

TITLE: Enabling the disability community to fully participate in worship in public places

PRIMARY READER: Religious leaders, Marshals/ church ushers, administrators, faith based organizations and congregation

SUMMARY: The right to association and religious participation in Uganda is a human right to everyone, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) inclusive. However the physical environment, inadequate knowledge on disability by religious leaders, communication gap, just to mention but a few has hindered accessibility and hence congregational participation in worshipping by PWDs. There is a need to make places of worship accessible to this category of Citizens as measures to increase more disability community members attending worshipping centers and enjoying the services.

MESSAGE: Advocating for the increased participation of PWDs in religious events

INTRODUCTION:

The constitution of Uganda, 1995 stipulates that every Ugandan, Persons with disabilities inclusive that make up 17% of the total population has a right to worship.

In the late 1980s, it was estimated that 66% of the population was Christian--almost equally divided among Protestants and Roman Catholics. Approximately 15% of Ugandans were Muslims and about 19% of the people professed belief in traditional religions or denied any religious affiliation.

It is believed that religion plays a great role of strengthening the spiritual and physical well beings hence being enjoyed by the followers. Religion has influenced opportunities for education, employment, and social advancement. As a result, the distinction between material and spiritual benefits of religion has not been considered very important, nor have the rewards of religious participation been expected to arrive only in an afterlife.

Since time immemorial, very few members of the disability community have enjoyed worshipping in Uganda although many PWDs are very much willing to participate in it.

The inadequate knowledge on disability and the needs of PWDs by religious leaders hinders leaders and administrators to plan and deliver disability friendly worshipping services. The physical environment like high steps, raised seats, worshipping centres being built in hilly places, prohibits PWDs to access worshipping centres with ease. The communication barrier especially among the Deaf and Deafblind community has left a lot to desire, in all the worshipping centres 99% of what is being delivered, is by verbal communication. The less involvement of PWDs in worshipping activities like ushering, leading seamons, giving testimonies has also made the Disability community think that there are “invisible”. The religious centres don’t have disability mentors whom the disability community look at as there role models.

So with such challenges one may wonder if in Uganda, nothing hasn't been done to encourage PWDs to attend worshipping services! It is true, something so far has been done, here in Masaka, for example because of the CBR approach in Naruzare Parish, Buwunga Sub County and Bukulula Parish under the leadership of Fr. Charles Ssekyewa, the worshipping services have been made inclusive as the deaf fully participate freely in the worshipping services. These parishes provide sign language interpreters, the leaders are also learning sign languages, 2 access routes were constructed to ease wheel chairs to access the church, PWDs are given a chance to read the verses for the sermons. These services have increased on disability awareness among the community members, more PWDs have been identified within the community and the congregation is freely interacting with the PWDs with ease.

As it is the role of religion to be accommodative, the following measures should be set up to ensure that the disability community enjoy worshipping in Uganda. To stop looking at the disability community as "charity" objects that have to be given "material things", forgetting that they too have to be catered for during the planning process. Establish accessible routes to the religious centres for the wheelchairs and clutch users to enter with ease. The need is to provide sign language interpreters during sermons in the religious centres to ease communication especially among the deaf. To plan and budget for sensitization workshops on disability among the religious leaders and administrators, so as to increase on the disability awareness and needs for better delivery of spiritual services.

CONCLUSION:

To ensure that every Ugandan, Persons with disabilities inclusive, participate in religious activities, it is the mandate of religious leaders, marshals/church ushers, administrators, faith based organization and the entire congregation to be disability mindful so that more PWDs meet their spiritual needs in these religious centres.

Complied by;

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