

## **REPORT: THEOLOGIES OF DISABILITIES**

**Origin: Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee**

### **Introduction: Why Theologies of Disabilities?**

*Many times I have wondered: “Why would God let this happen? Where is God today?”*

*I have been bemused, saddened, and perplexed by the way our church has treated those like me, and has largely refused to hear that there is even a problem.*

The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee was asked by the Executive of General Council in November 2013 to develop a theology of disability,<sup>1</sup> which could include concepts such as healing, cure, sin, and normalcy. From the beginning, we wrestled with the notion of developing a theology of disability because the category “disability” is not neatly defined or clear. With this principle in mind, we invited people living with disabilities, and allies, to tell their own stories. The *italicized* sections of this report represent a small selection of the 35 submissions received in writing, video performance, and artistic work which we received in answer to our invitation to tell the church a story over a cup of coffee about living with a disability, or being an ally with a person with a disability. We have been honoured to be entrusted with these stories, some painful and some joyful, that have enriched the development of this report.

As affirmed by the United Church in 2012 in the report “Open and Accessible: Ministries with Persons with Disabilities,”<sup>2</sup> people with disabilities may have physical, mental, or emotional conditions that affect movements, senses, or activities. A disability may be visible, or invisible; it may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental, or a combination of these. Disability is complex. A person with a disability is not reduced to their disability alone; rather, ability is just one identity among many—such as gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and age—that make up who a person is. In addition, understandings of disability change over time. Conditions such as Crohn’s disease or chronic fatigue syndrome, for example, were not considered disabilities several years ago. Disability can also be dynamic. It is an elastic category—an open minority—that anyone can join at any time, with the likelihood of joining increasing with age.

As we reflected on the complexity of disabilities, and the diversities of theologies related to this identity, we moved towards developing “theologies of disabilities,” as there is not only one disability and not only one theology related to this. We also want to present theologies that resist categorizing people solely as either normal or disabled. This type of categorization in the medical model is Western society’s prevailing way of understanding disability. It defines disability in terms of what people with disabilities cannot do or what body parts or mental

---

1. The United Church of Canada, Executive of General Council, November 2013. “Gathering Together: Toward a Culture of Mutuality and Full Participation for Persons with Disabilities and Their Allies,” and “PMM6 Consultation on Disabilities” ([commons.united-church.ca](https://commons.united-church.ca); search “2013-11-16 GCE Workbook”), pp. 70–79 and 98–99.

2. The United Church of Canada, Executive of General Council, March 2012. “PCPMM 19 Open and Accessible: Ministries with Persons with Disabilities” ([commons.united-church.ca](https://commons.united-church.ca); search “2012-03-24 GCE Workbook”), pp. 172–181. A paraphrase of this paragraph also appears in this report.

processes do not work. It emphasizes disability as a bodily defect, loss, or flaw. It also views people with disabilities as heroic when they participate in ordinary activities such as sports or careers. Focused on the individual, the medical model pervades our culture to such an extent that we hardly notice that it is only one way, and a particularly Western way, to understand disability.

The social model of disability, an alternative to the medical model, defines disability not as what a person can or cannot do, but how people with disabilities are treated by society. To have a disability is to experience prejudice and exclusion, called ableism. If disability is understood as socially constructed, then the barriers society sets up become an issue of justice. However, this social model has been criticized for focusing on bias and discrimination, while ignoring the physical and emotional realities of disability. Neither the social nor the medical model can fully define disability or what we understand about disability from a theological perspective, but both of these models can contribute to our understanding of disability.

*The church is behind, playing catch up and not leading. This saddens me, because of your history of fighting for social justice...This is a justice issue in our midst.*

Recognizing that people living with disabilities and their allies often encounter barriers in communities of faith and often find themselves on the margins of church life, the United Church needs to create much more accessible spaces, both in terms of physical space and attitude. According to Statistics Canada, in 2006 14.3 percent of Canadians were persons living with disabilities. In the national identity survey conducted by The United Church of Canada in 2011, only 5.3 percent of respondents identified as living with a disability. This gap illustrates that there are obstacles in the church that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating. And yet people with visible and invisible disabilities are present in all, or nearly all, of our communities of faith. Some may move in and out of church life, and some may move in and out of degrees of disability.

*The problem with the church and disability is cultural, and no amount of legislation, tsk-tsking, or calls to right thinking will change it quickly.*

The Gospel witness of the ministry of Jesus shows that he sought out the very people who faced disability and marginalization in the society of that time. If we are to be true to Jesus's example, and to the biblical witness, we must be clear that a theology of disability is inherent in Scripture. It affirms that all are created in the image of God, and that all of God's people are welcomed into the radical hospitality of Jesus, wherever they are on the spectrum of ability.

### **Difference and Building Community**

*My disability is not [the] totality of who I am. Usually, disability is not the first identity I name. As a person of faith, my first identity, my baptized identity, is as a beloved child of God. This is the primary identity that continues to shape my life, and one that I hope [to] be reminded of as I seek to remind others that they too are beloved children of God.*

Disability is usually viewed as a limitation, and in comparison to those who have the power to define normalcy. Disability, therefore, is a social construct, created by what a society takes for

granted as normal. In fact, both the normalization of ability and the construct of disability can be challenged. There is no normal.

*Ideas of normalcy and imperfection remain and get reinforced in the church making some people feel inadequate because of their disability.*

### ***Engaging Difference***

Disability is about difference: people with disabilities may move, see, hear, speak, and think differently. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities names as a general principle respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Commitment to relationship across diversities presents the challenge of creating communities that expect and honour differences. In the commitment to becoming an intercultural church the United Church has already developed some understandings of what it means to live with difference:

Becoming an intercultural church is the call to live together in intentional ways where there is the mutual recognition and understanding of difference through intentional self-examination, relationship building, and equitable access to power; it is also our attempt to respond faithfully to such a call.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, as affirmed in the United Church's 2012 Ecclesiology Report,<sup>5</sup> we need communities that are prepared to struggle with the ways that the differences among us are reflected in structures of domination and subordination. This means that community is not achieved simply by including everyone in an unchanging church, but involves grappling with the relations of power among us in a dynamic faith community. An intercultural church honours difference, works to transform relations that exclude, and is committed to be changed by those who have been seen as “other.” When difference is recognized as “necessary to truth and goodness”<sup>6</sup> differences become sources of energy, alternative visions of reality, and ways of moving beyond binary thinking into models of multiplicity, mutuality, and dialogue.

Alliance-building through action is key for the work of social transformation.<sup>7</sup> The ethicist Janet Jakobsen argues that without attention to forming alliances in a context of difference, movements for social change tend to reproduce the very dynamics they criticize in the dominant society. She

---

3. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml).

4. The United Church of Canada, General Council 41. “Intercultural Ministries: Living into Transformation” ([commons.united-church.ca](http://commons.united-church.ca); search “GC41 ROP”), pp. 312–314, 524–533; and Executive of General Council, “GCE 3 Intercultural Ministries: Living into Transformation (GC41 GCE12 – REF PC PMM 17 2012)” ([commons.united-church.ca](http://commons.united-church.ca); search “2012-10-26 GCE Workbook”), pp. 137–138.

5. The United Church of Canada, “TICIF Ecclesiology Report”. *Record of Proceedings of the 41st General Council 2012* ([commons.united-church.ca](http://commons.united-church.ca); search “GC41 ROP”), pages 431–447.

6. Gloria Albrecht, *The Character of Our Communities: Towards an Ethic of Liberation for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 159.

7. Janet R. Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

contends that alliance-building must engage diversity and complexity within and among groups. Only then can movements for change avoid reproducing the barriers of we/they thinking and instead form working relationships for the creation of “spaces where differences need not imply hierarchy and domination.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the starting point for transformation is not simply valuing diversity by expanding categories of inclusion, but challenging existing relations of domination.

### ***Building Community***

Faith communities tend to believe that diversity can be achieved by inclusion through outreach and invitation. Even when committed to diversity, the inclusive community too often reflects notions of pluralism which assimilate differences to the norms of the dominant social order. Honouring and engaging difference entails examining relations of domination and exclusion. Furthermore, building solidarity across boundaries of difference involves risk and struggle.

*I would value a church that spends time thinking about how to walk with people who live with chronic, demanding, unpredictable situations.*

An alternative vision of community is “radical inclusiveness” aimed at “the conversion of all present structures by the transformative power of ‘dangerous’ stories” in order to create communities “where all are able to know themselves to be loved by a God whose desire for them is fullness of life.”<sup>9</sup>

*More than anything, I need you not to be afraid of my story. I need people who are willing to walk with me when I am afraid, angry, exhausted, or sad.*

To be radically inclusive requires that dangerous stories re-shape how the community defines itself. Rather than seeking inclusion at the centre, this model of solidarity at the margins aims to transform the very structures that constitute the centre.

*It is essential to be aware of the power we hold related to our identities and our roles and who makes space for our leadership. How we see ourselves in leadership impacts how others see us and vice versa.*

Re-imagining community in these directions calls regional and national structures as well as local communities of faith to new ways of being church. God calls us through Christ to create spaces of possibility where all people without distinction (Galatians 3) can join to give life to this radically inclusive vision. To do so invites thorough examination of the ways that church life continues to exclude through hierarchical theologies, binary thinking, and relations of domination and subordination. To embrace ambiguity, faith communities need to be open to multiple and complex ways of expressing faith and permit the renewal of traditions through articulating, re-working, and negotiating diverse norms and values and the relationships among them. Diversity is the hard work of building relationships, bearing one another’s anger and pain,

---

8. Jakobsen, *Working Alliances*, 20, 15.

9. Eileen Scully, “Solidarity: Love that Moves Hands and Feet,” *Groundswell*, Summer/Fall 1996, 3–4.

confronting complicity, and creating politically effective strategies for justice-making. Diversity work is a transformative process, reconstituting church, society, and individual.<sup>10</sup>

## **Redefining Accessibility, Vulnerability, and Safe Space**

### ***Accessibility***

*At church, the now startlingly regular references in Bible readings and music, to the healing of the blind, to sight miraculously being restored, jumped out at me at every turn with irony and challenge and sometimes a wry smile. I still notice and think a lot about what these words really mean. Has my sight been restored?—sadly no. Has there been healing? This is a more difficult question, and I am grateful to be a member of a denomination and local congregation that can talk about healing at many levels.*

To be radically inclusive, a faith community must be accessible—which means more than enabling people with disabilities to enter a building or see and hear in the sanctuary. The symbol of the white wheelchair on a blue background advertises accessibility, but how do the community’s structures and traditions reflect the diversity of Christ’s body? To welcome “all,” the church must think all the way through changing the physical and organizational structures to include not only potential congregants but also ministry personnel. “Under the guise of providing access, a society can systematically limit or censor access, purposefully determining areas of access and conversely determining areas that would remain inaccessible.”<sup>11</sup> Full accessibility goes beyond removing physical barriers to reconsider the language of worship. Liturgical language may link sinfulness with disability and use terms to describe disability that divide those with “abnormal” bodies from those considered to be “normal:”

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,  
your loosened tongues employ.  
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come;  
and leap, ye lame, for joy.<sup>12</sup>

Making our faith communities accessible goes beyond accommodation. Our commitment to becoming an intercultural church prompts us to ask: What social and material arrangements enable all minds, bodies and souls to worship, grow spiritually, and contribute to the community? The radically accessible faith community includes Christians with disabilities as active, self-identified members in the body of Christ whose vulnerability make the church whole, for “difference is how God says beauty.”<sup>13</sup>

---

10. This paragraph appears in “A Church with Purpose: Towards an Ecclesiology for The United Church of Canada in the 21st Century.” Report of the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee, *Record of Proceedings of the 41st General Council 2012* ([commons.united-church.ca](http://commons.united-church.ca); search “GC41 ROP”), pages 431–447.

11. N. Kagendo Mutua, “The Semiotics of Accessibility and the Cultural Construction of Disability” in *Semiotics and Disability: Interrogating Categories of Difference*, ed. Linda J. Rogers and Beth Blue Swadener (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001), 113.

12. Charles Wesley, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” *Voices United* 326.

13. Darren Dahl, “Why Does Ecumenism Matter?” sermon delivered at St. Martin’s United Church, Saskatoon, SK, February 1, 2015.

### ***Vulnerability***

The dual meanings of being vulnerable emerge as we craft relationships across difference and disability in communities of faith. One can be vulnerable in the sense of being, and feeling, threatened. More hopefully, vulnerability feels as if trust is inherent and the ability exists to open oneself up to love. How can this latter sense of vulnerability be fostered among diverse people? People cannot be forced to love, appreciate, or include others they deem unworthy because of their differences. But the scope of our imagination can be enriched if we learn to live with the hidden lessons of the dissonance that diversity occasions. The movement from feeling threatened to feeling trust needs to occur within communities of faith:

*Nurturing relationships, getting to know others and having open communication fosters bridge building. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” and “Be still and know I am God” are important verses that keep my faith “doing and being” in perspective.*

These words illuminate the sense of trust that comes with being vulnerable with others in relationship over time.

### ***Safe Space***

*I need the church to know that I do not need to be fixed.*

*I have been bemused, saddened, and perplexed by the way our church has treated those like me. And has largely refused to hear that there is even a problem.*

Trust is fostered in safe space, a term that has come to mean a place where vulnerable people, such as victims of domestic violence or members of LGBTTTQ communities, are safe from violence and free to express themselves in ways not permitted in the wider community. A safe space is an environment where all are accepted and are free to express themselves fully.

Sometimes the church has provided political sanctuary, but its safe, sacred space is for all aspects of human life and relationships. The United Church strives to welcome all people regardless of their gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or cultural background. Despite good intentions, however, commonly-held theological and cultural beliefs make some communities of faith unsafe spaces for people with disabilities.

The obstacles to nurturing a safe space for people who live with disabilities go beyond inaccessible buildings to overtly and subtly inhospitable attitudes. For example, people with disabilities may be stereotyped as objects of pity, a source of divine inspiration, or recipients of charity rather than embraced by the community as active and contributing members. Further, biblical stories portraying disabilities and illness as connected to sin or acts of healing contribute to confusing messages regarding the church’s view of disability and community membership. Such concerns can lead to the perception that the church may not yet be the safe space it is called to be.

At times theological messages regarding disability such as “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle” serve to protect others’ faith while alienating individuals living with disabilities. In response we may ask, “For whom are we making our church community safe—people with disabilities, or able-bodied members of the community?”

*I was told that God would not give me more than I can handle. I heard these opinions often, and for a young mother (of a child with disabilities) struggling with constant feelings of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty these suggestions not only did not “cheer me up,” but they engendered feelings of inadequacy and shame.*

Communities of faith have the potential to affirm all as full participants but to do so we need to be open to hearing, and faithfully responding to, the stories of all members of our congregations, including stories of painful exclusion. Indeed, as beloved people of God we have the exciting opportunity to befriend all of God’s creation in its wonderful diversity. Communities of faith are called to create a space where the stories, contributions, and full participation of all are embraced and valued.

*Fast-forward five years, and you can’t tear J, now 16-years old, away from our church. He’s an active member of (the youth group), volunteers at community dinners, attends camp, sings at open-mic, and won’t miss a Sunday for anything. J has embraced the church and the church has embraced him in return.... Our faith community at XYZ United Church has definitely enriched J’s life. He now has faith as well as a whole faith community to support him. And J has enriched the lives of the faith community in return. They know this fantastic young man who grasps life in both hands.*

### **Disability and Theology**

Practices of welcoming people with disabilities and their allies as full participants in churches have their roots in a theological imagination that understands disability neither as flaw nor defining characteristic, but instead as part of the variation that makes up our communities across the range of human experience.

*I am not special. I do not believe that God has uniquely chosen me for this journey. I am not a saint, nor am I some kind of superwoman. In fact, I am the same as you and I am simply doing the best I can because I don’t have any choice in the matter. This is our life...*

*Not all disabled people “suffer.” Disability can be just one more factor that shapes who a person is.*

Theologies of disabilities need to reflect the fact that many people with disabilities do not seek a cure or consider themselves broken or weaker, but rather work with the limits of their lives as something that makes up part of who they are, and may not perceive their disability as a limitation at all, but rather a difference.

*I was born with [cerebral palsy]... Had I the choice of miraculously becoming able-bodied, I would choose not.*

In practice, however, such bodily differences become socially excluded by attitudes based on common but problematic theological notions. Statements such as “there but for the grace of God go I” or “God doesn’t ever give you something you cannot handle,” may be expressed with good intentions but have harmful consequences for people with disabilities, putting the burden on them to suffer the consequences of society’s exclusion. Disabilities are not all the same; there are invisible disabilities and mental illnesses that also affect people.

### ***Image of God***

So there is need to rethink what it means to be human in relation to God. As part of God’s creation, human beings are created from the earth and with the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), neither perfect nor autonomous, but whole as vulnerable and interdependent creatures. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7).

*One of the messages within the Bible is that of perfection, and people with a disability are not perfect. In fact, all people are not perfect.*

The whole person is valued not because of a set list of abilities or capacities but in relation to God, with others and the rest of the good creation. The dignity of human life is connected to God’s creative activity; all humans bear the image of God (Gen. 1:27), loved into being as precious.

*I have never believed that my disability was a “gift from God” or God’s way of “testing” me. I find such ideas abhorrent and nauseating.... [A]ll of my physical and psychological imperfections, visible and invisible, which seem to be piling up the whiter my hair gets, in no way detracts from the light that shines within me. I know I am made in the image of God. I have God’s thumb-print on my soul. At my core I know I have been “fearsomely, wondrously made.”*

Disability is part of the natural limits and conditions of creation, neither a flaw nor a blessing but one of the diverse ways of being an embodied creature. For the image of God is not as a set of capabilities that can be listed and measured according to standards of exchange value, such that their absence makes someone less human; rather, it is a sign of intrinsic goodness and preciousness that is vulnerable and expressed differently in each person.

If all are created in God’s image, we might welcome one another with the intent of honouring the unique and different way that image is borne out in each of us, including disability and/or mental illness. Biblical characters who have a disability—such as Moses (with his stutter) or Jacob (with his limp)—are not somehow special or chosen because of disability; rather, they are examples of how God may work through people with different ranges of gifts and abilities.

### ***The Healing Narratives***

Given this, there is need to rethink how we interpret the many Gospel stories in which Jesus heals people with disabilities. For some examples see Matthew 20:29–34 (healing two blind men), Mark 1:23–28 (healing the man with an unclean spirit), and Luke 13:10–13 (healing the bent over woman).

*Many disabled people have been severely damaged by Christians who have told the person that their faith is insufficient and that is why they have not been healed.*

*I didn't like the way people with disabilities were portrayed in the Bible. There were too many references to the lame walking and the blind seeing. If I couldn't walk or couldn't see, was I to blame for having too little faith?*

The healing stories may be understood differently. For example, Jesus does not treat disability as a sign of spiritual need or deprivation, as punishment for previous sin, or as a blemish marking some kind of danger. In fact, he challenges such cause-and-effect depictions, opening up alternative perspectives on healing. For instance, in John 9:1–41, with reference to a blind man, Jesus counters the disciples' assumption that disability is a consequence of sin, claiming that neither the man's parents nor he had sinned to cause the disability, but rather that the works of God may be displayed. In this story, as in many others, the focus is not merely on the elimination of impairments and illnesses, re-making people so that they function normally. Instead, the emphasis is on the personal and social transformation that takes place through Jesus' presence.

In this sense, healing entails the restoration of community, removing barriers to belonging, for Jesus had already recognized people with disabilities as part of God's community. Healing marks Jesus' radical hospitality, which fosters new possibilities for the wellbeing (*shalom*) that comes from living in transformed relationships with Christ, with oneself, and with others. Stories of healing in the Gospels serve to show Jesus' identity as Christ, revealing a taste of God's realm at hand: making whole, overcoming isolation, and building community.

Therefore, to focus on the physical cure of the individual with disabilities is to miss a richer, social sense of healing. It also makes people with disabilities the problem and overlooks how it is actually societies that demean and exclude on the basis of restrictive standards of value. Indeed, Jesus' ministry calls attention to this exclusion by constantly challenging the status quo and overturning assumptions about what normal is—refocusing community away from the centre toward the margins, welcoming the uninvited outcast as the honoured guest, pointing toward those shunned by society as, in fact, treasured vessels of the new community of God. Instead of indicating a non-functioning person, the presence of disability may instead be the sign of a non-functioning community, marking the limits of its capacity to welcome and foster belonging. In fact, the prophetic call here is toward communal transformation and right relations. Jesus identifies the work of God with the excluded, those wrongly counted as problems.

*I recall being stunned when a woman afflicted with late stage cancer said: "I must have done something very evil for God to have punished me in this way." Sadly it was not the only time I would hear such a statement. I did my best to say: "No, that is not how it works!" but it was an uphill battle.*

*The old dysfunctional folk theology of God dishing out disease as punishment survives like a wolf in sheep's clothing.*

### ***The Disabled God***

In an even more radical sense, theologically Jesus' death on the cross is an expression of his identification with those suffering from marginalization and oppression. It is fitting, then, that the resurrected Christ retains the wounds suffered on the cross (e.g., John 19:20, 27), revealing a God whose solidarity with humanity not only entails vulnerability and suffering, but more powerfully, whose suffering *with* humanity is now displayed as a disability that is raised and taken up into God's own life in the form of Christ's resurrected body.

Jesus now reveals, in the words of disability theologian Nancy Eiesland, a "disabled God" (Luke 24:36–39). Disability is central to the life of God's own presence in Christ, revealing a new wholeness. In Eiesland's words this revelation underscores that "the reality of full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it means "rethinking Christian symbols, metaphors, rituals and doctrines so as to...remove their able-bodied bias."<sup>15</sup> This powerful image of a disabled God, which deserves a more prominent place in our preaching and teaching, opens up solidarity with people with disabilities and a wider sense of access for all.

### ***Being Church Together***

Accordingly, the church—the body of Christ—is that place where welcome, access, and accommodation are central features of life together, through which all members "have the same care for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25). The church is a household of God (Eph. 2:19) in which "dividing walls" based upon human ordinances are abolished (Eph. 2:14–15) and gifts are received from all members of the body (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12), some of whom may be assumed to be weaker but who are in fact indispensable (1 Cor. 12:22).

*We could focus on what is not working, what is broken, but if we focus from a place of positive, such as those who do accept and welcome, we can draw the circle wide and build communities of acceptance, that move equity forward.*

*I have a much clearer sense that I belong in church, especially because people have made me welcome and have made room for me.*

The church is a place where all might give and receive gifts. All belong. Since God's image includes disability, and this image dwells in all human beings, the church is summoned into a radical kind of belonging, as if welcoming each other is to welcome the divine in our midst.

### **Recommendations:**

See TICIF 1 Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Accountability and Future Work Proposal, page 295.

---

14. Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

15. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 104.