

The inclusion of people with disabilities in the church by Barbara Watt

According to the World Health Organisation there are 650 million people with disabilities in the world. They are the most unreached people from a Christian perspective. For instance, how many people with disabilities have you seen in your church? People with disabilities need God just as much as anyone else. Therefore the church needs to actively reach out to and be inclusive of people with disabilities by being accessible in attitude, buildings and correct Biblical teaching. The Bible has much to say about disability.

There are many misconceptions about disability in the world and in the church. Fear and a lack of understanding cause people with disabilities to be ignored. Also those people with disabilities in the church have endured much wrong teaching regarding faith and healing. Some churches will not allow people with disabilities into the church!

However, paradigms are changing. People with disabilities should not just be viewed as “needy” but as participants in the life of the church for they have much to contribute. They can be a unique witness to the grace and glory of God. They need to be in a “user friendly” atmosphere whereby they can realise their full potential and purpose, which God has for them.

THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CHURCH

According to the World Health Organisation, there are 650 million (11%) people with disabilities (PWD) in the world. This group of people would be the most uneducated, the most unemployed, they would have the most transport, housing and family problems. From a Christian perspective they are the most unreached people in the world. According to this 11%, there would be about 5 million PWDs in South Africa. Unfortunately, due to inaccessible buildings, negative attitudes, ignorance and some incorrect teaching, PWDs are not generally included in the life of the church.

How many PWDs have you seen in your church? To highlight this, I quote from a letter written about a church in the late 90’s in Ladysmith, South Africa. “. . .they were not accepting disabled people in the church because of their belief. If ever a disabled person came he would sit behind the door. His offering was not accepted because it was from the sinner. He was not allowed to church choir nor his child in Sunday School.” Someone from this church wrote, “I remember the first time this lady (she was disabled) came, after she left the grass mat that she was sitting on was burnt. She was not offered to sit on a comfortable chair. She asked for water, the pastor’s wife gave her water with a cat bowl. . . .”

Is this an extreme example? Think about your church. Has there ever been consideration or even discussion on reaching out to PWDs or making provision for them. As a real basic, is there wheelchair access?

The apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 12:22 that “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour.” Note that he says, “seem to be” and “that we think.” We may think people with disabilities are weak and less honourable but Paul says they are indispensable.

Yet in the past there have been many misconceptions about disability. Many people even today, believe disability is caused by sin in the person’s life or in some family member’s life, perhaps in a previous generation. Many believe it is a curse.

When Jesus healed the paralyzed man in Luke 5, he firstly said to the man, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” This was perceived, as the link between sin, disability and healing.

Conversely, Jesus was asked who sinned regarding the man born blind. He quite clearly replied, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” John 9:3.

Sadly, many churches often emphasise physical healing as opposed to spiritual healing. Then when no healing takes place, the person who is disabled is blamed for his/her lack of faith. These actions have caused great difficulty and hurt for many PWDs. Many a time I have gone forward in a church for prayer and it has been immediately presumed that I want prayer for healing to get out of my wheelchair. How much better is it to ask what kind of prayer is needed? As I grew spiritually and emotionally, these kind of hurts did not affect me as much anymore.

The inability of the church to accept the way we are, causes continual condemnation

for PWDs. The Bible gives harsh words for favouritism based on appearance. “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” 1 Sam. 16:7b. “Love your neighbour as yourself . . . but if you show favouritism, you sin. . .” James 2:8,9. We are all created in the image of God, which makes us equal.

Fear and a lack of understanding of how to speak to PWDs causes non-disabled people to generally ignore them. From the onset of disability, PWDs discover they have difficulties with other people’s attitudes, the environment, employment, transport and housing, depending on the severity of the disability. A friend wrote ‘life with a disability in the church is not any better than out there in the world – in fact it’s even worse at times, because as a Christian one thinks of the church as being a place of refuge. . . but they will treat you as if you’re invisible. . . otherwise you are given glares for being in the way. No wonder Mephibosheth, a disabled man in the Bible said he was as good as a ‘dead dog.’”

In 2 Samuel 9 we read the story of David showing kindness to Mephibosheth. He restored possessions to him and invited him to share at his table before he even knew Mephibosheth was disabled, acting out loyalty to his

friend Jonathan, Mephibosheth's father. We too should act out of loyalty to Christ in our motive for reaching out to PWDs. The motive for ministry does not come from our feelings but from commitment to Jesus.

Shifting paradigms are what we are starting to see, as many PWDs are not content with past treatment and attitudes towards them. Those who have been empowered, do not want to be hidden away at home or in institutions. They are realising they have human rights and want to be treated with respect and dignity.

It is also very rewarding to become friends with PWDs. A ministry to People with Disabilities is designed firstly around relationships. Such relationships begin with an awareness of disability and how people are affected by becoming disabled. PWDs need to be participants, and they have much to give. They should not just be viewed as "needy." They can offer a unique witness to the grace and glory of God. Even the most severely disabled person can have a ministry, like the ministry of prayer.

One church's ministry paradigm turned around. To continue the letter from Ladysmith as above, "... the whole church has changed. What we did was not acceptable and wrong but nobody ever challenged the churches until the disabled lady. In our church we have two disabled reverends, disabled children are attending Sunday School, disabled members are all doing church activities. ... there is need for programmes like CBR (Community Based Rehabilitation) because pastors understand nothing about disability."

The deepest need of a person with a disability is the same as anyone else – forgiveness, acceptance and love. Just as much as PWDs need the Lord in their lives, so too, does the church need PWDs. The church is simply not complete without PWDs. Lets provide an atmosphere, whereby they can realise their full potential and the purpose, which God has for their lives.