

## **Integrating People with Disabilities into Church Community Life in South Africa Through a Christocentric Reading and Application of John 5 and 9**

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### **Abstract**

*The subject of disability in the Church in South Africa is a less considered topic. People with disabilities, though welcomed into Church communities, often find that their needs are not fully considered – whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Presuppositions and biases prevail among able-bodied believers that cast a negative light on the Church of Jesus Christ. The co-author of this article is a pastor of a Baptist Church in the Eastern Cape and has been living with a disability. He has demonstrated how, amid current varied attitudes and perceptions toward people with disabilities, he has managed to overcome and live out his calling. This article informs the South African Church on integrating people with disabilities within its community life using a biblical approach that is Christocentric. This will mean that the model of Christ is utilised for Church practices. This article, therefore, suggests through exegetical analyses and theological reflections of John 5 and 9 how negative attitudes and biases need to be overcome so that the Church functions as a place of solace and development for people with disabilities. The article bridges the gap on current attitudes and practices in the Church because of Christ's example. The research question may thus be stated: How can the Church integrate people with disabilities into Church community life in South Africa by utilising a Christocentric approach from John 5 and 9?*

### **1. Introduction**

Lausanne's *Cape Town Commitment* suggests that people with disabilities form one of the largest minority groups in the world, estimated at above 600 million (Cameron 2011:44). This is equivalent to one in seven people globally who live with a disability (Deuel 2021:1). This will mean that in every community, there are people with disabilities. The able-bodied are taught from a young age to be kind and respectful towards people with disabilities. However, the reality is that they are often marginalised, being considered unable to make meaningful contributions to various spiritual and economic endeavours or society in general. They become objects of sympathy which drive many into the shadows, reluctant to mix with people

that society considers “normal”. Their personhood, linked to the image of God in humanity is, thus, devalued (Eurich 2012:53). As a result, people with disabilities are sometimes perceived to be “paying” for past sin/s as demonstrated in the disciples’ question in John 9. Due to this continuing perception, many find no belonging in the Church family, which should be safe growth and comfort havens for them. As a result, their growth is often stunted. These notions need to be remedied through a biblical response.

This article focuses on people with physical disabilities, specifically in relation to the Church. It, first, presents a brief understanding of what disability is. Second, it looks to selected biblical examples in John 9 and 5, respectively, to establish Jesus’ treatment of people with disabilities as a foundation for Church engagements. John 9 will primarily focus on the *origin* of certain disabilities. John 5 will focus on revealing and removing *biases*. Third, this article explores the role of the modern Church in the lives of those that live with disabilities. Finally, it suggests Church strategies for the South African context, to promote stronger engagement with people living with disabilities.

## **2. Understanding Disability**

Terminology is important when discussing people. Different contexts take offence with different words or phrases used in description. Certain terms such as “differently abled” and “special needs” are often rejected by those that live with a disability (Terrell 2012:562). Terrell (2012:562) also sees a difference when discussing “impairment” and “disability.” Terrell (2012:564) shares her borrowed definitions of these concepts:

The World Health Organisation describes disability as a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives. The New Zealand Disability Strategy describes the difference between impairment and disability this way: Individuals do not have *disability*, but rather *impairments*. They may be physical, sensory, neurological, psychological, intellectual, or some other impairment. *Disability* is the process when one group of people designs a world solely for their way of living, taking no account of the impairments of other people, and thus creating barriers for them.

It becomes clear that terminology used may be acceptable to some and unacceptable to others. For the purpose of this article, we will utilise the more common terminology i.e., *people with disabilities*. The word

“people”, first and foremost, acknowledges their humanity as those created in the image of God and are valuable (Gn 1:27) (*cf.* Eurich 2012:52-54). Their *essence* is not dependent on subjective experiences – whether personal or those of others; but rests entirely on the fact that they are created in God’s image. This establishes personhood for all people. Second, the phrase “with disabilities” broadly describes them without certain *functional* abilities that are consistent in able-bodied people. In a basic sense, *disability* is a neutral term, a statement of fact that is neither inherently positive nor negative. Yet for many people, disability has a negative connotation – an affliction that is considered undesirable or unfortunate.

Interestingly, many people with disabilities do not share this view. In fact, it is often the negative judgement directed at the condition that contributes more to a person’s ‘disability’ or sense of inadequacy than their actual impairment. Fritzen & Kabue (2004), both people with disabilities, suggest that because disability is common to human experience, we would be right to consider it simply one of many ways to live, even suggesting that disability can contribute positively to a person’s life.

When people think of disability, most do not focus on the facts; their thinking is driven more by fear or fable. People’s ideas about disability are often based on stereotypes, biased judgment, cultural tradition, and misinformation rather than empirical evidence or practical experience gained through association with people with disabilities. Most are unaware of the many factors that can lead to an impairment-induced disability (such as genetics, illness, accidents, and ageing), which – if better understood – should induce far higher levels of tolerance and acceptance.

The marginalisation of people with disabilities is evident in the language that is often used. Many labels emphasise that people with disabilities are different, as if the disability captures the person’s essence. As the disability is given prominence, the actual person is forced into second place. Even seemingly innocuous medical terms can take on a dark hue. For example, the word ‘disabled’ has a negative connotation when applied to a group, i.e., ‘the disabled’. The implication is that ‘the disabled’ are all alike. They are simply lumped together, as if to know one is to know all. This perversion of language often prevents people from seeing the individual with a disability as someone with multiple other attributes with much to offer society.

When able-bodied people first encounter someone with an obvious disability, their attention is invariably drawn to the differences and assumed limitations, rather than to the similarities, between that individual and themselves. Unfortunately, given the cultural bias in society towards the able-bodied, many people with disabilities become discouraged or depressed, even to the extent of wanting to withdraw and go unnoticed. They may not venture out of their homes because of how they have been treated, and fear being verbally or physically abused or exploited because of their condition. Parents may keep a child who is disabled indoors out of fear that their neighbours will negatively regard the family. Furthermore, because people who call themselves Christians may have a similarly negative mind-set, people with disabilities – and often their immediate family – may be averse to going to Church. Even if a Church ostensibly reaches out to them, an underlying suspicion about the Church's motives may lead them to resist or reject the Church's overtures.

Since the Church belongs to Christ Jesus and people with disabilities make up His Church, how did He respond to these persons?

### **3. Disabilities and Christ's Response**

When someone is observed with a disability, people are often curious about the origin of the disability. They may wonder what the person *did* to become disabled, thereby revealing an attitude of bias. This is a natural question since one of the tenets of the Judeo-Christian worldview is that people are created in God's image (Gen 1:27) and as God does not act randomly, disability was perceived as an aberration and brought on by sin directly or indirectly (Lev 21:17-23). This seems to be a common understanding in Israel during Jesus' time (cf. Jn 9:2). Yet, the origin of disability seems not to be directly dealt with in the Old Testament. Wynn (2007:62) sees the Old Testament's perspective on disability as "a phenomenon of nature, not punishment." He sees Leviticus 21:17-23 as *the* text that most marginalises people with disabilities; but rightly discounts a universal application, for the text exclusively applies to the Levites and offers no answer to the origin for disability (Wynn 2007:62). In fact, Micah 4:6-7 and Jeremiah 31 propose a vision of a utopian reality when people with disabilities will also be part of an ideal Zion. Their inclusion is both instructive and reassuring. Schipper (2015:321) observes that this imagery "does not use healing imagery to represent their ingathering or restoration from exile. The figures with disabilities do not experience any healing or normalisation in this oracle." God accepts them as they are.

The New Testament is more explicit in discussing the origin of disabilities. Two texts, John 9 and John 5 are examined. The former examines how Jesus handled the question of the origin of disability. The latter views His treatment of people with disabilities amid cultural perceptions. Both these passages need to be understood based on the purpose of John's Gospel as stated in 20:31 "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." In other words, John 9 and John 5 point to Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of God. Also, an affirmative response to believing in Jesus will lead to life. The "signs" or "works" that are demonstrated in the Gospel in general, and specifically in these chapters, refer to miracles that "authenticate the person and mission of Jesus and demonstrate the miracle-working presence of God in his words and deeds" (Ladd 1993:309). Other similarities are pointed out by Wynn (2007:63) on these "sabbath healings":

(1) Both accounts are "healing/controversy" in form. (2) Both healings take place in Jerusalem at the time of a feast and (3) both healings take place on the Sabbath. (4) Both men have had their disabilities for a long period of time and (5) both accounts comment on the relationship of sin to their conditions. (6) Both healings take place at pools and (7) both require obedience to a command. (8) Both of the healed men are brought before a "court of inquiry" at which time the charge of Sabbath violation is made and a defense is required. (9) Each man is confronted with typical Johannine questions and must make faith statements that go beyond the surface of the question. Following their day in court (10) both men are met by Jesus a second time. Finally, (11) those who would judge Jesus are judged by him.

Hence, these accounts are important in their portrayal of Jesus as Messiah and the response of the religious establishment to Him. The mentioned disabilities form the plot around which these revelations are designed. Jesus could have used other means to bring out these revelations. However, He chose to do this in His engagements with two men with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to examine these texts for a Christocentric reading and application to people with disabilities.

### ***John 9: The Origin of Disabilities***

Wynn (2007:61) sees John 9 as one of the most cited passages for those journeying with people with disabilities. Hence, it is fitting to consider its teachings.

The Gospel of John records in 9:1-2 (NIV): ‘Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be blind?”’ The disciples directly connected disability and sin (i.e., either the blind man’s sin or his parents’ sin caused his disability). Bruce (1983:208) notes, “In their thinking about divine retribution they had not advanced far beyond the position of Job’s friends.” The focus on the disciples’ question and bias is glaring. Yong (2011:78) argues that Jesus’ disciples displayed what today is referred to as ‘normate bias’ - i.e., an unwavering worldview that sees able-bodied people as the norm against which others should be judged. This view devalues people who have disabilities, while at the same time allowing able-bodied people to hide or deny their own limitations and vulnerabilities. Whilst this could have been the disciples’ attitude behind the question, the focus of the text moves the disciples from whatever biases they may have held to Jesus’ gracious response to this man which must be observed and understood theologically.

Theologically, sin comes upon humanity in three ways (Keathley III 1997:8-9): first, it is *imputed* from Adam. Because Adam sinned, all sin (Rm 5:12). Adam is the representative head of humanity. Second, it is *inherited* from parents. The sinful nature is passed on from parents to their children at conception (Psa 51:5; 58:3). Third, it is *individual*. We are all guilty of sin (Rom 3:18, 23). The disciples’ question was directed at *inherited* and *individual* sin as possibilities of the blind man’s condition. Jesus’ response is: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned...” (Jn 9:3). In what follows in Jesus’ response, the stigma of what could be perceived as religious bias is dismantled. Jesus continues: “... but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (Jn 9:3). The fact that Jesus was implicitly pointing to *imputed sin* is evidenced in His response that follows in words and actions. For some disabilities (and suffering) in the world – we cannot attach immediate causes. As in the blind man’s disability, it may be because we live in a fallen world (see Chappel 2001:539). This result of disability through imputed sin and its subsequent healing finds significance in the phrase: “so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Jn 9:3).

In the fact of imputed sin, Jesus was pointing to Himself as the *One* who can remove sin and all its consequences (including disabilities) when He healed the blind man who was in darkness for his whole life. Jesus speaks of night and day – thereby highlighting the man’s inability to work (beggar) – because of his perpetual darkness. However, Jesus is the one who is

the light of the world. His “work” in opening blind eyes demonstrates His ability to bring the light of the Gospel into lives so that they may be transformed according to Christ’s image (*cf.* Gn 1:27; Col 1:15; 2 Cor 3:18). Jesus is making known to the observers that He is the Messiah who restores the image of God back into sinful humanity – which is a distorted image of God due to Adam’s fall. Our personhood is embedded in the fact of God’s image in us – whether we are able-bodied or people living with disabilities – even in a fallen state (Eurich 2012:53).

Jesus as Messiah is confirmed through His action of spitting on the ground, making mud, applying it on the blind eyes and commanding to wash. This may seem bizarre at first; however, a theological lesson also emerges here that directs the disciples, the blind man, and all who will subsequently be drawn into this miracle to consider who Jesus is. The act of Jesus going down to the dust and making mud seems to direct the observers to the creation account in Genesis 2:7 “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground....” Jesus was pointing to the fact that He is YHWH, the Creator of the Old Testament. Earlier in John 8:58, He said, “Before Abraham was; I AM.” The theological message from Jesus in John 9 may be paraphrased: ‘Only I am able to remove original sin or imputed sin – and its consequences and restore humanity to its intended purpose.’ Those whose spiritual eyes have been opened to this fact will receive Jesus as God’s salvation and find their new humanity “in Christ” (*cf.* 2 Cor 5:17). The fact that the man went home seeing confirms not only what Jesus can do, but His identity as God (*cf.* Jn 1:1, 14). Jesus is the only one who can bring light into lives that have been darkened by sin and its consequences. He is the only one who can save humanity from our sin. Through Jesus, the “works of God might be displayed” in all that are in darkness (Jn 9:3). Salvation is an act of GOD. The cure for sin and all consequential disabilities is Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Jesus ends up using the disability of physical blindness to demonstrate a greater lesson of spiritual blindness of the Pharisees who claimed to see (Jn 9:39-41). Their spiritual blindness was the bigger issue. Jesus opened the blind beggar’s physical and spiritual eyes, and he responded with, “‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshipped Him” (Jn 9:38).

From the text, we can deduce certain truths to develop a Christo-centric approach for Church application. First, by inference from the text, not all disabilities will be healed; only those that function theologically to confirm who Jesus is through the miraculous. Many have sought healing and have not received it – yet even their stories have brought hope to many who

need the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Joni Eareckson Tada is an example of one whose diving accident left her a quadriplegic. Yet, God has used her through her disability as senior disability representative with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation (Piper & Taylor 2006:191-204). She points people to Jesus through her journey as a person living with a disability. Second, not all disabilities are attributed to the fault of *inherited* or *individual* sins. For some, the fact that we are born into a fallen world explains certain disabilities. Yet, our humanity and personhood are not completely distorted by The Fall - i.e., both able-bodied and people living with disabilities. Jesus is the only hope for this fallen world. He brings redemption and restoration into a new humanity for this life and the life hereafter that resembles Him. Third, Jesus lovingly defines people, not by their physical disabilities, but according to their spiritual disabilities. He reached out to all in our physical and spiritual states to restore us to God.

### ***John 5: Overcoming Biases***

A similar display of bias against persons with a disability is evidenced in John 5. Jesus encountered a man who had been physically disabled for 38 years. In contrast to the man in John 9, it seems that this man's disability is related to his sinful ways, following Jesus' words "See, you are well again. Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you" (Jn 5:14) (Beasley-Murray 1987:74). The man was lying by the Pool of Bethesda, along with many others who had some or other afflictions. According to popular belief, the first person into the pool when an angel stirred the water would be cured. Bruce (2005:42) points out that although the people with disabilities were Jews, they were excluded from the feast by reason of their physical condition. Bruce (2005:42) explains, "Their passivity is emphasised by the fact that they are lying down" (see Jn 5:3, 6). Bruce (2005:42) also sees them as poor and beggars. Begging in Jerusalem was concentrated around the Temple – but not active in Israel's worship, thereby suggesting their marginalisation. This is a first pointer to the bias evidenced within the religious context.

When Jesus asked the man if he would like to be cured, he replied that he had no one to help him into the pool. The man's reply to Jesus indicated a lack of opportunity, not the lack of will that kept him from being healed (Bruce 1983:124). Jesus healed the man demonstrating His life-giving power (Beasley-Murray 1987:73). Because it was the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders had an issue with this healed man carrying his mat instead of focussing on his healing and the mercy and grace he had received from Jesus. In other words, it could be inferred that the Jewish leaders would

have preferred that he remained an invalid than break a man-imposed religious rule. Jesus reminds the religious leaders that the Father works – even on the Sabbath. As the Son, Jesus works with the Father (Jn 5:17). Beasley-Murray (1987:74) comments on Jesus' response to the Jewish leaders in verses 19-30:

The signs just narrated indicate that he brings to men no mere anticipation of the saving sovereignty of God but its reality – life from the dead; and he declares judgment on rejectors of the word of God which the Last Judgment will confirm.

Jesus is not concerned with dead religiosity as portrayed by the religious leaders. They had no concern for the healed man, but instead focussed on what they perceived to be God's concern. Jesus broke that mould by offering a quality of life to the man, thereby solidifying the fact of who He is and the need for humanity to trust Him for eternal life.

As observed by the preceding two examples (John 9 and 5), the Bible acknowledges people with disabilities who were victims of others' biases. Distancing oneself from the reality of disability – which was seen to have an undeniable link to imputed sin (from Adam), inherited sin (from parents) or individual sin (personal choices) – made able-bodied people feel 'whole' in a spiritual sense. Treating people with disabilities as invisible made able-bodied people feel that they did not become tainted by people with disabilities' sinful nature. So, amidst these perceptions, it is impossible to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry without recognising his unshakeable commitment to the vulnerable in society. Bruce (1983:208) comments on the presentation of Jesus by the Gospel writer;

As the healing of the cripple at the pool of Bethesda in chapter 5 introduces the presentation of Jesus as the one who executes judgement and imparts life, so the healing of the blind man at the pool of Siloam illustrates Jesus' claim ... to be the light of the world.

Jesus levels the playing field. In both cases, the religious leaders are the ones who suffer disability – spiritual disability.

The scope of Jesus' ministry crossed barriers of spirituality, gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, and physical condition. It might have invited criticism from the Jewish elite but was a welcome relief to many others, particularly

those living with disabilities. Jesus' acts of kindness and healing towards people with disabilities sent a powerful message to the world – that everyone is a child of God and deserving of His mercy. It is a message that is just as relevant today as it was in Jesus' time and just as important to convey and act upon – considering the deep bias in societies across the world against those who are 'different'.

### ***General Biblical Observations***

The Bible teaches that God is love (1 Jn 4:8) and demonstrates His love in Christ Jesus (Rm 5:8). It is out of that love that His justice flows. God's attributes of love and justice are not contradictory. For God, "... justice is loving justice, and love is love that is just" (Erickson 2013:267). God's love and justice demand that those who are neglected or oppressed – widows, orphans, impoverished people, strangers, and individuals and families affected by a disability – be respected, cared for and shown hospitality, mirroring God's hospitality in welcoming all into His family. In a biblical context, justice is not a 'thing' that one experiences; it is an activity in which one lovingly engages. Christians should display a lifestyle characterised by justice and mercy toward others and humility before God, which includes not thinking of others as having less importance or value than themselves since every human being bears the image of God – even in a fallen state (Gn 1:26-27).

In Phlp 2:3–4, Paul set the standard modelled by Christ for true humility when he said: 'Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.' Thereafter, he demonstrates how Christ becomes the reference point for this type of attitude (Phlp 2:5-11). Christ shows that true exaltation happens when one is prepared to serve others by not counting the cost. Christ's humility and subsequent exaltation are also evidenced in Isaiah's prophetic picture of the suffering servant in chapters 52 and 53 portrays the Christ in His sufferings as "disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness", "stricken", "smitten", "afflicted", "pierced", "crushed", etc. (Is 52:14-53:5). In His atoning sacrifice as the Lamb of God, Christ was able to identify with those whom the Jewish priestly office would have considered blemished (see Lv 21:16-23 for prohibitions for those with disabilities into the priestly office), and modern society would consider 'abnormal' (modern society's advertising is directed at our obsession with looks and what may be propagated as the perfect body). Through His sacrificial and atoning death and glorious resurrection, Christ

invites all believers into the priesthood to serve the Father (*cf.* Rv 1:5-6). Christ's attitude and actions are to be emulated by His Body – the Church.

In Phlp 3, Paul shows how he emulates Christ's humility by treating as rubbish all that he previously lay claim to for his personal exaltation. This can only come about through the strength emanating from Christ's resurrection to face the personal cross of dying to self and pride to bring us to service (Phlp 3:10). A fellowship in the cross of Christ awakens Paul to identify himself with that death and to conform his life to the implications of that death now in the present (Hawthorne 1983:145). Similarly, modern Christians will do well to emulate Paul's commitment to a Christ-centred life and thus to get rid of personal pride and biases – even those directed against brothers and sisters with disabilities.

Both the Old and New Testaments highlight how God uses weak or flawed people to carry out His work. In 1 Cor 1:27–29, Paul explains:

God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

In response to the disciples' search for a reason why the man was born blind, Jesus said his blindness was not a result of his or his parents' sin. Rather, the man's blindness was so that the power (and work) of God could be seen in him. Instead of focussing on a primary cause, Jesus told them to focus on purpose. Jesus did cure the man of his blindness, but what was of greater significance was that he brought the man to faith, curing his spiritual blindness as well (Jn 9:37-38). The miracle was a confirmation that Jesus was who he claimed to be – the promised Messiah (Is 61:1–2). John 9 details the progression in the man's understanding of who Jesus was: he first saw Jesus as 'the man,' then as 'a prophet,' then as 'a man from God,' and finally as 'Master' (Lord). The man became a living testimony to Jesus' power to forge reconciliation and spiritual healing with God.

These and other stories in the Bible demonstrate how Jesus, through his interactions with people from all walks of life, was able to restore dignity on the marginalised within broken societies and open the Kingdom of

Heaven to all. A clear message that is to be applied is that if we choose to ignore or push aside people with disabilities, we may create limitations around ministry in experiencing God in action. Our Ecclesiological approach must include a Christo-centric attitude in integrating all believers within the Church.

#### **4. Disability and the Role of the Church in Society**

Jesus left a strong and lingering legacy for Christians who are to display the same godly love and compassion that Jesus displayed, particularly towards those weighed down by neglect, isolation, or oppression. Thus, being a Christian does not stop with having a close, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Instead, our relationship with God (vertically) should serve as a springboard to demonstrate compassion and caring for other individuals (horizontally). The Church is mandated to lead the way in this regard (Is 61; *cf.* Lk 4:14-21; Mt 28:16-20; 2 Cor 5:17-6:2) without neglecting marginalised communities. The personhood of all people is to be highly valued. In this respect, Eurich rightly argues;

The Christian argument for human dignity rests on an attribution made by God and includes everybody: 'The dignity of the image of God, which is given to all human beings in the same way, means at the same time, that every single human being deserves protection even in his imperfection and deficiency.' From a Christian perspective, the mere life of a human being given by God demands unconditional respect. It signifies that the necessary preconditions of being a person are met.

The Church is a representative of God in society, a channel for the Word of God and a constant reminder to its members and communities that Jesus made no distinction between the people with disabilities and able-bodied people when inviting them to experience God's grace and goodness. Jesus bridged this gap when He went to people that were sick or disabled and touched and restored them. People with disabilities have a hunger for worship, growth, and support as able-bodied people do and the same desire for relationships, community, and belonging (Carter 2007). Yet, the special gifts and talents of people with disabilities are often underestimated or overlooked, lost in the cloud of pity that they attract or drape themselves in. However, people should be reminded that disability is a dramatic reminder that God's ways are not our ways - for God does not surrender to our expectations, as is evidenced in the example of Jesus (Block 2002:91).

Sieck and Hartvigsen (2001:n.p.) argue, “Ministry is spirit to spirit. It does not depend on the state of a person’s eyesight, hearing, and ability to walk, talk, or sit still. Nor does it depend on one’s intellect. It depends on one’s heart.” Thus, the Church in society has to embody an attitude that helps others see people with disabilities through the heart’s eyes. According to Palmer (1993:n.p), What is needed is *whole sight*, which allows one to see beyond assumed facts and theories about disabilities and recognise the beauty and worth of an individual. Through whole sight, it is possible to accept that people with disabilities may have a spiritual advantage in that they more readily sense their dependence on God and interdependence with others. Thus, they become teachers and help others focus on practically applying relationships and furthering community life.

The following short case histories will help to illustrate the assertion above. Cope (2011:29) writes of how his daughter, Megan, a cognitively impaired and physically fragile child who lived only to the age of 10, altered his view of what was important in life. Despite, or perhaps, because of her incapacity, Megan taught him that “what really matters has to do with the heart: keeping promises, seeking justice in a brutal world, learning to see those in greatest need, and living with courage, joy, and unconditional love” (Cope 2011:29).

Colson (2010:190) also writes of his grandson, Max, who was moderately autistic. Max brought joy and love to others, even in his fascination with commonplace items like vacuum cleaners. Though at times disruptive, Max showed complete openness and honesty. Colson (2010:190) explains, “Max truly sees the world more as God intended – he’s not judgmental or impressed by looks, status, or finances.” Max was able to show how the simple things in life, which often do not get a passing thought, should be cherished and marvelled as part of God’s creation.

Bonker and Breen (2011:206) describe how Breen’s daughter, Elizabeth, who also fell on the autism spectrum, changed typical views about life, faith, and relationships. Though unable to speak, Elizabeth wrote poetry that revealed her deep spiritual insights and connection to God. In her poetry, she expressed a desire to help people improve their lives and be happy and healthy. Through her daughter, Breen explains how she has come to appreciate the beauty of nature and the human spirit and that autism “makes a mind that is different but not less” (*ibid.*).

The Church must recognise the spiritual and material needs of people with disabilities and their families and respond in a Christ-like way

(Govig 1989:98). Despite the Church's clear mandate, many people with disabilities do not feel welcomed at Church services or find it difficult to participate in Church activities because their physical limitations are not properly catered for. For a Church to be inclusive, it needs to be accessible to people with disabilities – both physically and emotionally and spiritually. If they cannot come to us, like Jesus we are to go to them and embrace them as fellow citizens of our heavenly Kingdom. We need to clear the way for them to be brought into fellowship with the rest of the Body of Christ.

Accessibility should not be taken lightly. It should be the result of careful consideration given to the challenges that people with disabilities face when attending Church. In terms of physical access, a Church might need a ramp for wheelchairs, braille hymn books for visually impaired people, and interpreters for people with hearing impediments. In terms of emotional and spiritual access, a Church might need to provide special counselling and training for people with disabilities who are dejected and isolated from their communities, those angry with God, and those who lack the kind of life skills that many able-bodied people take for granted.

Family members should be part of the equation as they are the ones who experience first-hand the difficulties that people with disabilities encounter daily when trying to function in a largely able-bodied society. Understanding and supporting their families is a vital ingredient in people with disabilities' quest for a fuller and richer communion with the Church. Although 'the Church' suggests decision-makers or those in a management position, it also refers to the broader Church community, i.e., members of the congregation, who strongly influence (through their actions or inaction) the environment in which people with disabilities find themselves.

As is evidenced, the role of the Church is crucial in the healing and integrating of its members with disabilities to achieve an every-member body involvement for Christ's glory. One of the ways to begin this process is by listening to the voices of people with disabilities.

### **5. Church Application: Strategies to Promote Stronger Engagement with People with Disabilities in South Africa**

Literature is somewhat divided on the issue of how to forge greater inclusiveness in the Church. Some authors recommend a structured, multi-step approach that is clearly measurable. Others suggest a more *laissez-*

*faire* approach – but no less important – which puts engagement with the disabled community at the core of the process.

The implementation of one or another approach would depend on the specific circumstances. People with disabilities play key roles in overhauling wrong attitudes about disability and ensuring that their needs are clearly expressed and understood. To this end, Churches should have at least one leader responsible for all matters relating to people with disabilities as this would encourage a better understanding of typical needs and challenges in the South African context.

Educating others to adopt more enlightened attitudes should be an overarching goal. Education (including disability awareness training) should start in seminaries and theological colleges to ensure that new clergy are prepared for the challenges associated with accommodating people with disabilities in their congregations. In addition, Churches should add an advocacy role to their mission agendas which would see them educating the faith community and members of the public about the importance of accepting people with disabilities and stamping out discriminatory practices in South Africa.

To facilitate relationships between people with disabilities and able-bodied members of the congregation, Churches could introduce a ‘buddy system’ whereby volunteers ‘buddy up’ with individuals with special physical needs, such as sit with them during Church services and generally help them with difficult tasks inconspicuously and sensitively. The holding of special events (fun days or training sessions) aimed at people with disabilities and their families are other ways of forging greater inclusiveness in a Church community, provided that such events are positive and uplifting experiences and not patronising. Within Lausanne’s site “Disability Concerns”, the sub-title is a quote from quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada, which reads: “Disability ministry is not disability ministry unless the disabled are ministering.”<sup>ii</sup> Tada advocates for people with disabilities. Her quote is a sobering reminder to the Church that the voice of the disabled must be heard, and their ministry within the Church is needed. This will mean that the Church’s mindset in South Africa moves beyond charity to championing justice to bridge the gap (Deuel 2021:5-6).

South Africa’s legislation is well advanced when it comes to outlawing discrimination against people with disabilities. In fact, it prioritises people with disabilities in terms of employment creation. However, in

a Church setting, this needs to be more vigorously promoted, which, in turn, will depend on how effectively traditional stereotypes and fears can be eliminated. While one cannot legislate Churches into wholesale acceptance of people with disabilities, the legal framework that exists in South Africa nevertheless provides a useful foundation for advocacy, awareness and skills development programmes and helps in the pursuit of funding for such initiatives.

The Church's responsibilities towards people with disabilities need to be researched much more thoroughly, with this paper illustrating how even a small study can be very illuminating and an important building block in an envisaged long-term process. South Africa is an extremely divided nation – particularly in an economic sense – hampering its development. By putting energy and creativity into integrating people with disabilities into their community life, Churches will be setting an important example for others in their quest to forge a more inclusive, harmonious, and productive society.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the South African Church has much work to do, especially regarding perceived attitudes and actions around people with disabilities within the Body of Christ. We have witnessed from the Christocentric reading and application of John 5 and 9 how Jesus set aside cultural norms and religious attitudes to lovingly reach out to people with disabilities – thus affirming their humanity and personhood. Armed with the attitude of Christ (*cf.* Phlp 2:5-11), local Churches are to welcome and treat them as fellow image-bearers of God who are valuable parts of the Body of Christ. If disability leads to suffering, the Church must learn to suffer alongside that part of the Body. It will mean that the Church walks a journey with people with disabilities to meet their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs so that every member finds love, belonging, and purpose in the Body of Christ. In this way, we begin integrating able-bodied individuals and people with disabilities so that one united Body “in Christ” is demonstrated to a divided and hurting South Africa.

## **7. Notes**

i. The preceding commentary was sourced from an online sermon preached at the Grace Community Church – Fourways by Dr Terrel Manikam, entitled, *The Works of God Displayed from John 9* on 5 July 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XG9eF9n7Zo>

ii. <https://www.lausanne.org/networks/issues/disability-concerns>. Accessed 03/03/2021.

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### **Authors' Declaration**

The authors declare that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced them in the writing of this article.

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