

Theology of Disability

A Mission made possible!

Are disabled people represented within the Church? Within the UK 15% of the population have a registered disability of some sort, but disabled people are certainly not 15% of our congregations. Why are we failing so much in this mission?

Firstly, what is meant when I say 'disabled people? It's easy to presume it's just people who use wheelchairs. This is partly due to the influence of TV, and that people in wheelchairs are easily recognised as being disabled. However, disabled people are not just people who use a wheelchair; disabled people are people who are hard of hearing, or totally deaf. Disabled people are also those people who have a visual impairment or are totally blind. Disabled people are also those who have a learning disability. These are the disabilities that many of us can visually recognise, but it also affects those people with such 'hidden' disabilities as epilepsy, arthritis, mental illness, dyslexia or even HIV/Aids. One of the major points about disability is that it is something that affects all people regardless of gender, age, social standing, and race.

If disabled people are not part of the church then why not? Does the Church reach out and minister to disabled people? Disabled people are often seen as people who are recipient of our services or charity. Historically the Church has been instrumental in helping change some of society's responses to disabled people. However, in today's culture, it is the church that is a long way behind society.

We often see disabled people as their medical condition and seek to 'cure' them through prayer or healing services. Or we see them as people who don't have a great deal to offer the body of Christ, maybe we ask them to pray rather than looking for other gifts they may have. There are disabled people who do indeed come to our churches seeking healing, but let us not be presumptuous as to assume what the healing is for, and we must never apportion blame or accuse the person of a lack of faith if an individual is not healed.

As a society we often confine people to their medical condition. We ask what their condition is, when in most cases we don't know anything about it, or have a very limited experience of it. It also tends to label the individual as their condition.

We see this medical condition as the thing that limits them and we can try to 'normalise' them to fit in with the societal image by trying to make them walk, stand, hear, see etc. Disabled people call this the 'medical' model of disability. However, most disabled people see the problem as not being their medical condition, but more to do with the way society responds to their impairment. This would be called the 'social' model of disability. For example I have a physical disability which means I use a wheelchair. The problems I face are not often related to the fact that I have a physical disability but the way society creates an environment that limits my involvement. People who use wheelchairs can not enter buildings with steps. It is not the using of the wheelchair that limits, but the steps of the building.

The biggest problem disabled people face is more about attitudes. Many people may say 'we all have a disability', but most disabled people would respond by asking if you face some form of discrimination because of it. If I say I use a wheelchair, or if I had epilepsy, people may make assumptions of what I can or cannot do and therefore possibly think twice about considering whether to give me an interview let alone a job.

However, as a Christian, I think it is very limiting to say that our problems are all created by society. Disabled people have a role to play in helping change our society, and indeed the church. Within some parts of the Christian disabled community there is another model. It is called the 'relational' model. We are all made to be in relationship with God, and with each other.

The saying 'no person is an island' is so true. We need God, and each other to find our true identity. God created us in perfect relationship with Him, then after the fall he sought to restore that relationship through the person of Jesus Christ. We are therefore created to be in relationship with God. Yet it doesn't end there. We have the gift of communication, and we are in relationship with each other. It is a vertical and a horizontal relationship. The vertical to God, the horizontal to each other.

Disabled people are part of our society and we are created in God's image, with gifts for His church. Disabled people are a part of the body of Christ that the apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 12. Disabled people are not a part of the body we drag along, broken, but contribute to the Body of Christ, bringing the unique gifts that God has given us, as disabled people. The Church is really missing out on

the huge contribution that disabled people can bring to God's Church and His world.

The Church has a mission – a mission to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. But it is failing or dare I say not even considering disabled people. Disabled people need to hear that we are accepted and welcomed by our gracious and glorious God, a God who recognises that we are separated from Him due to our sin, not our disability.

The Mission we have is to open our doors and hearts that welcome disabled people into our churches. Rather than seeing the difficulties of making our churches more accessible, seeing it as our mission to reach those who don't hear the gospel of Christ because of the lack of access, and poor attitudes. We have a mission, a mission made possible because of Jesus Christ's love for each and everyone of us.

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