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# THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF HUMANITY AND THE PROMOTION OF THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: THE CALL AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

## ABSTRACT

It is estimated that 10 per cent of the world's population, approximately 650 million people live with disability. Eighty per cent of them live in developing countries. The needs and rights of persons with disabilities have been high on the United Nations agenda for at least three decades. This concern of the United Nations raises the question of the missional role of the church in addressing the spiritual, social and emotional needs of people with disabilities. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute" (Prov. 31:8). In this light, the article discusses the missional role of the church in promoting the rights of people with disabilities, by engaging literature on disability, the rights of people with disability, the biblical view of humanity, and the missional agenda of the church from an ecumenical and theological perspective. The article concludes that the church has a missional call to serve as the home and prophetic voice for the marginalised in society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 10 per cent of the world's population, approximately 650 million people, live with disability. Eighty per cent of them live in developing countries. The needs and rights of persons with disabilities have been high

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on the United Nations agenda for at least three decades (United Nations 2015). Most recently, after years of effort, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol was adopted in 2006 and entered into effect on 3 May 2008. It presents a paradigm shift in the field of disability rights and provides a framework for promoting the inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities in their communities (United Nations 2015). With regard to this, it is very important that, as part of the missional call of the church, the church should seriously consider issues related to the rights of people with disability and their inclusion and full participation in the churches.

Even though the Bible does not contain a fully elaborated, codified doctrine of human rights, it does address several issues relating to the rights of people. The idea of human rights is the claim that all people have the same right to be treated as persons, irrespective of their religion, sex, political persuasion or social or economic status. In fact, the basis for human equality is the creation of humankind in the image of God (Vorster 2012:3; Claassens 2011:39; Koopman 2013:6). Furthermore, the sacredness, the equality and the sanctity of life of all human beings, derived from the belief that human beings are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), have a strong implication for human rights (Tutu 2010:1-7; Waldrom 2010:216-220).

Reports regarding persons with disabilities indicate that they are more likely to be victims of violence or rape, and, less likely to obtain police intervention, legal protection or preventive care. Some 30 per cent of street youths have some kind of disability and, in developing countries, 90 per cent of children with disabilities do not attend school (United Nations 2015). In Africa, in particular, people with disabilities have been subjected to prejudices, discrimination and segregation (Hahn 1997:174). According to scripture, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Prov. 31:8). The implication of Proverbs 31:8 is that the church has a missional call to serve as the prophetic voice for the marginalised in society. Persons with disabilities form part of the marginalised in society, and it is, therefore, imperative that their rights be respected, promoted and preserved. This is what the World Council of Churches (2013b:53) calls “Mission from the Margins”.

Although there is a great deal of research on the missiological agenda of the church, there is a paucity of missiological research relating the mission of the church to the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities. This article, therefore, seeks to explore the biblical view of humanity and its implication on the rights of persons with disabilities, by

applying the missiological agenda of the church in scripture, ecumenical and theological discourses on the rights of people with disabilities.

The study employed a multidisciplinary approach to unearth issues on disability, the rights of people with disability, and the mission agenda of the church towards people with disabilities. The purpose of this article is to serve as a platform to help people understand disability from a biblical perspective and to sensitise churches and church leaders on their missional role of advocacy and concern for persons with disabilities.

## 2. DISABILITY DEFINED

The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Procter 1995) defines disability as the state of lacking some physical ability or any restriction resulting from impairment that prevents someone from performing an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. According to the American Disability Act (ADA), individuals with a disability are persons who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; have a record of such impairment, or are regarded as having an impairment. The World Health Organisation (2001:1, 3) posits that disability is the consequence of impairment in functional performance and activity of a person. It is a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Literature study on disability has shown that there are at least four major causes of disability, namely individuals who are born with a limitation or a congenital disability; biological disability; socio-emotional challenges, and individuals who have sustained an injury at work and as a result become disabled and cannot continue with their previous job (Akabas *et al.* 1992:3; Santrock 2009:25). Biological disabilities are the result of changes in the child's body, brain development, height, and weight. Cognitive disabilities involve challenges in one's thinking, intelligence and speech (speaking ability). Socio-emotional disability is a result of changes in one's relationship with other people, changes in emotion and changes in personality (Santrock 2009:25).

Disability studies have also revealed that the most prevalent types of disabilities are those related to visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental handicap, and physical disabilities (Naudé 2002:47; Whitehead 2004:14-16; Mann & Lane 1995:7). In view of the various definitions of disability, one could say that a person with a disability is considered as one who is unable to perform an activity within the range considered normal for others.

## 2.1 Disability in light of international human rights

In 1976, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), with the theme 'full participation and equality'. The objectives included: increasing public awareness; understanding and accepting disabled persons, and encouraging persons with disabilities to form organisations through which they can express their views and promote action to improve their situation. The General Assembly called for a plan of action at the national, regional and international levels, with an emphasis on equalisation of opportunities, rehabilitation, and prevention of disabilities. It advocated and encouraged persons with disabilities to take part fully in the life and development of their societies, enjoy living conditions equal to those of other citizens, and have an equal share in improved conditions resulting from socio-economic development (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2004).

Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) states that people 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 equal basis with others.

Article 16 of the Convention states that parties must protect persons with disabilities from economic, physical and mental mistreatment. If mistreatment occurs, states and people concerned must take all measures to ensure recovery, investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution of mistreatment.

In establishing the obligation to promote positive perceptions and greater social awareness towards persons with disabilities, it challenges customs and behaviour based on stereotypes, prejudices, harmful practices and stigma relating to persons with disabilities (United Nations Human Rights 2014:4).

Viewing disability from a human rights perspective involves an evolution in thinking and acting by states and all sectors of society so that persons with disabilities are no longer considered to be recipients of charity or objects of others' decisions, but holders of rights (United Nations Human Rights 2010:9). It also involves putting in place the policies, laws and programmes that remove barriers and guarantee the exercise of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights by persons with disabilities (United Nations Human Rights 2010:11).

### 3. THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF HUMANITY AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The purpose of this subheading is not to give a detailed account of the issue under discussion, but to bring to light the original status of humankind in the creation story, the biblical view of persons with disabilities, and how people related to them in the Old Testament. Jesus' ministry, as far as persons with disabilities are concerned, as well as other issues will be discussed to help readers appreciate why the church should have a genuine concern for people with disabilities, promote their rights, integrate them into the church, and help them fully contribute and participate in the *missio Dei*.

The creation story in the Bible states that man was created in the image and the likeness of God (*imago Dei*). This implies that humanity was created as perfect beings. However, the issue of disability in the human race results from disobedience to God (Ex. 15:26; Deut. 7:15, 28:28-29). Although there are many medical reasons, factors, or causes for disabilities, the Bible informs us that disability could also be caused by demonic afflictions and accident (1 Sam. 16:14-20; Luke 13:11; Mark 5; 2 Sam. 9). On the other hand, when Moses wanted to explain to God why he was incapable of serving Him, due to some inability in his speech, the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Ex. 4:11). This verse did not only address God's role in disabilities, it also set the stage for His provision, should one become disabled (Seow 1995:21).

In Leviticus 21:16-23, the Lord spoke to Moses:

Speak to Aaron. None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish (*disability*) may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish (*disability*) shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish (*disability*) shall come near to offer the Lord's food offerings; since he has a blemish (*disability*), he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He ... shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish (*disability*), that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord who sanctifies them.

Reading this Scripture, one is tempted to say that God supports discrimination against people with disabilities. In contemporary times, one would say that this scripture is an abuse and disrespectful to the

fundamental rights of persons with disabilities. However, going back to Leviticus 19-20, one is also tempted to ask the following question: Could the God who said,

You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. (Lev. 19:14)

really have meant that disabled people were inferior to others and unworthy to offer worship?

Relating Leviticus 19:14 to Leviticus 21:16-23, suggesting that God's judgement awaits anyone who will mislead a blind person on the road (Deut. 27:18), makes it very difficult to state that persons with a disability were discriminated against by God in Leviticus 21:16-23. Many Old Testament scholars are still reflecting on this. However, in order to do justice to Leviticus 21:16-23, it must be understood within the wider framework of the Holiness Codes.

Holiness, in this instance, is not only a matter of being separated from the nations. It also requires ethical behaviour toward one's fellow human beings (Collins 2004:151). It should also be noted that the proscriptions relate only to the offering of the sacrifices in the Holy Place, not to the eating of the sacrificial meal. Moreover, the blemishes specified in this text are all visually identifiable (Yong 2011:19; Milgrom 2004:175-183).

Although many interpretations of the Old Testament views of disability have led to a discriminatory and exclusive approach when viewing persons with disabilities, it is important to point out that the issue took a different approach in the New Testament. In the New Testament, as well as Jesus' healing ministry, there are examples of disabled people portrayed in a positive way, and of God using disability for good in people's lives (John 9:1-7; Acts 3:1-9). Grant (1997:77) argues that the healing stories of Jesus have served as proof of the moral imperfection of persons with disabilities. By contrast, Jesus Christ provided evidence that it is not always true that disabilities are caused by sin, but for the sake that the glory of God will be manifested (John 9:1-3). The gospels show Jesus Christ as sensitive and caring towards persons with disabilities. They are the main focus of his healing ministry (Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52).

The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) defines the place of persons with disabilities in the life of the Kingdom of God. The parable shows that Jesus Christ, in both word and action, sets persons with a disability within the circle of unity of the Christian church. The Acts of Apostles also gives evidence of how the early church had compassion and concern for persons with disabilities. All this evidence shows that persons with disabilities are

part of the mission agenda of God. Furthermore, countless healing in the Old and New Testaments provides proof of the compassionate nature of God. Despite the fact that not all illnesses, diseases, or disabilities were removed, the kingdom of God is not complete without persons with disabilities (Rayan 1991:29).

#### 4. THE ROLE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The All Africa Conference of Churches (1991) reports that many of their member churches are yet to fully integrate persons with disabilities into their church and community life, the reason being that many African churches have only nascent development projects for persons with disabilities, while others have no such projects. According to the World Council of Churches (2006), persons with disabilities and persons facing racial discrimination raise questions of justice and require advocacy. The World Council of Churches also recognises that these issues have theological dimensions, and must impact on reflection done with Unity, Mission and Spirituality.

Christ does not want His church to be meaningless in society or to be pushed to the periphery ... [but] ... to be right at the centre of things, right where the action is (Hendriks 2010:275; Sarpong 1990:9). The mission of the church is not only to preach the gospel, but also to be concerned for the welfare of the people within and outside the church (Walls & Ross 2008:35, 46-47). The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (2010:13-14) refers to this approach to mission as a godly fulfilment of the church's missional mandate to provide for human welfare. According to Aboagye-Mensah (1993:132), God expects the church to be a community where all ethnic groups and people of diverse backgrounds meet and accept each other with equal dignity. The biblical idea on justice envisions such human relationships to be balanced, reciprocal and of quality (Eurich 2012:51), in order to fulfil the life-giving mission of the Triune God (Keum 2013:4). The ultimate goal of mission is to present "love, equality, diversity, mercy, compassion and justice" (Kirk 1999:28) throughout God's creation. Furthermore, the appropriate response to disability is not medical treatment or rehabilitation, but social change and radical political action for justice, inclusion and full citizenship for people with disabilities (Swinton 2011:279).

Since 1971, the World Council of Churches has considered the mission of the church to persons with disabilities as an important concern. The Faith and Order Commission, meeting that year in Louvain, Belgium,

discussed disability under the theme “The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind”. It recognised that the unity of the church cannot be achieved without the participation of persons with disabilities. The programme on persons with disabilities was discontinued in 1996, due to financial challenges. In their attempt to revive this agenda, the stream coordinator and disabilities task force worked hard to get the participation of persons with disabilities as advisers at the World Council of Churches’ 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Harare, and to establish a network (World Council of Churches).

According to Wilkes (1980:40), persons with disabilities form an integral part of the church and society; they are essential for the wholeness and unity of the church. It is also essential that churches develop an inclusive attitude towards persons with disability and welcome them into Christian fellowship (Otieno 2009:14). Govig (1989:98) submits that the church must recognise the spiritual and material needs of persons with disabilities and their families, and respond in a Christ-like manner.

#### **4.1 Meeting the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities**

The church has a missional call to meet the spiritual needs of people, including persons with disabilities. The issue of meeting the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities challenges the mission of the church, especially in the area of miraculous healing. The New Testament records many miracles and healing wrought by Jesus Christ. Yet Jesus did not remove every disease and infirmity in His immediate proximity. Scripture records that, upon returning to His hometown, “he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith” (Matt. 13:58). In John 5, Jesus Christ healed only one of the many disabled people who had gathered at the pool of Bethesda to seek a supernatural expectation of physical healing. One can learn from this that, if prayer for healing is not immediately answered, it does not change one’s theology to say that God no longer heals. This requires a continuous trust in God in anticipation of the day when the infirmities of earthly existence drop away in the perfect light of His eternal presence (General Council of the Assemblies of God 2000:1).

Mashau and Mangoedi (2015:5) submit that, in reading Acts 3:1-10, it is clear, without a doubt, that worshippers in the temple in Jerusalem were either ignorant or insensitive to the lame man’s spiritual need to belong, to be part of their community and to be able to call the church his home. His longing to belong could only be satisfied when he was healed. Once he was healed, the man entered the temple walking, jumping and worshipping. This demonstrates how important it is to see the spiritual longing of persons with disabilities. The argument, in this instance, is not

only to seek their miraculous healing, but also to see them as part of the community of believers and participate in the *missio Dei* without any sense of discrimination. Furthermore, inclusivity in addressing the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities gives the church the opportunity to share the healing and restorative power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, as Peter did in Acts 3.

Whether the church is involved in the provision of care, rehabilitation, chaplaincy or ministry to, or with disabled people, it must recognise the central assumptions of equality and dignity within the Christian message and promote it on its mission agenda. The church is, by definition, a place and a process of communion, open to and inviting all people without discrimination (World Council of Churches 2003:16).

#### 4.1.1 Discipleship for persons with disabilities

Discipleship is a core competence in the missionary mandate of the church. Bosch (1991:59) refers to mission as the disciple-making assignment of the church. The church is called to disciple people from diverse backgrounds and physical appearance. Evangelising and discipleship of persons with disabilities is not on the agenda of many churches, especially churches in Africa (All African Conference of Churches 1991). This could be as a result of financial constrain or lack of people with the right training to do so. This was confirmed at the World Council of Churches' workshop on disabilities held in Kenya. It was reported that

[t]heological colleges and seminaries in Africa do not seem to be offering any focused programs in disability. For this reason, Church Ministers are ill prepared to deal with disability issues. As a result of this persons with disabilities are increasingly being driven out of the Churches (World Council of Churches 2004).

It should be noted at this point that the church's participation in the *missio Dei* should be holistically inclusive. This implies that there is, therefore, the need for clergies and workers (ministers) who are well formed and prepared to address disability issues. There is also the need to institutionalise disability issues in the seminaries and theological colleges, in order to ensure that the enthusiasm to disciple persons with disabilities does not fade. Furthermore, churches should have a well-defined programme to reach out to persons with disabilities and to engage people trained in sign language, ability to read and teach with Braille. Efforts should be made to provide Braille discipleship materials, bibles, as well as audio-visual and hearing aids for the blind.

As part of the discipleship agenda, persons with disabilities should be encouraged to actively participate in the activities of the church. Their gifts and talents should be accepted and used in the church. According to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005:8), the church must remove physical, emotional and spiritual barriers in order to bring in persons with disabilities and charge them, through discipleship and training, to use their spiritual gifts and God-given talents in building the Body of Christ.

#### 4.1.2 Serving as a prophetic voice

As part of the proclamation (evangelism) mandate of the church, the latter was also assigned a prophetic role of advocacy. The church must continue to echo her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless. The church must denounce and combat all that degrades and destroys people. Churches are, therefore, required to raise awareness throughout society, regarding persons with disabilities, and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities; to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life, and to promote awareness of the capabilities and contribution of persons with disabilities (World Council of Churches 2013a:2-3). The World Council of Churches (2013b:84-88) submits that our faith compels us to seek justice, to witness to the presence of God, and to be part of the lives and struggles of people made weak and vulnerable by society's structures and cultures.

It is extremely essential that the church should incorporate a missional advocacy role in its mission agenda, because justice is an attribute of God. He rules with justice and righteousness (Ps. 96:10-13). He is a lover of justice; has established equity, and executes justice and righteousness (Ps. 99:4). The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed (Ps. 103:6-8).

The church also has the responsibility and the missional call to educate the public and the faith community to love and accept persons with disabilities, as God loves the church. This approach would minimise marginalisation and discrimination against persons with disabilities. The faith community should be informed that the church is the best place for persons with disabilities to experience the sincere love of God and to feel accepted.

Although it is fitting to address the needs of persons with disabilities, it will be a great joy when they can do things for themselves (Jonas 1999:200). In this regard, churches should also make it part of their mission agenda

to empower persons with disabilities by creating opportunities such as vocational education and employment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article made a case for persons with disabilities in light of international human rights, the biblical view of humanity, and the missional role of the church. It argued that, since human beings are made in the image of God, this makes it important that every person be treated equally with respect and dignity. This implies that persons with disabilities are made in the image of God and, therefore, deserve all the rights and freedom enjoyed by persons without disabilities.

Using Proverbs 31:8 as the starting point for the article, it was argued that the church has a missional call to serve as the prophetic voice for the marginalised in society. Due to the fact that persons with disabilities form part of the marginalised in society, it is thus imperative that their rights be respected, promoted and preserved. The World Council of Churches calls this “Mission to the Margins”. The article finally argued that the church also has a missional call to address the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of persons with disabilities.

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**Keywords**

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