

1. To Relieve but not to be Excluded

Verses 16 to 17: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God." It implies that God commanded Moses to exclude and deny the disabled and women from temple service. However, according to the Jewish practice, the priest had to offer two bullocks, one ram, seven male lambs without blemish and a lamb as a burnt offering for God. In addition, some grains, oil and wine had to be offered as offerings (minchah). So one can imagine how laborious and arduous the duty of a priest was. *Every day and night, the life in the Temple depicted by offering, offering of animals, smoke of flesh and incents and the fire of altar is kept by the priest.* Priest should carefully prepare and participate every details of the ritual. Indeed, it was a laborious and arduous duty.

God's commandment to Moses, "*No of your offsprings come near to offer the food of his God,*" needs to be seen in terms of the laborious and arduous process of ritual. A disabled priest could not undertake this duty. Nevertheless, this verse does not imply denial or exclusion of the disabled priest from serving God. On the contrary, it demands to give physical relief to the disabled priest from their daily laborious duty. For fear of the recurrence of the example of Nada and Abihu which they "*offered unholy fire before the Lord… and fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD,*" (Lev 10:2). This verse reminds the holiness of the ritual and offering. But it does not mean the exclusion or denial from the service

of God. The core message is that disabled people must be given relieve from laborious duty, but not to exclude the disabled in sharing God's gifts for enrichment of our community and society.

2. To Support but not to be Dissociated

After announcing disabled people to be relieved from laborious duty, it says, "*the food of his God, from the most holy and the holy, he shall eat.*" This has a profound social and religious meaning and it also expresses God's abundant richness and grace to disabled people. This demands incorporation and support of the disabled people, and the abled people should offer them the resources they need to lead a dignified and good life. It challenges that we need to create a social, religious and cultural system that support disabled people.

Though disabled priest could not perform the duty of offering, they still deserve the portion of the food of God that is the most holy of holy, just as the normal priest enjoyed. They deserve the welfare and rights regardless of being disabled. They should not be socially or religiously relegated to exclusion or marginalization just because they are disabled. They are not to be excluded from the family of priest. Instead, they are active member of the family of priest. Hence, to work for a social, political, religious and cultural support system and network is what God demands from us to do. In fact, the prophet Isaiah envisioned the establishment of such solidarity support system and network as criteria of fulfilling God's righteousness and salvation. As Isaiah 29:18-19 records that:

> "*On that day, the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,*
> *and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.*
> *The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,*
> *and the neediest people shall in the Holy One of Israel.*"
>
> (Isa 29:18-19 RSV)

It reminds me the time when my wife started to lead her life in wheelchair. She felt ashamed and could not face the reality for two years. She was in constant fear of being humiliated and discriminated by the people. She was also in constant feeling of distressed. When I recalled that experience, I could not imagine what power enabled her to face the reality and move on her life till today. Along with the warmth

support from dear children, husband, church, and the members of Hualien Association of Spinal Cord injury encouraged my wife and she could overcome the negative and inferior feelings and attitudes. The association organizes various monthly or annual activities and gathered many disabled people. During those events, my wife and other disabled friends could chat and encouraged each other. This social support and solidarity network changed her so much. It is fortunate that the streets of Hualien city and also many shops are disabled friendly which gives her a confidence and dignity as she is able to do shopping just as normal people do.

Therefore, when it says, "*The food of his God, from the most holy and the holy, he shall eat*," it challenges us that we should not exclude and dissociate the disabled from the family, society and community. Rather, we should give what is due to them. We should care for the disabled priest and embodies in our church, society, economic, religious and cultural life and establish solidarity support and friendly social system and networks. This is a step to fulfil God's righteousness, grace and salvation.

3. To Honour but not to be Marginalized

God's commandment, "*Because I am the Lord who sanctify them*" gives a new perception of disability. It challenges the traditional and stereotyped understanding of person with disability. Disabled people were seen as cursed and hated by God. This commandment clearly affirms that there is no room of contempt, discredit or marginalization of disabled priest. On the contrary, God says that: "I am the Lord who sanctify them." God recovers their identity, relieving them from the traditional, cursed, negative and hostile "yoke." The disabled people are created by God in his own image. The disabled once again gains the sacred position of their creation in the image of God. No wonder God reiterates that:

> *You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:14 NRSV*)

God takes heed to the discriminating, bullying and marginalizing social and religious system. Jesus reaffirmed this commandment saying:

> *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to*

> *hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.* (*Mark 9:43-47 NRSV*)

This further affirms that disability should not be the reason to block and exclude them. Every disabled person deserves acceptance and entry to the Kingdom of God. The same applies to the disabled priest. In the eyes of God, the disabled priest is also sanctified by God. So, they deserve and have the privilege of invitation and access to the Kingdom of God.

**Conclusion**

A couple is sustained by genuine love and relationship. I could feel that my foot become my wife's foot. She is able to move on her life's journey with the support of my foot, walking along with her and my hands pushing her wheelchair in a friendly social environment. However, I often surprised and puzzled by the meaning of Leviticus 21:16 – 24. Many people see it in terms of exclusion, discrimination and marginalization of disabled friends. This is not the meaning of this passage.

In fact, the Leviticus 21:16-24 is to assert that even among the sacred priests serving in the sacred Temple, God commands us to relieve the work load of priest, but not to exclude them. In God's Kingdom, the disabled deserves the dignity and respect just as normal people do. God demands us to establish a friendly, just and life-affirming society and environment for the disabled. It is our collective responsibility to create a just and inclusive church and society so that broken and anguished hearts will experience love, care and acceptance in God's Kingdom.

# The Gift of Being in the Making of a Just and Inclusive Church and Society: A Theological Perspective

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro

**Standing at Intersections as a Disabled Person**

A well-meaning person can perhaps empathize at the predicament of a disabled person. However, at the core, one can only probe the depths of disability when one leaves the realm of the so-called "normalness" and becomes an "outsider" of such realm. I say this as an Asian, Filipino woman who, by my profession, is placed in the category of middle class – albeit between the lower and middle level. But such social location is not so much a privilege when one gets disabled in a specific geographical location, and that is, the Philippines. Living in such locations, I contend that a disabled woman who seeks to live in a just and inclusive church and society inevitably stands at many intersections. An intersection is the point where different paths meet or cross each other. From my social and geographical location, I see myself at the intersection where instances of several paths meet. In different occasions, however, as a gendered female body, I became the place where the crossings happen.

This view point came from my experience of hidden disability. At nine, my normal hearing was impaired when one of my eardrums was destroyed. Being partially deaf, I became an object of taunting by children and even by my uncle who was fond of putting a negative signifier, e.g. bungol (deaf) before my name. This made me develop a low self-esteem. But I struggled to survive and passed as "normal," as one without hearing problems. Then, in January last year, a freak accident tore the meniscus cartilage of my left knee.[1] The first thing

that I dreaded was the cost of a surgical procedure. The hospitals in Dumaguete City[2] do not have the equipment to treat such a medical condition, and so being a widow, I had to drag myself alone, and make several trips to another island, in Cebu City, for the examination, for MRI, and eventually for the arthroscopic procedure and a meniscectomy. Then I became dependent for sometime on the crutches. The commutes from my house to the hospital for PT sessions and to school were challenging because public transportations are usually not PwD-friendly. The other challenge is the general indifference of many people I have encountered in public facilities. Having experienced disability, albeit partially and knowing the meniscus will not regenerate, I feel being more of an "outsider" of the world of the "normal." I can no longer do much of what I used to do. In my situation, I realized that being unable to walk is more difficult or challenging than being partially deaf. Furthermore, as a female PwD, I realized that I stand at the intersections of many things. And due to time and space limitation, I will only cite a few here.

**Standing at the Cultural Intersection of Disability and "Normalness"**

In the public elementary school, we were taught a song that was supposed to be funny: The Town San Roque (*Ang Bayan ng SanRoque*), where four disabled persons are making fun of themselves: "The lame danced, the deaf listened; the blind watched, the mute sang."

However, a closer look at the lyrics shows that the song instills in subtle ways a discriminatory attitude towards the disabled persons. It reifies the marginalization of the disabled persons and makes them object of mocking or a laughing stock. This attitude pervades in my country's culture. The "normal" people tend to look down at other people's disability as either funny, or annoying. Discriminatory jokes, accompanied by speech or actions mimicking the disability are still common source of fun time for "normal" persons. This attitude continues even after the promulgation of Republic Act 7277[3] (May 1992) known as "Magna Carta for Disabled Persons."[4]

In the 1980's, a composer wrote a song of lament and irony. It says that each "normal" individual is in some ways blind, mute and deaf. These "normal" individuals are not even better than the disabled, because in real life they refuse to see, to hear and they stammer towards

a life of holiness.[5] This is where the *gift of being of the disabled comes in*. Their presence, somehow, challenge and make the "normal" people realize that many of them are in some ways blind, dumb and deaf; that they are not even visible, they are not heard, and in many occasions, they stammer in the sense that they could not even articulate what is the desired life that can be called holy.

**Standing at the Crossroads of Liberating and Enslaving Texts and Traditions**

In feminism, women's experience is a central norm that is to critique traditional theological teachings.[6] It can be used as a lens to construct new or revised doctrines. This can also be said on disability. The experience of disability can be taken as a central norm that can be used to analyze and critique traditional theological teachings–practically all traditional doctrines – doctrine of God, *imago dei*, christology, salvation, ecclesiology, and mission, to name a few.

As a Christian woman, I stand at the intersection of the reality of two biblical traditions on disability: one discriminatory and the other, liberating. "Normalness" in biblical view is almost synonymous with perfection. In the biblical tradition, the discourse that says "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house" originated from the expression of resistance of the Jebusites against King David's move to occupy their land in Jerusalem. The Jebusites told David: "You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back." Yet David took the stronghold of Zion and said: "Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates." From then on, the following expression because popular: "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house." (2 Samuel 5: 6-9; cf. 9:1-13)

One need not defend the discriminatory texts in the Bible by glossing it over. These texts exist: texts that banned the offerings of animals with defects in the temple rituals, and disallowing PwD from such religious rituals so as not to "profane" the sanctuary (Lev.21:17-24; see also Malachi 1:7-8; Exodus 4:11; 2 Sam. 19:24, Daniel 1:3-4). For example, even if the interpreter viewed Leviticus 21:17-24 as one that relieves the disabled priest from the meticulous labor of preparing the offering in the temple,[7] one must not turn one's gaze away from the verse that says,

> But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them. (Lev. 21:23 RSV)

The essence of discrimination is still there: that disability profanes the Lord's sanctuary, and therefore the disable should not even go near the curtain, much more approach the altar. Glossing over some texts will not be helpful; instead, it perpetuates the discrimination and violence against the disabled. Most of the similar texts speak of disabilities or physical "defects" as considered manifestations of lack of faith, of not praying hard enough, of sinfulness and punishment for disobedience against God. In a country where Christians claim to account for 90% of the population, the prevailing view about disability still echoes the discriminatory and enslaving tone of some biblical passages.

Yet, the Bible also have many passages that are liberating for the disabled and the physically afflicted. There are stories of David insisting to have Mephibosheth ate with him at his table (2 Sam 9). One should not abuse the deaf or misleads the blind. (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18). In the New Testament, there are many stories of Jesus healing the lame, and the blind (Matt. 15:29-31, Hebrews 12:13, Luke 14:12-14, Matt. 15:29-31/Luke 7:21-23). Unfortunately, it is the enslaving texts and concepts that are usually highlighted and remembered, thereby overshadowing the liberating ones. This is perhaps where the seminary and the church in general, take on their position of complacency and indifference towards the issue of disability.

**The Gendered, Disabled Body as the Intersection of Giving and Receiving**

Human beings are body and soul together. These two cannot be separated; otherwise, if the body is removed from the equation, there cannot be a "physical, material dimension of human existence."[8] Human experience and knowledge are grounded in the body and so as a partially disabled feminist, I affirm the idea of an "embodied thinking." One cannot think with a truncated body. Embodiment is a woman-centered value, and consequently, bodily integrity is a central issue for feminist theologies and ethics. Giving and receiving are acts of embodied morality – of having the sense of mutuality and reciprocity in a relationship. Thus, disabled persons, women particularly, have the

right to exercise control over their bodies, to enjoy or to refuse sexual intimacy, to be free from surrogacy, harassment, and violence.

I connect this notion of embodiment with the "gift of being," and with life as a gift. In the discourse on quality of life, however, there is still a prevalence of ambivalence or even difficulty of accepting disability as a gift. Yet, the experience of disability calls for humanity to reflect on the question of human existence. It urges the disabled to recognize their giftedness and affirm themselves as in: "You don't need arms and legs to sing."[9] The late Australian paraplegic Stella Young was an activist on issues including disability, gender equality and education. Her being and words could be taken as her gift to the world:

> I dance as a political statement, because disabled bodies are inherently political. But I mostly dance for all the reasons anyone else does: because it heals my spirit and fills me with joy.[10]

The managing director of the broadcast company where Stella Young worked said that Young was -

> an unforgettable communicator and a passionate advocate... She was very warm and generous, the first to laugh and to make us all laugh ... Stella helped us understand disability issues by sharing with a raw honesty about her own life ... She took great delight in challenging conventional wisdom and lazy thinking.[11]

The "gift of being" is exemplified by Young's life. This "gift of being" that disabled persons give is the call and challenge to the "normal" to understand that being is inclusive of bodies. and that "all bodies are beautiful," and disabled bodies must also be counted. Just as the disabled persons give the world the gift of discernment and the call to care, one must also be mindful that many disabled, gendered bodies have been the locus of abuse. I have in mind the image of this mentally disabled young woman roaming in the marketplace of Dumaguete, begging. Every year she gets pregnant and had abortions. It took some time for a government agency to take her to a mental health institution for caring. In the Philippines, where around 60% of the people live below poverty level, many disabled persons are poor. Thus, the lack of, or the absence of social services in many areas in the country compounds the difficulty of caregiving. Very few can afford to go to the doctors for medical check-ups, for a physical therapy, or to acquire wheelchairs, among others.

Feminist ethics of care recognizes that PwD are, just like the "normal," embedded in relationships. In this light, one may be a caregiver and care receivers, and even both at some point in time.[12] Yet, unlike the men, most women with disability are still expected more to take care for others in the household. For instance, it is now my turn to take care of my octogenarian mother. In her work, feminist philosopher Joan Tronto says: "The care perspective requires that we think about the moral dimension of receiving care as well as that of giving care. It requires that we reflect upon the place of dependency, illness, insecurity, and death in human life. These have not been the central concern in moral philosophy and political theory,"[13] unfortunately.

Yet, we cannot universalize the disabled person's response to their bodies, even as they recognize their being as a gift. Susan Wendell, a feminist philosopher with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) says: "I am learning not to identify myself with my body, and this helps me to live a good life with a debilitating chronic illness."[14]

But this I am certain: that without the presence of disability, human beings will not have the challenge to probe into the depths of the meaning of life and their faith in the Divine. The presence of PwD compels a community to reflect on disability and how to look at life. This is the disabled persons' gift of being to humanity.

**The Epistemological Privilege of the Disabled Body, Difference, and Rejection**

There are disabled persons who are admired for achievements that surpass those of the "normal" people. Some of them have excelled in the field of the academia, in sports, in literature, in broadcasting, and many others. Yet, one must recognize that "there is always an undercurrent of 'difference' between the lives of disabled persons and the "normal," instead of glossing it over. This "difference" makes, for the disabled, a special standpoint or "sitpoint"; a way of looking at the world that is different from those who are safely on the side of the "normal." Knowledge becomes complex and special in the sense that such standpoint or sitpoint (for those who cannot stand) "shows how much the 'normal' take for granted that their environment will be physically accessible and socially welcoming."[15]

Contrary to God's "economy of grace," in the world of the "normal," the profit economy prevails, and institutional rejection of difference is

usually necessary. In a profit economy, the outsiders, such as the persons with disability, are regarded as "surplus people." The members of such profit economy are "programmed" to respond to "difference" in three ways: ignore it; copy it if the difference is dominant; and, destroy it if the difference is subordinate. Audre Lorde, a Black philosopher once said: "We have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion."[16]

**Recognition of the Gift of Being of PwDs in Constructing a Just and Life-Affirming Church and Society: A Continuing Cry**

A truly just and life-affirming church and society will not be attained if the call of the PwD to receive their gift – gift of being in the world – is not heeded. It is a call for a just world because the issues confronting PwD are justice and peace issues. In this Advent Season, the Prince of Peace come unexpectedly as one who is disabled – in a sense that he and his biological parents were rendered disable by their low social and economic status. In their context then and ours today, various forms of disability are experienced and these disabilities intersect with other different issues and situations. In this light and in relation to disability, the church and society need to explore and construct patterns for relating across our human differences and intersections. In this way, the differences may not be mislabeled, misused, or made an excuse to separate individuals and communities as "us vs. them," "we vs. they," the "normal" and the disabled. In doing so, the society and especially the church could truly be an embodiment of Christ, and become truly a just and life-affirming community of faith, a community of humane people.

**Endnotes**

1 This meniscus cartilage cushions the meeting point of the leg and thigh bones.

2 A city in Negros Oriental, in the central part of the Philippines.

3 "An Act Providing for the Rehabilitation, Self-Development and Self-Reliance of Disabled Persons and their Integration into the Mainstream of Society and for other Purposes." [Database online] Available at http//:www.ncda.gov.ph .

[4] RA 7277 definitions: (a) *Disabled persons* are those suffering from restriction or different abilities, as a result of a mental, physical or sensory impairment, to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being; (b) *Impairment* is any loss, diminution or aberration of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function; (c) *Disability* shall mean 1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more psychological, physiological or anatomical function of an individual or activities of such individual; 2) a record of such an impairment; or 3) being regarded as having such an impairment; (d) *Handicap* refers to a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the function or activity, that is considered normal given the age and sex of the individual.

[5] Freddie Aguilar wrote and sang "Bulag, Pipi at Bingi" ("Blind, Dumb and Deaf"). Available at http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/f/freddie_aguilar/bulag_pipi_at_bingi_lyrics.html

[6] Susan M. St. Ville, "Epistemological Privilege," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,* edited by Letty M. Russel and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 84.

[7] Walis Ukan, "Misleading text to disability?" This is his bible study manuscript during the first day of the Asia-Pacific Consultation on "A Just and Life-Affirming Church and Society: A Person with Disability Perspective" on December 12, 2016 at Yu-shan Theological College and Seminary in Hualien, Taiwan.

[8] Susan A. Ross, "Body" in Dictionary of Feminist Theologies, edited by Letty M. Russel and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 32-33.

[9] This quote is borrowed from the title of Chapter 7 in Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore, *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* (Los Angeles, California: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2007).

[10] Melissa Davey, "Stella Young, disability activist, dies at 32," in *Australia News* 7 December 2014 [database online]. (Cited 9 December 2016). Available at *https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/dec/08/stella-young-disability-activist-dies*. Young was born with osteogenesis imperfecta that made her use a wheelchair almost all her life.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] Lorber and Moore, 172.

[13] Cited in Ibid. This quote was taken from *Tronto's Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[14] Susan Wendell, "The Suffering and Limited Body," in *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* edited by Judith Lorber and Liza Jean Moore (Los Angeles, California: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2007), 186.

[15] Lorber and Moore, 189.

[16] Audre Lorde, "Age Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", in *Ethics: A Feminist Reader,* edited by Elizabeth Frazer, Jennifer Hornsby, and Sabina Lovibond, (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Blackwell Publishers,1992), 213.

# EDAN Accompaniment in Theological Education in Myanmar

Lal Tin Hre

**Brief Information on PWD in Myanmar**[1]

The Census in April 2014 enumerated a total of 50, 279, 900 persons in Myanmar. The Census also shows that Myanmar has 2, 311, 250 persons or 4. 6% (2. 8 in 2012) of population, living with some form of disability. More than a quarter of this population with disabilities have multiple disabilities, 1. 11% of the population (559, 880) live with a moderate or higher level of disability and 0. 43% of the population (216, 062) live with severe disabilities. At a household level, there are more than 1.7 million households, or nearly 16% of the conventional household, with at least one person living with disability.

- The 2014 provided clear evidence that the population with disabilities lag behind in the achievement of national, regional and global development goals.
- Myanmar has achieved several educational development goals, but persons with disabilities are still far behind. Literacy rates, school attendance of primary and secondary school children, and education completion rates of persons with disabilities were all much lower than for persons without disabilities.
- Similarly, labour force participation rates and the employment-to-population ratios were lower among persons with disabilities compared to persons without disabilities.

PwD and NGO: There are two main Centres working for PwD across the country, both are based in Yangon. One is called *Myanmar*

*Independent Living Initiative (MILI)*, led by disabled persons for PwDs and has been working for equal rights, inclusion and independent living of people with multiple types disability in Myanmar. The objective of MILI reads "to empower and support persons with disabilities for their independent … living". 28 branches are operating in 10 regions and states in Myanmar, and currently there are 48 employees and 4,752 disabled members in the organization. MILI gives its priority on women, children and persons with severe disabilities.

Another Centre is called *Eden Centre for Disabled Children (ECDC)*, founded in April 18, 2000 by a Physiotherapist Mr. Tha Uke with 14 disabled children. ECDC focuses on children. Since 2007 the Eden Centre has started making partnership with other international NGO's and has implemented various projects on "Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)" and "Inclusive Education (IE)" around the country. There are more than 160 children with disabilities who are benefitting and receiving the necessary services, both in the centre and at their own residence. At present, 60 full time staff are working at the centre and in the project.[2]

**In Theological Education**

The very recent survey of PTCA (2018) indicates that there are more than 180 Bible Schools in Myanmar. Out of such big number, only 34 Schools have been working in an ecumenical-theological-network called Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM). Churches (MCC) Member Schools in ATEM follow the common curriculum especially for B. Th. and M. Div. programs.

The first initiative of PwD and theological education in Myanmar started in 2010 and the first workshop on its kind was held in 2011, organized by ATEM and financial support came from EDAN. 37 participants from non-ATEM and ATEM member schools joined the workshop including persons with disabilities. Wati Longchar (India), Jitra Samsa (Thailand), Yeja Lee (Korea) and local resource persons facilitated the workshop. The main aims and objectives were as follows:

- To receive reports of the EDAN's endeavour to introduce disability course in theological institutions.
- To discuss the best approach to bring about inclusion of persons with disabilities in the academic and social life of theological institutions under the auspices of ATEM;

- To develop tools (curriculum/guidelines) to facilitate integration of disabilities studies in ATEM member institutions as away to prepare students for their future pastoral roles to persons with disabilities;
- To explore integration of disabilities concerns in the existing curricula;
- To introduce to the study resource materials developed in other regions to accompany the disability studies in theological institutions;
- To discuss whether there is need for national specific study resource materials that would need to be developed and if so, to plan the process to develop them.

**Results**

- Appreciated the issue by theological schools, particularly who were able to join the workshop.
- Developed a curriculum for ministerial candidates under the heading "DISABILITY DISCOURSE".
- Identified *Areas and Issues for Integration of Disability Course in other Discipline*.
- Began to introduce the course in some theological institutions.
- Published a resource book entitled, "*Is God Disabled: Teaching Theology from Disability Perspective*" in 2012 which is a collection of paper presentations and other related articles.

The Second Workshop: It was organized during April 23-27, 2013, which was attended by 21 participants from 13 member schools. The main objective of the workshop reads, *equipping students for responsible engagement towards persons with disabilities and to recruit the faculty in teaching the subject based on the curriculum proposed by the first workshop*. The workshop process included Bible reflections (devotions), addresses and paper presentations, group discussions, and plenary presentations. All these approaches facilitated a variety of perspectives on the subject: biblical reflections, theological articulations, ethical considerations, ministerial strategies and counselling techniques. The international resource persons, by the names, Bill McAlister (Director of CBM International, Ireland), Ezamo Murry (professor of Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, India, and Wati Longchar, (SCEPTRE,

Serampore) and consultant of the workshop, and local invited resource persons presented very thoughtful papers.

**Impacts from the workshop**

- Strengthened teaching faculty as it was a follow-up program of the first workshop.
- Revisited and updated the curriculum drawn by the first workshop, and changed the title to "*Disability Ministry: Creating Society for All*".

The Third Workshop: It was organized during February 16-18, 2016, which was attended by 17 participants from member institutions. The theme of the workshop was "*Towards an Inclusive Community for All: Disability Perspective*". Samuel Kabue, General Secretary of EDAN based in Nairobi, Kenya and Anjeline Okola, Wati Longchar and local resource persons presented papers, and some participants were invited for personal sharing on the issues related to PwDs.

From the light of three Workshops conducted in Myanmar, three important matters were pointed out, especially by Samuel Kabue.

- Another workshop on PwDs for public awareness is no longer necessary; assuming that churches and theological schools in the country have already known its importance.
- On the one hand, resource materials are badly required for teaching the PwDs in theological schools.
- Encouraged ATEM to provide a series of disability study materials for both faculty and students.

**Teaching in Theological Schools**

At least two theological schools had introduced PwDs course as an integrated subject and included in their syllabus. Tha Uke was invited to teach the subject. For instance, Tedim Christian College began to offer PwDs course in 2008 as a subject in theology, but now moves it to Liberal Arts as a subject in Social Work.[4] More than 40 students have been taught the subject. In the same year, Tha Uke also taught "Disability Studies" course in Myanmar Theological Institute (MIT) for its M. Div. and MACS students as elective course in the Second Semester. Unfortunately, it was discontinued now for the next year.[5]

According to the recent survey conducted by PTCA, the majority of Theological Schools in Myanmar have introduced a course of PwDs as part of Theology or Christian Ministry instead of separate subject. Some few schools do not offer the subject at all. It is found that there are reasonable difficulties to introduce disability discourse in theological schools in Myanmar.[6]

- Lack of awareness on the issue: Awareness on PwDs in Myanmar is still very low and far behind not only in Christian society but also in general public.[7] Instead of caring the disabled, the disabled people are considered as abnormal, subhuman beings or second-class citizen, etc.[8] The buildings including church building are very exclusive for people with disabilities even if it is not with elevator. For instance, along with Wati Longchar, we had visited ten big hotels in Yangon on 27 April 2018, looked for a suitable hotel for the next meeting in November, we came across that no hotel was satisfactorily convenient for people with disabilities, particularly those who use wheelchair.
- PwDs as minor issue: As a result of lack of awareness, issues related to disabled is not considered as a major issue, but just a minor issue. In fact, the issue is a major issue related to human rights and social justice or even political issue. If we don't take the issue seriously, disabled people will continuously remain as excluded, oppressed and will live as a marginalized groups.[9]
- Lack of resource materials: One of the obstacles in teaching PwDs in theological schools is the lack of resource materials, especially in Myanmar/Buddhist context. So far, the above-mentioned book (*Is God Disabled?*) is the only publication by ATEM in relation to this area. Without enough resource materials (literature resources) or proper curriculum it is impossible to teach effectively.
- Qualified personnel or trained lecturer: To this date, theological schools in Myanmar have no qualified personnel or trained lecturer on this particular subject. We have a good number of scholars in various areas of concentration, but no professional trained yet for disability subject. It is not easy to teach in theological school without having at least basic knowledge about this issue.

I sincerely admit that the participation of theological schools in Myanmar in the PwDs program is still weak and dissatisfactory. I assume that theological schools are the most suitable places in introducing the program/awareness. This can be introduced by the public or church members, or equipped faculty. The interested and equipped students would become pastors or any kind of church workers in future. The institutions can seize this opportunity to improve its physical facilities, the curriculum, and faculty to suit the needs of the people with disabilities.

**Endnotes**

1 https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th.../20170309-2L-Khaing-Khaing-Soe.pdf

2 www.edencentre.org

3 Massager message by Dr. Pau Lian Mang, Lecturer in TCC dated 19 June 2018.

4 Tha Uke, "Possibilities and Constrains of Introducing Disability Discourse in Theological Schools in Myanmar: ATEM Perspective" in *Is God Disabled?: Teaching Theology From Disability Perspective* (Yangon: EDAN-ATEM, 2012), 87.

5 PTCA Research Project conducted by Lal Tin Hre in Myanmar.

6 themimu.info/.../Report_First_Myanmar_National_Disability_Survey_GovtofMyanma...

7 It is clear that the Myanmar education system does not adequately provide for children with disabilities.According to the national survey conducted by the government of Myanmar, more than 60 percent of the deaf people never go to school. 50 percent of all people with disabilities, including physical and intellectual disabilities had never attended school, largely because they denied entrance at the government's mainstream public schools. The high school graduation rate for people with disabilities was just 2 percent. See, *https://reliefweb.int/.../myanmar/situation-analysis-children-disabilities-myanmar-2016*.

8 https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/Full_report_in_English.pdf.

# Broken, Shaken and Awakened for a Renewed Life Journey: My Experience of Teaching Course on Disability

James Wesly S

At the outset, I would like to share two Tamil sayings and a story with you before sharing my experience of teaching Disability Course. The two Tamil sayings which if translated into English would roughly are as follows '*whatever you have in the cooking pot or pan is what you will get on the plate*' and '*picture of a bottle guard on paper won't be useful for preparing curry.*" In other words the teacher being the pot or the pan can only offer to students what he or she has within himself/ herself. So the personhood of teacher is very important. Secondly, mere bookish knowledge of the teacher is not sufficient but deeper experience and engagement of teacher with the subject of teaching is very important for effective teaching.

Further in order to explain what I mean by deeper experience and engagement of a teacher I would like share the story of Prince Siddhartha who later on goes on to become Gautama Buddha. Prince Siddhartha as we all might know grew up in the palace with all kinds of luxury and pleasures of life offered by his father who feared that Siddhartha would become an ascetic monk if he is confronted with the sufferings of life as predicted by a sage. The young prince Siddhartha grew up without experiencing any of the pains and sufferings of the world and was married at 16 to princess Yasodhara. But on one of his journeys, probably the first journey outside the palace Prince Siddhartha experienced suffering as he saw people suffering in their life. Prince Siddhartha saw an aged person, sick person and death. This experience really broke his perception about the goodness and

meaningfulness of life. Resulting in his experience of being **Broken** as he witnessed suffering in the world, further Prince Siddhartha was **Shaken** as he saw that some of these sufferings could not alleviated and he also would have to journey the same path of suffering in his life. Later the Prince Siddhartha encountered an ascetic who was living a life of renouncement and solitude in search of Truth who looked more peaceful and serene. These encounters **Awakened** Siddhartha to the truth about life which changed his direction of life. These four sights/ encounters Broke, Shook and Awakened Prince Siddhartha to a renewed life journey.[1] All of us need experiences that will break us, shake us and awaken us towards a renewed path of life. But today even though we live in the midst of profound and unimaginable suffering around us we are conditioned to be insensitive and have developed thick skins and we often "walk by on the other side of their parishioners Jericho Roads"[2] as they lay wounded in their life journey. In other words we have grown insensitive and indifferent to the plight and needs of people around us.

## 1. My Experience of being Broken, Shaken and Awakened as a Teacher

Teaching a 'Disability" Course is quite a unique and different experience comparing to other courses in theology, because what we do are not preoccupied with the metaphysical or the supernatural rather we are confronted with real life stories of suffering and exclusion. For me teaching Disability Course is an encounter, an experience that Broke me, Shook me and Awakened me towards a Renewed Life Journey. I strongly believe which encounters and experiences that can actually break us, shake us and awaken us are essential for transforming our own self.

### 1.1. The Need to be Broken

As a student of counselling I understand the importance of Empathy. Being Empathic or being in the shoes of others and going through the process of understanding their pain and discrimination is an experience that can break us as we confront the problems of other people. What really broke me are the life stories and testimonies of PwD. As I listened to the stories I was confronted with pain and pathos of PwD. Stories of PwD are stories and experiences of shame, social stigma, isolation, discrimination, rejection, poverty, humiliation, feeling of hopelessness and helplessness and sometimes Godlessness (forsaken by God). The depth of the pain and suffering experienced by PwD, if we care to listen

to them wholeheartedly would help us to experience their brokenness. Further the stories of people with disability I have seen in Kolkata is stories of hunger, fear of future, gasps of desperation and tears of loneliness experienced daily hidden from the eyes of the society. I encountered a visually impaired couple at a place called Habra about 49 Kilometers from Kolkata living in a depleted house in extreme poverty. Their personal story is a story of shattered hope like many other visually challenged couples. Their hope of bearing a "healthy Child" was shattered as they discovered that their newly born son too was visually challenged. Many visually impaired couples put their hope in their children expecting them to become a source of strength and help for them. There are very few Churches or Church-based organization that work among PwD. Sometimes to the majority community the persons with disabilities do not exist. Even to them, these people are not to be considered as human beings with equal dignity. For many PwD, life is a long painful journey of the tears, uncertainty and painful struggle for survival.

### 1.2. The need to shake our theological positions

Teaching Disability course shook me because it challenged and changed my theological positions, perspective of God, and understanding of the Image of God. It also helped me to understand how the sacred space and sacred language what we use in Church is exclusive, inaccessible and discriminatory. How the songs and hymns that we sing traditionally might hurt the feelings of PwD. How our liturgical elements and movements are not friendly towards PwD. How we were insensitive towards young parents with children born with disability! Ultimately how our churches are becoming inaccessible and theologies are insensitive and harmful to PwD.

### 1.3. The need to be awakened

It is a life transforming experience, because it had great impact on my life and has changed the way I looked at my life and wanted to live my life. This experience woke me up and reminded me about being sensitive and inclusive in my preaching, teaching, theologizing, worship and the language that I use. It was also an experience that woke me up or awakened me to my own insensitivity towards PwD. How I looked at PwD with pity not as people created in the image of God! I was also awakened to understand my insensitive theological positions and limited understanding of God. I can definitely say that

teaching disability course has had a deeper impact and has significantly changed my life. It definitely woke me up and challenged me to come out of my comfort zone of being an arm chair theologian.

**2. My Teaching Experience with the Students**

The students who have done the course on disability have had diverse responses and reactions to the issues and problems faced by PwD.

Students often start with an attitude that it is not part of churches' ministerial work to engage with PwD. It is the work of Non-Governmental Organizations and social workers. Sometimes the students understand the pain of the PwD but are often satisfied with the charity approach. Some even support the view that it is probably because of their sin that PwD are suffering. Such positions are taken as students are influenced by prosperity Gospel and Prosperity Preachers who equate God's blessing to material abundance, perfect physical health. Some students readily accept and understand the plight of PwD and some even share their own stories of encounters or sharing life with PwD.

**2.1. Teaching Methodology**

**a. To experience Brokenness**

The first step is to facilitate students in their journey of experiencing the brokenness of the PwD by listening to their stories and testimonies. I have personally felt that listening to voices, testimonies and stories of PwD would be a great resource in this endeavor of being broken or experiencing brokenness. It is much more effective than many intellectual arguments or sometimes even Bible Studies. Inviting parents of children with disability and inviting PwD to share their life experiences with the students would be a very effective method. Another way of experiencing brokenness is to read stories and testimonies of PwD together as a class.

**b. To shake narrow/exclusive theological positions**

The next step is to critically engage with the narrow theological and faith positions. I remember my own journey of being shaken as a young undergraduate coming for theological education as my own narrow and exclusive theological position was shaken. This can be done by discussing various theological themes from the perspective of PwD. For example, how to understand God's omnipotence and omnipresence, Image of God, Suffering, Blessing etc., from the perspective of PwD.

Such an experience of shaking us out of our theological comfort zones is needed.

**c. For a renewed life journey**

The ultimate goal is to sow seeds of change in the hearts of the students. That would awaken the student to a renewed and reformed life journey which is more inclusive and understanding towards all the marginalized and ostracized groups including PwD.

**3. Some Challenges on the Present Disability Course**

- The current course on disability is actually not a compulsory in a real sense. There are options to choose course on HIV & AIDS or Children at Risk instead of course on Disability. This issue needs to be rectified and students under the Senate of Serampore College must get the opportunity to understand all the above three important issues that confronts us.
- Study material must be made available to all theological colleges. There is dearth in getting access to the materials which are published within the Asian context.
- The current on Disability course is a 2 Credit Course, no-final exam, College-Examined Paper. Sometimes as a teacher, I have felt that these courses must be made as 4 credit hours so that we can get more class hours to engage with the students. Having no final exam is a good idea as it gives lots of scope to use various teaching- learning methods to engage with the students.
- Finally making 'Testimonial Documentary Videos' and making it available as resource material would be of great help for teachers who handle course on disability.

**Endnotes**

1 https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/bud_lt03.htm (12th June 2018)

2 Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Thiruvalla: SuVartha Bhavan, 1984), 199.

# My Journey as a Theological Teacher with Disability

Jessy George

*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His Service. I Timothy 1:12*

Life is a process which takes courage and calls upon one to receive God's enabling affirmation of oneself and to affirm one's own dignity and value. When one's life is open to God, God does what God can for us, seeks to protect us from destructive forces; lovingly cares for our essential selves and seeks to resource us; as we develop and struggle with life's limits and challenges. As Paul says in Romans 8:28, God works for good together with those who love God.

The gifts of people with disabilities are as varied and peculiarly phenomenal as those of able-bodied people. But the fact of being 'differently-abled', often faces the wrath of under-estimation and dissuasion in the constant and conscious act of the ably-different-bodies. Its extremity is vibrant when it counts the differently-abled as 'nonexistent.' An individual himself or herself is not a disabling condition but has a disabling condition. Every individual, in their own distinction and peculiarities have God-given abilities, gifts and talents that can contribute to the good of the community to which he or she belongs. The Bible makes it clear that the worth of every individual, differently-abled or ably-different, is not determined by their actions but by their having been created in the image of God. I have viewed the disability as a challenge or as an opportunity for personal growth. Even I have seen the disability as a means of experiencing total dependence on God for provision and thus they may be graced in a new way. People

like me with disabilities experience many hardships that others do not experience. As a theological teacher I always experienced theological world as governed by the able-bodied people. The disabled bodied are subjected to the norms and conditions and values which are defined and determined by the able-bodied individuals. Whereas people with disability like me have no say in this. As theological teacher with disability I have experienced discrimination by the different college leaders, for them as a disabled person I cannot do many things by standing like others. Though I was able to do they would look down upon me because I was a disabled person. The arrowed questions that discourage and disappoint me. But by the ever-promising Grace of God, I faced and laughed it away in the assured Word of God, "I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me." Remembering the hallowed memories of past, I had to face two distinct personalities that viewed me differently. One of my beloved professors (apologies, with due respect to his academic excellence and individual credibility, I wish not to divulge his name out) intimidated me to axe my grade for not attending his class conducted on the first floor; this happened despite my plea to have the class in the ground floor considering my difficulty. This incident really broke my heart. I wish he understood me. Contrary the rest, my Thesis guide, despite his busy schedule availed himself to my house to aid me. That was a boon and a moral strength in a time of total distress and disgrace from others. On the completion of my Post Graduation, I have applied to various theological colleges, which plainly and diplomatically said "sorry" to have me in their faculty fraternity. It was so demeaning when the colleges with elevators found it difficult to accommodate me. At times, I felt the legitimacy of emotions with a total rejection when some professors said, "We are sorry, we cannot have you". I was on the cliff of my emotions when others saw me and my disability as a liability.

Being a theological teacher with disability, I always realize that God has not only chosen the physically abled but also differently-abled to serve God's purpose. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he provides an example of recognizing God's grace and provision. Paul was robbed, stoned, beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked and eventually martyred. He also suffered anguish from the bickering and in-fighting of members of churches he had established. Some members even questioned his fitness to be their leader. Yet Paul never gave up hope. Indeed, he counted himself blessed to be persecuted. Paul

recognized the frailty of his own humanity. The unorthodox paradox of Christianity is that the weak are made strong, not by anything they do but by the power of God within them. An individual is made perfect in his/her weakness and that God has chosen the weak of the world to demonstrate God's reign. Indeed, God has chosen the weak over against the strong. I know and am learning that the road ahead is tough to fight and is long enough to tread.

When I was jobless, I requested my friends and former colleagues to help me to get a placement, but they could not because whenever they hinted about my physical status the people in the privilege/power plainly rejected my plea. Do you understand the struggle? All men and women should have the opportunity to enjoy their privileges to serve the Lord because it is God who appoints every individual for God's purpose. At times, ministry of teaching as a differently-abled person is both sweet and a sourexperience. Joni Erickson Tads stated, "Good theology must be accompanied by good sociology." My journey had led me into class room, preparing students to understand the importance of an inclusive society. People want to see differences not disabilities. As disabled I was denied my basic Human Rights in a theological community. I do not find any comfort to serve the Lord within a theological circle. We do not have any suitable class rooms, roads to walk, and library facility to access the books easily. Most of the administrative offices function not in the ground floor. I struggle to climb up the steps. Abled bodies never want to deny their comfort despite knowing the struggle of people like me.

Person with disability needs to be provided with all the necessary facilities to enable them to live a full life as God intended them to. Deliberate efforts should be made to ensure that buildings are disability friendly. God's redemptive plan is for all humanity. It is high time that we see each other from a divine perspective. Each one of God's people has been given a unique gift and each individual requires space to exercise these gifts for the benefit of the God's Kingdom.

No one can understand my inner struggle and pain. I have never found any one, except my family members, with whom I can share. They encouraged and helped me to overcome every hurdle with optimism. Further, to be more specific, only the disabled can understand the pain of a fellow disabled. We must understand that God is Sovereign and responsible for disability. People who happen to be

disabled are so by God's design, not because they are inferior humans. We must understand that God has sovereign plan both in the past and in the future for the disabled. Since the year 1995, in my journey as a teacher with disability, I have always kept Jesus as my Lord and as the center of my life. Claiming all the promises that God has ever made to me as an individual, I know I have a God who will neither leave nor forsake me. I have always kept joyful experiences and I ignored all the negative views which I experienced with the theological community by serving as a theological teacher. Still, yes! I am keeping only the joyful experiences as my treasures.

# My Journey as a Theological Teacher with My Disabled Child

Kilangla Longchar

Let me introduce my beloved daughter Arenkala Imsong, whom we call 'Kathy' in short. She is a 16 year old attending Monfort School of Education, Tura, Meghalaya. She was born on 25th April 2002 at Baptist Hospital, Bangalore. She was a healthy baby weighing 4.2 kg from the time of birth. She is a darling angel to us, fair and beautiful. Well, life is not as easy as we planned and things did not happen like we hoped for. I had to undergo a lot of hardships and difficulties during pregnancy. After she was born, we were informed that due to her high body temperature, she was to be kept in the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit). We were not aware that our daughter would be a special child.

It was one sunny day in the afternoon around 2:30 pm that my brother-in-law went to our bedroom to check on our daughter. He found her awake with a very high fever and by the time I went to check, she was already unconscious. It was something which I had never experienced. I started to panic and felt helpless. My husband too had gone to pick up one of our sick cousin from her field work. My brother-in-law and our neighbor were telling me to calm down and to pray but I could not even concentrate in my prayers. She was taken to the hospital and the doctors suspected her to have Epilepsy. Later on they said that it was due to the high fever that she fainted and then prescribed some medicines. But even after that, she would become unconscious. It was not long before we realised that something was wrong with her health. Finally we consulted a Neurologist and she was diagnosed with a term

known as generalized seizure (fever triggered generalised seizures). Doctor diagnosed her real symptom which was deficiency of valporate content. After medication for 3 years her sickness got healed completely but sadly, her mental growth was greatly affected.

One of the incidents I still recall afresh is the one when we were in United Theological College. I was attending my class when our helper came running breathlessly saying Kathy is dead. I rushed home immediately and found that our neighbour had taken her to hospital. I panicked and thought where to search? Tensed and worried, I finally came to know that she was taken to CSI hospital. At her early age we were compelled to keep our door always closed because she would just go out if she found the door open and we had to search for her in and around our college campus.

There are many challenges I face along with my teaching assignment and other responsibilities. At the age of 16, she still cannot help herself in any way except eating food. She cannot speak except for a few words. To brush her teeth is also one of the struggles I undergo, as she does not know how to spit it out. On the other hand, she also has two dentures which I'm told by the dentist to remove in the evening and put it back in the morning. I always have to attend to her needs every time regardless of what other work I am doing. I have to make sure that the house is properly closed before going to class since there is nobody to take care of her in my absence. Sometimes I get emotionally disturbed, raising many questions in my mind. I feel comforted when I remember the encouraging words from a friend that God will give this kind of special child only to those who will care and look after them.

It is very true that one can never understand or feel things until its impact affects concerns us individually directly. I still remember my childhood friend who had a disabled brother. My other friends and I would not want to go out with her whenever she took him with her. Now I realize how she must have felt to have a special child. Loving her with all we have and more than anyone else. There was a time when our own friends tried to scare their children by saying Kathy will come if you do not listen, which made me so discouraged and upset because I know that my daughter is very much harmless. A special daughter one could never imagine to hurt someone. At one point of time, I felt that sending her to school was also not safe because once there was an incident where she was locked inside the toilet by somebody for about

three hours. As a mother I was furious and was compelled to confront the school authority for not taking care of the special children in the school.

Different kinds of pressure come with multitudes of questions. Why? I would just sit down and weep bitterly alone. It is very difficult to come to terms with the reality of having such a special child who needs help in everything. The challenges become more when I see our elder daughter's willingness to talk and share with her as friend, telling her how she wishes that she could talk. It is very difficult to push away from my mind and self-pity becomes one of the greatest obstacles while dealing with the situation. Sometimes, I get upset and angry when things happen in the busiest of times. There are times I feel that I'm a failure, because I could not do justice as a mother to my daughter who needs my help all the time.

Imagining and thinking about the future life of my daughter makes me worried but in spite of all the struggles, difficulties and challenges, I am very much grateful and thankful to our loving God, because our daughter is improving year by year. She is one of the God's given gifts, a daughter who is always cheerful and happy. I know for sure that our loving God has a plan and purpose for her too. My only prayer to God is that one day she should be able to help herself without depending on others and will be able to talk.

**Some Recommendations for Theological Colleges:**

1. That the infrastructure in theological institutions need PwD accessibility and disabled friendly
2. That the Senate of Serampore College curriculum can include the course on Disability as "compulsory" to create awareness among the students and teachers;
3. That theological colleges can ensure Reservation of Job policy to the PwD in any possible employment opportunity.
4. That theological institution can observe one special day for PwD to disseminate ministerial concerns and share solidarity with the PwD.
5. That Seminars/Symposium/Workshop can be organized in the institution by inviting experts on disability.

**Few points for the churches to ponder upon**

- The ministry of the church is to go beyond visible community and soul winning activity. She needs to understand the crux of the human experiences under which member of the church are undergoing. This shall open-up enormous ministerial opportunity to include marginalized community.
- Church leaders' attitude towards disabled children and parents should be non-judgemental and based on unconditional love of God.
- Church should give proper teaching on Christian Education where even in Sunday School children would be conscious about disability.
- Church should initiate some vocational training for disabled people.
- Church should invite PwD to churches.
- Church must observe "Disability Sunday" every year in her calendar.
- Special budgetary provision for PwD can be created in the church annual budget.
- If possible every church should appoint well-trained ministers who can look after PwD.

**Conclusion**

God created every human being in God's own image and we are expected to care and love one another in all circumstances. I hope and believe that we will continue to love one another without any discrimination, because even disabled people are created by God. Let us continue to struggle together to make this world a friendly place for the differently abled to live in.

# My Journey with the Special Needs Children

Akangnungba

Today the issue and concern corresponding to persons with disabilities still remains unaddressed and rather ignored in many churches. People living with disabilities are considered to be a curse from God and are looked down as sinners. Socially and culturally, PwD are consciously stigmatized and ignored. The undesirable attitude of the Church and society towards the disabilities has generated serious concerns in the ministry of the Church. The glimmering light is, churches in many parts of the world with their mission statement, *A Church of All and for All*, has taken up the issues and concerns of the disabilities as part of their church ministry. However, if we examine the life and witness of the present Churches in Nagaland in particular, one can observe the ignorant nature of the Church towards the issues and concerns of the disabilities. People have totally isolated, rejected, and discriminated, and even mocked them at times in the life and ministry of the Church. Today, the Churches urgently need to develop equal space to all in the life and ministry of the Church. At the same time, Church must work towards organising awareness programme and develop advocacy strategyand policy. The Church must mobilize people in society with an aim to create space for all.

**CURE Foundation Ministry**

With prayer and conscious commitment, CURE Foundation was started on June 28, 2016 in Mokokchung town. At present, Mokokchung district of Nagaland alone has identified more than 300 persons with disabilities. More so, many are still in at homes due to social, cultural and

religious stigma. My main purpose of opening this CURE Foundation was to uplift the persons with disabilities in Nagaland and beyond, who get less or no opportunity in education, job, economics and political life, etc. It is very sad to note that the church which is "For All" often marginalize and isolate and discriminate our own brothers and sisters with disabilities. As a result, they live under abject poverty leading them to psychological trauma. Thus, in order to uplift the disabled persons, I accepted the challenge to set-up this centre empty handed. And it's my prayer and hope that this centre will be a platform for the disabled persons not only in Nagaland alone, but also for the entire nation and the neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Nepal. The result that we have achieved during the last three years has been both challenging and encouraging in spite of several constraints.

**Aims and Objectives of CURE Foundation**

- To formulate polices for disabled people's self-determination and self-respect.
- To promote and protect human rights and dignity of disabled persons.
- To promote and protect social integration of disabled persons.
- To create awareness and promote social acceptance through seminars, campaigns and publication.
- To consciously involve in sensitizing and empathizing activities.
- To work in collaboration with state, national and international agencies in promoting the cause and welfare of disabled persons.
- To mobilize resources for self-sustainable and self-supporting.
- To concentrate on health and social determinants of people with disability.
- To promote access to proper and adequate representation of people with disability on all bodies which make decisions that affect their lives.
- To promote advocacy for people with disability to ensure right and justice.

**Challenges Faced by CURE Foundation**

*Our Experience and Observations*

1. Parents' attitude towards their own disabled child is in most cases very disappointing. Parents always think that their disabled children are incapable and cannot do anything. The do not pay equal attention and care with normal children. For example, the school so far charge Rs. 500 per student as tuition fee per month. Most of the parents, though they spent thousand on their other children at home, are reluctant to pay for the child with disability. More so, unless the school sent transportation to bring them to school and drop them back after school hour, parents are not that ready to send them to school. In most cases, the parents see their child with disability as a burden to the family.
2. With very limited resources, the centre organize parents-teachers meeting once in two months. This is with a concern that caring for differently abled children requires active involvement of both teachers in the schools and parents at home, and for this purpose the centre always brings experts from outside realizing experts hand in dealing both with parents and children. However, only very few parents participate so far in the parents-teachers meetings. They feel that it is a waste of time and resources.
3. At present the school has 14 students, 4 fulltime teachers, and one helper while one teacher has been sent for training. Every Monday to Friday our school runs from 9 am to 12 noon. Each student is charged Rs.500/- as tuition fee per month. Teachers are paid Rs.3000/- per month and Rs.2500/- per month to the helper. Teachers with same qualification like B.A with Montessori trained certificate are earning Rs.35,000 to Rs.40,000 in government schools or approximately Rs.15,000 to Rs.20,000 in private schools. Whereas equally qualified teachers are paid Rs.3000/- in our schools. Having no regular income source, with much difficulty we are paying this little to our teachers. However, it is challenging to see these teachers with this meagre salary teaching with commitment and sincerity.
4. Not to talk about public places like schools and church buildings, shopping complex or hospitals, community halls or children parks, home environment of these children are not disabled friendly. So

far, most of the children with disabilities have encountered Down Syndrome during the last three years, and the effects of this on the children in most cases, causes inability to move around or seat freely. Hence, they need extra care. So, this is one of the most painful scenarios we have experienced and experiencing every day. Lack of these provisions is a major obstacle that could frequently prevent the disabled people from entering or joining community life and space.

5. Another challenge is providing transportation to these children to bring them to school every day. The school covers a distance of approximately 20 to 25 kilometer each day to collect and send back the students home, because students though very few, need transportation and their home is located in the North-East-South-West of Mokokchung town. Moreover, parents with excuse of their busy involvement in other activities are never available to transport their child to school. Unfortunately, there are many parents who display indifferent and bias attitude towards their own children who are disabled. Some parents are not comfortable in accepting disabled child as their family member and they consider it a shame even to expose them as their own children. Unfortunately, due to this unhealthy attitude, many parents ignore the needs of their disabled child and duty as parents to bring their disabled child to school, while they give more importance to abled children in the family.
6. During the last two years our school have visited several churches and participated in the church worship by singing songs and performing other church activities like reading scripture, dancing, short poem recital. Some churches, after witnessing and listening to the importance of this concern came forward and donated money to our school. But most of the churches, though they expressed concern, forget after we leave the church. There is no follow up, unless we move and initiate first. Churches, in our observation, still find it difficult to consider persons with disabilities as minister in the church. Churches in Nagaland need to re-think their present Mission context. Most churches are International Mission minded so they spent crores and lakhs of rupees for International Mission annually. But sadly home mission is ignored and issues and concerns on disability are unaddressed. The mission of the Church

has been a mission directed so far towards the abled-bodies people.

7. In spite of our humble effort in disseminating information through letters and press release in the local newspapers, through church pulpit and public sphere, public/society attitude though positive is not action-oriented. Except in very few schools and churches, so far, disability day on 3rd December is also not observed. We, as a church have failed in our mission to work for the community as a whole. Rather, we have become part of the problem which set the disabled persons aside from church life, and above all, from the community.
8. In most of the Sunday schools, children with disabilities are not welcomed. They are neither recognized nor given space to participate. If they are given space, it is always in a secondary category. We need to change the attitudes of abled people in our society in order to create inclusiveness in our society. We must broaden our minds and look into the needs of the people so that everyone, despite the differences, can come together as a community with dignity.
9. During the last three years, we have experienced and encountered that the abled people are a major obstacle for the growth of PwD. Society looks at them with several reservation like, with pain feeling, with sympathy, feeling misfortune, considering as bad luck, sheer disappointment and so on. On the part of the parents, they consider it as shame and misfortune on the family. If we want to bring changes in our church and society we must first change our mind-set.
10. From our three years' experiences, we can assert that slow yet certain changes and developments are taking place among the children with disability. No doubt, it is very encouraging and promising. We have noticed our students improving in their manner. We have seen positive attitudinal change, emotional maturity, physical health improving, and some of them who never spoke, start speaking though in snail pace degree. In spite of these changes, it is sad to say that there are many parents who neglect in providing proper education to their children with disability. Thus it is high time for the parents that they give equal importance to all their children, whether abled or disabled.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The church which is the Body of Christ is by nature inclusive community. Church ministry cannot be selective. When a section of the people- whether abled or disabled- is neglected and ignored by the church in her ministry and mission, it becomes oppressive to the people who are ignored, excluded and alienated. Therefore, the following recommendations may be made:

(a) Create provision for independent living and vocational training programme

(b) Organize peer counselling

(c) Arrange home visitation for families with children with disabilities

(d) Mobilize programme for sponsorship of mobility Aid

(e) Seek financial assistance from the government

(f) Initiate ministry of advocacy programme

(g) Create regular programme for outing and camping

(h) Motivate and educate pastors and church workers to build disabled friendly and welcoming church

(i) Preach sermons relevant for the families, and persons with disability, and

(k) Observe Disability Sunday in all churches with dignity and grace.

# My Journey with my Disabled Sister

Bendangyapang

My younger sister Imtiyangla is disabled by Post Polio Syndrome. We are a family of six children. My younger sister Imtiyangla was born on 28th October, 1983. A child usually starts walking after the age of 1 (one). But as the years passed by, she could not walk. I could not understand why my sister could not walk like other children. When I saw her struggling to walk without support, my parents were very worried. Many people told that she will be able to walk as she grows older. But she could never walk. Some people even told that it is due to past sin committed by parents and grandparent that my sister could not walk. During the Revival movement in 70s and 80s, lot of miracles happened. Healing was one phenomenon. Many preachers and prayer groups came for prayer. We even took her to Revival Crusade hoping that she would be healed and walked. As a boy, I questioned myself "Why God!". At times I thought that she was going to be a burden for the family.

As a disabled child, my sister seldom received attention in the society. Our church does not have a ramp and we left her alone at home whenever we would go to church, community gathering and festival. However, I noticed that my sister since from her childhood was very unique and special. It was her true courage, determination and perseverance that she did not let her disability restrict her from living a normal life. Her passion to learn and discover new things is worth mentioning here.

My sister loved going to school. But her legs could not support the weight of her body and she could not walk without the help of others.

But this did not stop her from going to school. She was determined to learn and achieve. She went to school everyday holding a stick to support her and placing the other hand on my or other sister's shoulder. We also encouraged her in every possible way and she began to excel in her studies.

She changed her school during her 6th (sixth) standard to Government High school, Alongkima, in Mokokchung District, Nagaland. It is a hilly area and the school was situated 3 kilometers away from our home. My parents did not have a car to drive her to school. But the distance was not an obstacle for her, she took it as an adventure and a challenge to be achieved. It was her dedication and hard work that she used to walk 3 kilometers everyday and go down a slope of 450 steps (four hundred and fifty) and from there, my father, who was the Headmaster in that School, used to carry her in his back till the school. And the same process was followed while returning home as well. I salute my father for the sacrifices he made, the patience he endured and the love he showed in educating his daughter.

My sister completed her 12th standard as a regular student. But as time passed, during her B. A. studies, it was becoming more difficult for her to commute to college every day. The College buildings were also not disabled friendly. This setback did not stop her from giving up. She decided to share her problems with the Head of the Institution. They were kind enough to understand the scenario and leniency was shown, and she was allowed to write exams without regularly attending the classes. She is hard-working, dedicated and determined, and these qualities did not go unnoticed. A reward always follows. She was successful in clearing her B.A degree. I would say, I am very proud of her. She never said, "No, I can't". She truly is an inspiration. She continued and took a Diploma course in Special Trained Education Teacher from Ferrando Speech and Hearing Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya in the year 2016.

Apart from academic excellence, she is also gifted in various skills. God bestowed different gifts to all of us. How do we use those God's given gift? My sister is a self-employed person and financially independent. She earns more than me and also supports family members. Let me highlight in brief some of her income generating skills:

I. **Tailoring:** She started using the hand sewing machine as a hobby. And gradually she mastered it. It was self-taught. And now she stitches her own clothes and for family members. She even receives orders from friends and relatives, which opens a way for her source of income.

II. **Wedding planner:** She has excellent talent in flower making and arrangements. This led her to the field of wedding decorations. She set up her own wedding planning service and with the help of our other siblings all the necessary arrangements are done accordingly. She also regularly supplies "brooch" to a shop in Dimapur. She has been providing this service for the past of 3 (three) years.

III. **Flower nursery:** She believes in the "Dignity of Labour". She proves this to us everyday. With her strength and courage, she has opened a flower nursery in Dimapur. She plants and nurtures flowers and this clearly depicts her caring and nurturing qualities. It has been set up for the past 2 (two) years.

My sister is not dependent on anybody. I think if family, friends, church and community support and give a chance/opportunity to disabled people, they can do amazing things for the society. I feel that society is not doing enough for the disabled people. Everyday is a blessing for me and my family to have a person like my sister 'Imtiyangla' in our family. I believe God has a purpose for everything and we found the purpose through 'her'. We are 'Blessed' because of her. Through her we found a bridge which connects us through 'love', and 'care'. We became fearless and found courage to face obstacles and difficulties in life. It is because of her that I am a "better person". She has given me immense motivation to do better in my life. The family bond grew stronger because of her. I pray for her well-being and believe that she has much more to achieve in life. I believe that if we are willing to show solidarity towards disabled people, they in turn will become blessings to the society.

Some recommendations that the church can do for the people with disability:

1. That the Church organize visitations to the person with disabilities and her families.

2. That the Church stands with the persons with disabilities, voice up to the Government to fight for the rights and the welfare of the persons with disabilities.
3. That the Church employs the persons with disabilities; they could become very faithful servants.
4. That the church should continue to learn and do research from disability perspective such as the theological understanding of Disabled, Sin, Grace, Faith, Suffering, Healing, Wholeness, and Image of God.

The Church continues to be what she was in the beginning. Therefore, the Church understands and accepts persons with disabilities as her sheep and member. Her attitude towards them should be warm, loving and caring. The Church should recognize them and approach them with empathy. The Church should be a body of justice for everyone with no exceptions to the persons with disabilities. The Church is God's body here on earth, and bodies are meant to live and breathe, move and touch.

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