



Church, hospitality and disability

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The following is a second article from Martina Königer of the Disability Perspective Forum, which is part of the Evangelical Alliance of Germany. Martina is paraplegic, following a traffic accident in 1992. Here, she reflects biblically and theologically on her experience of attitudes towards disability that she has encountered in churches in her own region.

Is the church against disabled people?

“The church is against people with disabilities,” a man on the train told me after I mentioned that I work with the Evangelical Alliance to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church.

Then he began sharing his experiences. The pastor of his Church said someone with a severe disability should not marry. The man on the train finally did get married. Then he spoke about his experience with charismatic churches. He felt hounded by Christians who wanted to pray for his healing. Attending an evangelistic event with Reinhardt Bonke the evangelist, participants had been sent out to pray for people. Sure enough, he had people lining up to pray for his healing, to the point where he had to yell at them to leave him alone. One lady who had prayed for him, accused him of having a devil, for otherwise he would be healed by now. These are situations all too common for people with a disability. Sound theological teaching on disability is needed.

If we are encountering reactions like that of the man on the train, we might reflect on instructions like this in the book of Hebrews 12:15

‘See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.’

Part of that reflection could be to consider one of Jesus’ parables on how hospitality towards marginalised people, and explicitly those with a disability, need to be.

When he heard that those whom he had originally invited were making excuses for not coming to the feast, the man in Jesus’ parable went ahead and scheduled the great banquet anyway.

‘The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ (Parable of the Great Banquet; Luke 14, 21)

Amos Yong examines this parable and suggests that it means that people with disabilities are included in the Kingdom of God just as they are, rather than having to be ‘fixed’ first. He points out: ‘My argument is that there will be no more tears in the eschaton not because our impairments will be eliminated but

because they will be redeemed.' (2011, 173)

Later in Verse 23 it says 'compel, urge' them to come in, so that my house will be full.

I hear from churches and Christians: "We don't have anyone with a disability. But if a disabled person comes, we will of course do something to get that person into our church."

Church leaders often are not aware that the largest unreached group with the gospel worldwide, are people with disabilities. The Lausanne Movement has written a paper about this still widely-unrecognised fact:

'Only 5 to 10% of the world's disabled are effectively reached with the gospel, making the disability community one of the largest unreached — some say under-reached — or hidden people groups in the world. One in seven people globally have a disability.

'Jesus, aware that this population would be overlooked, made people with disabilities a target group.

The Lausanne Disability Concerns Network (<https://lausanne.org/network/disability-concerns>) is committed to strengthening and multiplying disability leaders globally.

Sometimes I think charismatic Christians rewrite verse 23 so it reads, 'Go out quickly, heal the disabled and then they can come to your church, and you won't have to struggle, or pay money to make it accessible.' Non-Charismatic Christians read this verse something like: 'Stay in the Church and wait until some blind and lame person knocks at the door and asks to come in. Then start to think about what you could do.' What it really says: 'Go to them quickly and urgently. Plead with them to come in!'"

When the church accepts and shoulders the burden, because it wants disabled people to belong and take part, that is when the world will see and take note. That's when true Christianity will be seen.

Positive example

Our church hosts a welcome café for refugees and others from town who want to join. When I said I wanted to be part of it, my church was looking for a way I could get with my wheelchair into the café. Initially a ramp was built and barriers removed. A Turkish man employed to help refugees in our city, was moved to tears when he saw it. In the end there were eight more wheelchair users coming to the café. This included a German atheist with his electric wheelchair and refugees with wheelchairs. Catering for our disabilities will cause trouble, inconvenience and cost money. The willingness to shoulder that burden will carry a message with a significant impact. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ put into practice.

If I want to attend a church I have not been to before, I find it difficult to find the necessary information on the website to see if it would be accessible. It is difficult to get in touch with the church. The office hours are limited. I realise that when churches plan new buildings, they often don't think about accessibility. Adjustments made later are usually more expensive and not as advanced as if accessibility had been considered at the beginning of the planning process.

Are we willing to follow Jesus' command to show genuine hospitality to those challenged by disability?

Let's be one. Let's be accessible, let's be inclusive, let's be united in love so that the world can see the truth of Jesus and believe!

References

Statistics about disability: www.thebanquetnetwork.com/blog/2018/8/28/5-statistics-we-cant-ignore

Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 173