

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Summary

¹The experience of disability is highly individualized, and the Church needs to understand and prepare for appropriate responses to disability. The Bible does not offer a one-size-fits-all approach. However, the Bible teaches that every believer belongs to the same body of Christ. Churches should examine and work toward accessibility within their facilities, worship services, and ministries. While God may heal people of a disability, some persons view their disability as integral to their identity. They connect their disability to their calling and service to God. All churches should prepare to minister to and receive ministry from those with disabilities, physical or intellectual, to include all members of the body of Christ.

Understanding Disability

The Church can play a meaningful role in the lives of people with disabilities. At the same time, people with disabilities can also play a powerful role in the life of the Church. The Church must respond appropriately to biblical teaching and resist the temptation to view persons with disabilities as people waiting only for healing or a hug. Instead, Christians with disabilities have received the same Spirit as every other believer. The Holy Spirit is the one who provides gifts for ministry and sanctifies believers for the same purpose and mission.

Language of Disability

Understanding and communication about disability necessarily includes how people use language describing disability. Person-first language avoids even unintentionally equating a person's whole identity with his or her disability. Using a phrase like "a person with a disability" when necessary acknowledges that disability is part of their experience without implying it is their primary experience or identity. On the other hand, when one uses language like "a disabled person," it identifies the person based on their disability. People with disabilities may choose the words that refer to their experience of disability.

Second, avoid using words or phrases with a history of perpetuating prejudice. For instance, terms such as "retarded" and "cripple" are unacceptable. Historically, some have used similar words in a derogatory way. Eliminate these in the spirit of kindness, gentleness, and love.

Finally, regarding language use, choose words carefully regardless of whether any given word may offend a person with a disability. Sensitivity to words helps prevent reducing any person to his or her disability. Language forms our understanding of the world around us, both intentionally and unintentionally.

¹ This paper is a revision of a now twenty-year-old position paper titled "Ministry to People with Disabilities: A Biblical Perspective" which itself was an abbreviated revision of a position paper entitled "A Biblical Perspective on People with Disabilities and the Great Commission: A Resource for Pastors," drafted by Special Touch Ministry, Inc.

Experiences of Disability

The experience of living with a disability is unique for each person, which makes defining and understanding disability complex. In simple terms, a disability is a physical, intellectual, or developmental impairment that limits one's ability to carry out daily life activities and restricts one's participation in the surrounding community and society. A disability may also be the occasion for new abilities to emerge, such as reading braille, communicating through sign language, using senses to interact with the world in new ways, etc.

Some disabilities are apparent, while others are not. Hidden disabilities could include chronic illness, autism spectrum disorder, dementia, and epilepsy. A disability is not necessarily the same thing as an illness. And while sicknesses can result in disabilities, sickness does not cause all disabilities. A disability may be present at birth, initially displayed in childhood, or acquired through an accident, lack of physical care, an act of violence, as a natural result of aging, etc.

People with a disability are a unique minority group because anyone can become disabled at any time. Therefore, disability concerns everyone because it is possible for anyone to experience disability at some point. The entire Church should fully include those with disabilities since Jesus commanded Christians to love each other as He loved us (John 15:12; 1 John 4:21).

Living with one or more disabilities is a multifaceted experience. It is unique for every person due to the nature and circumstances surrounding the disability or disabilities, the support of their community, and their relationship with God. Disabilities have physical, social, and spiritual dimensions, with each dimension interacting with the others. For someone who experiences the loss of a limb, the impact of that loss on their emotional and spiritual development (including their ability to adapt) may be very different from that of someone born without the same limb. At the same time, how persons with disabilities interpret their experience will profoundly shape their relationship with God and their community.

Disability in the Bible

The Bible offers varied views of disability. Some disabilities are the result of old age (Genesis 27:1; 48:10; 1 Samuel 3:2; Ecclesiastes 12:1–5). Other disabilities resulted from disobedience to God (1 Kings 13:4; Daniel 4:31–34; Acts 13:11). Other disabilities seemed to result neither from old age nor divine justice (Genesis 32:31; John 9:1–6; Acts 3:1–8). Some who lived with a disability were leaders and ministers among the people of God (Exodus 4:10–12; 2 Corinthians 12:8–9). While God provided supernatural healing in some cases, others did not experience healing from their disability in this life (2 Samuel 9:13; Acts 8:39).

Throughout the Scriptures, the people of God have included people with disabilities. The Bible includes stories of the social and spiritual dimensions of disability, and the experiences vary. Biblical characters remain part of God's story regardless of whether

they received healing or not. Their impairment did not prevent them from exercising their God-given roles and may have opened other opportunities for service.

Disability and the Church

Those who belong to Jesus belong to the body of Christ, which “will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).² God has given gifts to every member for serving in and through the body of Christ in harmony (1 Corinthians 12:7–27), supporting every other member in their trials and triumphs. Using the body of Christ as a reference point reveals that the community’s role in the lives of those with disabilities includes both ministry to persons with disabilities and receiving ministry from persons with disabilities.

Ministry to People with Disabilities

The biblical command to “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13) includes all believers. The Church often ministers well to persons with acute illnesses and injuries, where the natural healing process or the miracle of divine healing seems possible or likely. However, in situations where disability is long-term or presumed permanent, the person may experience a challenge in faith. Faith and practice must include a compassionate hand extended and a willingness to walk with those with disabilities, sharing human dignity and the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit.

The challenges to church leadership include (1) affirming and ministering to those with disabilities, (2) ensuring their full integration into church life and activity as equal members in the body of Christ, and (3) remembering their caregivers in church ministry.

The Church must also care for the caregivers. Caregiving can feel like a thankless ministry, especially when those receiving care can’t say thank you. It can be difficult to serve a loved one with a terminal illness or an impairment that requires vigilant attention. At times, it may feel to the caregiver as if their life is not their own. Caregivers can become “weary in doing good” (Galatians 6:9) and may wrestle with their spiritual and mental health.

Ministry to any segment of society has challenges, including ministry to people with disabilities. Volunteers may grow impatient when there are limited positive responses. Ministry may be especially taxing when there is significant cognitive impairment. An inability to relate fully to someone does not indicate their ability to relate to God or participate in the kingdom of God. Where medication, therapy, pain, and slow deterioration persist, so does God’s love for us. His love motivates the Church’s ministry to people with disabilities as ministry to Christ himself (Matthew 25:40).

² Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Given the imperative laid down by Jesus Christ for discipling people of all groups, local churches must commit to making their facilities accessible to all. Statistically, every community will include people with disabilities.³ If churches have no members with disabilities, this may indicate multiple barriers preventing people with disabilities from becoming part of that community.

Financial realities may prohibit many smaller congregations from making immediate accessibility improvements to their facilities. These congregations should do whatever is possible to allow people with disabilities to participate in church life. This is demonstrated in Mark 2:1–12 by the men who carried a man who was paralyzed, opened a hole in the roof of a house where Jesus was preaching, and lowered the man into the house. Think of accommodation as a reaction to barriers found in the way of those with disabilities, while striving toward accessibility means acting proactively on behalf of those with disabilities.

Don't view accommodation as a replacement for accessibility but as the first step toward it. Consequently, every local congregation should review the accessibility of their facilities and make improvements where needed. Our responsibility as representatives of the kingdom of God is to include those with disabilities in church functions and worship. Carefully and creatively considering seating arrangements will say, "Let us worship Christ together." Volunteers demonstrate Christ's priority of inclusion when showing kindness to worshippers with physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities and their caregivers.

The Church's mission to worship God corporately requires the involvement of all believers, including those with disabilities. A performance-driven approach to weekly gatherings where the congregation functions primarily as an audience is unhealthy and should not hinder this mission. The primary requirement for someone to participate should not be a measure of stagecraft. Evaluate success in corporate worship less by the quality of individual performances and more by the fullness of community participation. Some persons with disabilities may participate in ways that make others uncomfortable because of a disability. As long as behavior is not inappropriate, people can be taught to recognize that participation as a form of worship. Learning to receive those whom God has already accepted remains a significant part of Christian discipleship. Weekly church gatherings may become less predictable when all believers, including those with intellectual disabilities, contribute to the gathering, but the worship of God will become richer with everyone's involvement.

Sermons should present God's Word without prejudice toward persons with disabilities. Preachers must discern if biblical texts describe what took place or prescribe what to do today. One such example includes ancient theories for blindness. Many ancient people thought blindness could result from an underlying sin (John 9:2), the result of a "dark eye," that is, an eye that cannot properly emit light or shows a person's ignorance. (Ancient thought assumed that light originated in the eye.)

³ In the United States, persons with disabilities made up 13 percent of the population in 2022 (see The United States Census Bureau report "S1810 Disability Characteristics"). Statistically, communities of eight or more could be expected to include persons with disabilities.

Instead of replicating the views of Ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean cultures, which can denigrate physically blind people in our congregations today, the preacher ought to consider the prescriptive application of such texts. Jesus asserted that the man born blind was not physically disabled *as a result of sin* (John 9:3), despite the opinion of others. Jesus also empowered Bartimaeus to speak over and against a ridiculing crowd by including and healing him (Mark 10:46–52). In this story, Bartimaeus possessed critical information about Jesus (as the Son of David): he was not ignorant as some in the crowd might assume. As Jesus demonstrated here, the preacher ought to consider how to empower persons with disabilities and not feel excluded by the preaching of Scripture.

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

While any disability can have a spiritual impact, this is especially true concerning those with intellectual disabilities. Persons with intellectual disabilities can include persons born with developmental challenges as well as persons who develop challenges, such as dementia, later in life. God can save, heal, and fill with the Holy Spirit those people with intellectual disabilities. They can respond to the conviction and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. A recognizable level of comprehension does not limit the work of the Holy Spirit.

God has entitled every person to a presentation of the gospel at their level of understanding. There are various aspects to consider for gospel presentations; age and cognitive functioning are most relevant here. Churches should offer appropriate Bible studies and worship services for a variety of cognitive levels. Avoid using functional programming simply to segregate some community members from others. This space is not for “putting people away” but for offering appropriate teaching. In all other respects, encourage people with intellectual disabilities to participate in the life of the local church and the body of Christ at large.

Chronological age alone is irrelevant to moral or spiritual accountability if comprehension is absent. Until a person reaches a stage of cognitive development necessary for accountability, or if in the case of intellectual impairment, she or he rests in God’s abundant mercies and grace. Most people with intellectual impairment have a moral compass, understand right from wrong, and can respond when the Holy Spirit woos and convicts them. When people can choose the ordinances of water baptism and Communion, encourage them to do so.

Divine Healing and Persons with Disabilities

Some consider the promise of divine healing as the primary response of the Church to those living with disabilities. Divine healing is included in the Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, and the position paper entitled “Divine Healing” elaborates further on the topic. Healing can occur in many ways (Mark 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:9–10; James 5:14–16) but remains a gift of grace by a sovereign God. God’s will to heal is governed by the fulfillment of His creative purpose. Both the Old and New Testaments show that the timing of divine healing has always been in God’s hands.

Those ministering to people with disabilities during healing ministry need spiritual discernment. The physical eyes cannot be the only way to determine someone's needs. Often, intercessors seeking miracles target people in wheelchairs or with obvious physical needs, whether the person with the disability wants prayer for healing or not. Never assume that the most pressing need is physical healing; instead ask the person (Mark 10:51). Likewise, those who pray should not judge the results of their prayers by what they see. They may not know, without asking, how the Spirit of God has ministered to a person. Like others, people with disabilities have many needs and concerns in life, whether related to their disability or not. They may experience the healing power of God in mighty ways without Him healing their disability.

Some people have embraced a disability as a gift and do not seek healing. For those to whom a presumed disability is more of an identity or opportunity for service, it can be especially offensive to assume that their need is for physical healing. For example, someone with blindness or who is deaf may be comfortable with their ability to navigate the world and may find that their circumstance gives them access to otherwise closed communities and ministries. The social dimension of their disability may be very different from those who cried out to Jesus in the Gospels for healing. To treat a disability as a problem that requires God's healing is to minimize the rich life God has already given them.

People with disabilities who desire healing should not lose faith in the will or power of God to heal. Anyone who has ever received their healing was not healed the day before; healing may still lie in the future. The Church must take care not to assume that divine healing is the only concern of those with disabilities.

Ministry by People with Disabilities

The Great Commission is a call to make disciples of all peoples. Discipling and equipping people with disabilities to use their gifts to build the body of Christ is what the Lord empowers us to do as ministers (Ephesians 4:11–13). As a member of the body of Christ, every believer, regardless of ability, is equipped by the Spirit of God to minister. A church that does not incorporate the Spirit-empowered abilities of those with disabilities is an impoverished church.

The Church must resist the temptation to view persons with disabilities as recipients of ministry only, rather than those who have received the same Spirit who distributes gifts as He will to every believer (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Instead, the Church should submit to one another, including people with disabilities, as equally gifted ministers within the community (Ephesians 5:21).

The ministry of those with disabilities creates opportunities for evangelism that may not exist otherwise. Nonbelievers with disabilities and their families may never feel comfortable in a Christian community without believers who share equally in both

disability and the ministry of the Church. Believers with disabilities can bear a meaningful witness to Christ as those who understand the struggle.

There is a great need for the witness of believers with disabilities. For example, some regard the Deaf community as an unreached people group.⁴ Reasons for this include the lack of interpreters in churches and an assumption that some churches do not care about the Deaf. God can use Deaf believers to reach the Deaf community and beyond. Being Deaf is a calling that provides an opportunity to ministry that other believers may not possess.

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability encompasses a wide range of functioning ability, from severe or profound to partial or complete independence. The Church should remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit regarding the spiritual giftedness of those with an intellectual disability. People with intellectual disabilities can bear witness to the gospel in their own way. The church should not engage in intellectual prejudice concerning God's call (1 Corinthians 1:26). Congregations can receive their gifts with joy and awe at God's creative diversity in life.

Guidelines

All believers in Jesus belong to the body of Christ. Together, God expects us to “grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows, and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15–16). Without appropriate ministry to believers with disabilities, the Church cannot fulfill God's calling to be the community that “grows, and builds itself up in love.” Without ministry by believers with disabilities, the Church cannot be that community where “each part does its work.” God has given persons with disabilities to His Church, and vice versa. May we be the Church that is growing fully into Christ as we:

1. Listen to persons with disabilities. Hear what words and phrases they use (e.g., some prefer “Deaf” and others “person with blindness”). Understand how they perceive and navigate barriers in the life of the Christian community. Allow them to narrate their own experience of disability.
2. Strive to make facilities and worship accessible to fully integrate persons with disabilities into the local church. The goal is not only to welcome people but also to allow for the full participation of every member in corporate worship.
3. Understand that caregivers of persons with disabilities can sometimes feel forgotten. Consider support groups, check-ins, respite care, etc., as ways of supporting caregivers and their families.

⁴ See the assumption from Chad Entinger, “The Deaf: An Unreached People Group Like Any Other,” January 1, 2014, www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-deaf (accessed October 29, 2022). For more exact figures, see joshuaproject.net/people-groups/19007.

4. Proclaim the doctrine of divine healing without fear but understand that persons with disabilities might not see a need for healing of their disability. There are many forms of healing, including physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational. Sometimes, a local church's greatest need for healing is the healing of a community so they can receive persons with disabilities as fellow disciples.
5. Equip persons with disabilities for works of service as the Bible commands. Work to discern their spiritual giftings and provide opportunities for them to exercise those gifts. Share the work of the church's ministry with the body of Christ in your congregation. In this way, we act like a "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Corinthians 13:14).
6. Take advantage of parachurch ministries that aim to help churches include persons with disabilities. Some of these ministries come from the Assemblies of God, while others have worked successfully with Assemblies of God churches.⁵
7. Make every effort to affirm the shared dignity of all believers as full-image bearers of God, including persons with disabilities. To recognize the fullness of the body of Christ as including all those called together in Christ Jesus is to bear witness to God's call in Christ. How the Church comes together is a matter of the gospel.

⁵ See the list of ministries to persons with disabilities under "Intercultural Ministries" at intercultural.ag.org.