

Belonging and the Body of Christ: Why People with Disabilities Matter

This paper has not been written as if disability is merely “an issue” for the church to consider. It is about living, breathing people who have been created in God’s image yet routinely feel marginalized by the church, like “second-class citizens,” people on the outside looking in. Those in the writing group for this document love the church. We also live and breathe the reality of disability every single day because disability is an intimate part of our lives. The church’s response to people with disabilities matters.

One member of our group brings this perspective to our work:

In my training to become a pastor I took a pastoral care class. Just as medical doctors take an oath to “Do No Harm,” we were taught to “Do No Harm” as we engaged people in our church, particularly in a counseling context. As a parent of a person living with disabilities, I often experienced church to be the most difficult place to bring our child. The implicit message seemed to be that, because she was not “perfect” or was lacking in some ableist way, she was to be avoided or ignored. Had my husband and I not felt firm in our resolve to be part of a church fellowship, this would have caused us to avoid church, perhaps at the time and in the ways we needed fellowship the most. Conversely, in two churches of which we were a part, people reached out and offered real concern and practical help as we navigated a difficult time in our lives. These contrasting scenarios illustrate why addressing the challenges that people living with disabilities face is so crucially important.

People with disabilities are seldom included when “diversity” issues and “marginalized groups” are referenced, even though people with disabilities consistently represent the largest minority group—one that is open for anyone to join at any time, and one that cuts across all lines of class, race, economic standing, and religion. Disabled people are left routinely to advocate for their own inclusion!

This needs to change, particularly in the church, and we have ample support for this course correction:

- Jesus says in Matthew 25, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. ... As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.”
- The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, “Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”
- Belhar confesses: “We believe that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged...that the church must stand by people in any form of suffering and need, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice.”

People with disabilities are not looking for pity but for justice. We are looking for evidence that we belong and that our gifts and contributions matter. We are looking for the church to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

It is past time for the WCRC to act, consistently and without reservation, on the prophetic call to the church to provide a generous welcome of physical, programmatic, and vocational access for all people. This includes people with and without disabilities, as we seek to live out our calling as disciples in response to the promises made and received at baptism. Full participation in the body of Christ is not reserved for a certain class of (nondisabled) people.

This paper provides an overview of key themes regarding the nature of disability, language used for disability, the pervasiveness of ableism in the church, common misunderstandings of disability in the Bible, and how Reformed Christians should respond within the church and in our witness in the world. This paper calls for the full inclusion, welcome, and belonging of people with disabilities, and it concludes with several proposals calling on the WCRC to discern how God is inviting the church to respond in concrete ways.

About language and disability

Language is not neutral but is often weaponized against marginalized groups. People with disabilities are people, and it is better to talk *with* people than to talk *about* them. Only in getting to know people do we learn how *each person* describes or talks about themselves. One might prefer to be known as “a person with autism,” while someone else with autism might prefer the term “autistic.” The former is known as “person-first language” and the latter “identity-first language.” While it is helpful to know this, it is even more helpful to know the person than it is to know their disability or their preferred descriptors. Relationships are the most important part of being an effective advocate alongside people with disabilities.

For the purposes of this document, we have chosen to use both “person-first” and “identity-first” language. To help our communities transition from viewing disability as some kind of illness or curse, person-first language helps us remember that people are first of all *people*. We also celebrate the work of disability advocates who champion disability as an essential part of their being and prefer using identify-first language. As Amy Kenny says in *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, using “disabled people” is her way of shunning the shame often associated with disability and proclaiming that disability is not a bad word. “I am not a bad word. I am not a euphemism or a metaphor. I am disabled.”

Using both person-first and identify-first language acknowledges that we are part of the diverse and complex tapestry that is the Christian church. As Emily Ladau writes in *Demystifying Disability*, disability isn’t just a single term with a single meaning; it is a big, broad term to describe a natural, constantly evolving part of the human experience. There isn’t one single way to talk about or think about disability. The way people who have a disability talk about their disability is their choice. We all need to respect these choices, even if we’re also disabled and someone else’s choices are different from our own.

In churches and in society, disability labels often have been used pejoratively, calling people “wheelchair bound,” “lame,” or “schizo,” or saying they “suffer” from a disability. We recommend avoiding terms such as “handicapped,” an outdated term that has fallen out of favor with most disabled people, and euphemisms like “differently abled,” “other-abled,” “special needs,” “handi-capable,” “twice exceptional,” “mentally or physically challenged.” “Disability” and “disabled” are not bad words, so say them.

People with disabilities are not a monolith, and there are hundreds of types of disabilities. They include a range of impairments that affect persons throughout their lifetimes. Some impairments may be occasioned before birth, or at birth, while others may develop at varying stages of life. Disabling conditions can include physical, sensory, developmental, or intellectual impairments and mental illnesses. Some disabilities are more apparent than others, but most are not immediately apparent or visible. That means establishing relationships and creating an atmosphere of trust is essential to learning who in your church lives with a disability and what gifts they might contribute to the body of Christ.

All of us are created in the image of God, and all are equally important and significant in the sight of God. In Christ, there is no distinction between female and male, Greek and Jew, slave and free, disabled and able-bodied.

The pervasiveness of ableism

Genesis 1:26–27 is the foundation of the Christian understanding that every person has inherent dignity and value because we are all made in the image of God. To reflect this, churches should work toward dismantling the perspectives that degrade or demean the dignity and value of certain people. To reflect that people with disabilities are also made in the image of God with inherent dignity and value, we should work toward dismantling ableism in our churches and beyond.

All forms of discrimination are problematic for churches because they do not represent loving one another as we love ourselves but rather presume that one person or one group of people is more valuable than another.

It can be challenging to address discrimination because our value judgments and how we behave are often subconscious and implicit. Few people intend to treat people differently because of specific characteristics. We are often oblivious to our unconscious biases—biases formed by the environment we grew up in or the actions and beliefs of our society. Unfortunately, ableism is often similarly embedded in the theology and practices of churches. A multitude of pastors with disabilities do not receive calls or are not offered positions by congregations simply because they're disabled in some way. Some church traditions even discriminate against people with disabilities entering ordained ministry by pointing to biblical references in the Old Testament that prohibit a person with a "blemish" from becoming a priest. Such interpretations conveniently ignore that we do not confine ourselves to cultural and cultic practices of biblical times in much of what we practice as the Christian religion today. Such church traditions simply choose to perpetuate this exclusionary ableist theological interpretation and practice because it suits their inherent bias about the value of a person with a disability being "unfit" for ministerial roles.

Christians are called to share one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Still, unless we are disabled or close to someone with a disability, we seldom appreciate the extent of ableism and its negative impact within our churches and beyond. For this reason, we must listen to and practice solidarity with marginalized people if they share such burdens with us.

Ableism refers to beliefs or practices that devalue, discriminate, and oppress people with disabilities. This prejudice is subtle, unconscious, and pervasive. It assumes non-disabled people are “normal” and of greater value, while people with disabilities represent an undesirable deviation from this norm and need to be “fixed.” The uncomfortable truth is that most people consider a person with a disability to be “less than,” so not much is expected from disabled people. Consequently, we are not given opportunities or invited to be full participants, much less leaders. For centuries, people with disabilities have been silenced and sidelined. This has been truer in the church than in the world where we live, serve, and witness. Churches have been slow to provide basic access to people with disabilities and even slower to hire them as pastors. Scripture does not support this injustice, but the church has been reluctant to recognize it or act on it.

Ableism represents the privileging of non-disabled bodies and minds, and it has several specific categories. *Individual* ableism refers to attitudes each person holds about the value of people with disabilities. *Cultural* ableism is a collective viewpoint in which a societal culture does not consider people with disabilities to be as valuable as non-disabled citizens. When cultural ableism becomes formalized through the built environment, policies, laws, regulations, and practices, it becomes *systemic* ableism. The categories of ableism described above together foster *internalized* ableism—the thoughts and feelings that prompt many disabled people to feel like they are a burden or do not deserve the same access as everyone else.

In a church, systemic ableism can look like creating a separate “disability ministry” and assuming all members with disabilities should attend there rather than giving people options to choose what is best for them. Or, systemic ableism may insist that the timeline of sacred rituals, like baptism or confirmation or the Lord’s Supper, remain rigid rather than allowing people to participate at an age and stage that is meaningful for them. Or, systemic ableism may allow the credentials of clergy who acquire a disability to lapse rather than utilizing the vocational gifts that God has given them. Or, it may be the idea that all people with disabilities are overburdened and do not want to serve in any capacity. Ableism could also appear in the assumption that people with disabilities have nothing more than a “disability perspective” to contribute to their church or that people with disabilities can only serve in narrow, specific roles such as greeting or praying. It is also ableist to expect all individuals who fulfill a particular role to fulfill it in a particular way.

Many members of the disability community are also members of other marginalized communities so that they may contend with multiple forms of discrimination. Various forms of ableism and intersecting forms of oppression may hinder people with disabilities and their families’ involvement in and sense of belonging to a faith community.

In *Disability and The Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, Lamar Hardwick suggests that a community’s commitment to diversity is visible according to who can lead and who determines people’s positions within the community. He also says that how much we are willing to develop our accessible ministry demonstrates how much we trust God rather than ourselves for the provision of resources as well as the outcomes of the ministry.

Many churches exhibit ableism with respect to accessibility. Accessible entrances are often separated from the main entrance, “around the back.” Autistic congregation members who vocalize are frequently asked to listen to the service from a separate room where their sounds will not disturb others. Online events may be portrayed as a last-resort, less desirable alternative to on-site, in-person events, even though online access often presents fewer barriers for disabled people to engage. Both online and on-site options provide valuable opportunities for person-to-person connection. Sanctuaries may have accessible seating, but chancels and platforms often only have stairs. Environmental features communicate a lot about who can lead and who is expected to follow.

Options that promote accessibility for people with diverse access needs should not be considered alternatives, but rather part of the normative experience of being in a diverse community. Disability is one of the ways that God has created diversity in humanity. Approximately 15 per cent of the world’s population lives with some form of disability, making disabled people the largest minority group. Even if the proportion of people with disabilities in the general population were smaller, accessibility should always be a priority. After all, Jesus taught us to go out of our way to accommodate the one, rather than the 99 sheep. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for accessibility. The best way to ensure equal access and equal treatment is simply to ask and then listen to what people communicate about their needs and gifts.

Theological institutions and associated educational bodies must prioritise theologies that undergird all humanity’s dignity. Developments in disability theology must find their place so that emerging church leaders may be charged with the significance of identifying and securing the dignity of a whole range of humanity that has suffered under oppressive theological assertions.

With a renewed commitment to recognize, identify, and utilize the gifting of persons with disabilities, churches must make all appropriate provisions for increased enrollment of people with disabilities for training in ministry. Education institutions must be prepared for a variety of impairments and take steps to ensure that the legitimate call of God’s people is not thwarted by disabling conditions in training institutions, local churches, or churches’ administrative procedures.

Christian education spaces like Sunday schools and youth ministries have neglected the needs of children with disabilities in general, and children with intellectual disabilities or developmental disabilities in particular, in the physical ethos of Sunday schools, its pedagogies, curriculum, and training of teachers. The issue is not about having “special Sunday schools” for children with disabilities, but to ensure that *all* Sunday schools and Christian education curricula, teacher training, and classroom methodologies have elements to ensure inclusion of children with diverse disabilities alongside children without disabilities.

When churches start to think about disability, one of the first questions they ask themselves is “Are we accessible?” A better question is “*How* are we accessible?” or “In what ways are we accessible?” By continually asking, “How can we become more accessible?” churches can make incremental changes to make sure everybody experiences belonging.

The church is called to live out its role as the glory of God is revealed in God's own unique ways (John 9:3).

Consequences of ableist attitudes

By self-definition, Reformed churches are a movement toward full expression of the mandate of scripture. In seeking to be faithful to scripture, a church of the Reformation is both a church reformed and a church always being reformed. In each ensuing era, it faces the challenge of transformation. As followers of Christ, the church consists of disciples committed to making disciples of others. With Christ at its head, it must seek to identify all the "members of the body" to engage all life experiences in the unity of Christ. No category of humanity can be excluded or ignored if the mandate of its head is kept sacrosanct.

Laws alone do not change attitudes. Attitudinal change occurs when influential members of society are inspired to recognise and address issues that require action. The role of the church as an influencer is enshrined in scripture. In Jesus' own words to those who dare to follow, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Let your light shine before others" (Matthew 5:13-16).

In each succeeding era, a church reformed renews its commitment to shine and to produce flavor. Now it needs to shine in a world full of neglect and exclusion.

The church's vocation is to be the sign and servant of God's design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the lordship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The church will only be able to live this vocation when it learns to appreciate the presence of and the gifts from all its members.

At its best, the church can become the exemplar it was meant to be to the world. Very often, people with disabilities consider themselves among the unheard voices in the church. Indeed, studies show that many people with disabilities withdraw from churches, citing feelings of rejection and a perceived unwillingness within churches to respond to their needs. For them, a Reformed church would be one in which the particular needs of a constituency estimated to be some 15 per cent of the global population are given ample consideration. A Reformed church would also be one where the enormous pressures that caregivers and families of people with disabilities face are recognised as a substantial pastoral challenge needing the attention of not just the pastor but the entire congregation to ensure that the caregivers, families, and significant others of people with disabilities feel supported and cared for to shoulder their caregiving. The trauma, burnout, anxiety, panic attacks, and other mental health challenges faced by caregivers and families of people with profound disabilities is a little discussed topic in churches. This has enormous consequences for the witness of the church as a place of love, nurture, and care for one another. The creation of peer-support groups could give caregivers space to talk to each other to improve coping.

In its life and witness in the world, the Reformed church speaks of its vision of sharing the gospel of God's reign for transforming lives and communities. People with disabilities must be affirmed and encouraged to find their place in that mission. The onslaught of the global

pandemic of COVID-19 magnified the challenges faced by the most vulnerable populations in the world. Disabilities often feature among the most vulnerable populations. Poor populations in which basic material needs are unmet—who survive in a constant condition of food insecurity and substandard housing—find that those with disabilities are doubly challenged. A crisis such as the pandemic magnifies and exacerbates these challenges. Access to appropriate healthcare facilities is often more challenging for people with disabilities, a stark reality brought into sharp relief in the throes of such a global health emergency.

If the able-bodied world was stunned by the unprecedented scale of a modern pandemic, one can imagine how unnerving its onslaught was for people with disabilities. In times of natural disasters and political conflicts, emergency disaster preparedness and management in many countries have shown that people with disabilities are the “first to be left behind”. This total refusal to attend to the needs of people with diverse disabilities in emergency risk assessments, preparedness, and rehabilitation is unconscionable.

The able-bodied world has much that it may learn from people who live constantly with restrictions that often force them to find innovative coping strategies and to demonstrate remarkable resilience.

Attitudes enshrined in an ableist world with the mantra of “survival of the fittest” create a context of unrelenting competitiveness and restrict the room for collaboration and cooperation. Those with limitations are squeezed and often relegated to last place.

Overwhelmed health systems disproportionately affected people with disabilities. Many health systems across the world face chronic shortages in facilities and personnel. People with disabilities face not only the challenge of accessing some healthcare opportunities for COVID care but also cancellations of many regularly scheduled healthcare interventions. Children with disabilities may have been particularly disadvantaged when regular healthcare interventions are related to their condition of developmental delay.

Even part of the “solution” during the pandemic presented special problems for some people with disabilities. While the benefits of physical distancing were well communicated, this response created particular challenges for those needing consistently present caregivers, including some with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays. The benefits of wearing masks presented even more significant challenges for hard-of-hearing people who rely on facial expressions and speechreading (along with speech clarity) to compensate for their hearing loss

Our application of lessons learned would be a gift toward a more wholesome world.

Biblical perspectives of disability

Often, Christian interpretations of disability are characterized by the idea that disability, in general, is a “result of the fall” of humankind, implying that people with disabilities embody what went wrong when sin entered the world. In specific instances, it is attributed to punishment for one’s sin or for the sin of one’s parents; or is considered a “test of faith”; or it becomes an opportunity to build character, or to inspire others; it is an occasion for the

power of God to be made manifest; it is a sign that one lacks faith; or, it is simply a mysterious result of God's will. These interpretations are unsatisfying and always aim at the production of "The Other" by objectifying, classifying, and devaluing certain people.

Interestingly, many biblical stories convey a quite different message about disability: it occurs as part of one's personal life, as a part of Israel's collective memory, and as a part of the greatest biblical vision of peace (as described in Micah 4). These stories are particularly interesting to gender studies since they contain criticism of power regarding dominant constructions of masculinity. In Western culture, biblical heroes all look more or less like Charlton Heston. However, many of them did not meet the physical standard attributed to a "healthy body": Moses was stuttering, Saul struggled with depression, and Paul suffered from a chronic disease.

In the biblical narrative of Jacob wrestling with somebody (a "man," an angel, God?) near the river Jabbok (Genesis 32:23ff), Jacob's hip is put out of joint. Despite this impairment, he keeps wrestling until his opponent requests release. Jacob vows to let go only on condition of receiving a blessing (Genesis 32:26). Jacob (in Hebrew "deceiver") receives a new identity, and from then on, his name is "Israel," meaning, "You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." Jacob's frontier experience at Jabbok marks Israel's founding legend of creating a new identity. Part of this founding legend is Jacob's limping, which was not healed or cured but remained with him for the rest of his life.

Preaching the healing stories of the Gospels as *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* can be harmful, as it suggests that expecting Jesus to cure people with disabilities is more holy than working toward universal accessibility. Ableism assumes that in eternity, everybody will be "cured" according to standards of normalcy. A shared experience of many people with disabilities when interacting with Christians is having a stranger approach and offer to pray for them. The disabled person is forced to accommodate such requests when they might want to respond by offering a prayer for their new acquaintance that may go something like this: "Gracious God, forgive my new friend. They do not know the harm they cause by not accepting me and my body as they are. Through our encounter, please change their ableist attitudes so that my bodily differences will no longer be a barrier for them to recognize that you are indeed active in my life, and you have blessed me with spiritual gifts and skills to share with them and others. Amen!"

A better way to honour the diverse gifts and abilities of people with and without disabilities would be to ask people what they would like prayer for and respond accordingly. They might ask for patience in pain, that they are able to fulfil their familial duties even while ill, or that they would find opportunities to bless others with their gifts. They may even ask for prayer for a physical cure, but that should not be the default assumption.

Within the Christian tradition, dominant interpretations of New Testament healing stories have contributed significantly to current manifestations of ableism. Many people with disabilities define these healing stories as "texts of terror" since most of them combine the encounter with the divine with the (re)building of the fully functioning body, that is, with a dominant fantasy of wholeness.

Through her Instagram account @disabilitytheology, Michelle Eastman draws refreshing insights out of scripture by applying a disability lens. Moses' example of working with Aaron as his mouthpiece teaches us that "dependency on others is not a bad thing." Although the text tells us God restored all that Job had lost, it does not mention any healing of his boils, so this could mean that "God does not always treat illness as something that needs fixing." Jacob's limp, in the wake of wrestling with God, shows us a leader with a visible disability or one whose disability embodies the blessing he received from God. King David invited Mephibosheth to eat at his table in the royal court, which shows us that "people with disabilities should be included at all levels of society." Paul spread the gospel to most of the known world while simultaneously enduring a "thorn in the flesh," illustrating the fact that while disability may be a part of someone's identity, it does not define the whole person. Eastman concludes, "The stories of disabled biblical characters prove that disability is not a tragedy but part of the human experience that challenges the dominant norms of the first and second century and modern societies today."

Traditional views of our future life in Christ—when our bodies are resurrected—have disregarded the possibility of a disability. We expect that people with disabilities will be able-bodied as everyone else, showing no traces of the disabilities that limited their life on earth (Revelation 21). Yet, several biblical texts that suggest our embodied existence in the resurrection will include imprints of disability:

- The scars in the hands and the side of Jesus' resurrected body (Luke 24:37-39; John 20:19-28).
- The presence of people with impairments in the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) and in several prophetic texts (Jeremiah 31:8-9; Micah 4:6-7; Zephaniah 3:19-20).
- The apostle Paul's description of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:42-44) and his "theology of weakness" (2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 12:7-10).

Just as the resurrected body of Jesus still showed its wounds, our resurrected bodies may still bear the marks of our disabilities—not as limitations on our existence before God, but as the traces of divine grace, the signs of our deepest union with the Christ who shared our sufferings.

Just as disabled biblical characters can be instructive, disabled congregation members worshipping, serving, and living alongside members without disabilities are the key to creating anti-ableist communities of belonging for all.

Gender and disability

Gender is a privilege denied to many disabled bodies. Often, people with disabilities are perceived as not having a gender, as existing beyond the demarcation lines of social norms and stereotypes attached to what it supposedly means to be male or female. In most German restrooms, for example, pictograms differentiate between "male" and "female," the well-known binary construction of two sexes, and "disabled," a third category that exceeds gender specification. Constructions of disability are determined by the NOT: not attractive, not sexually desirable, not beautiful, not fertile, not lover, not married, not parent, etc. In a society informed by ableism, people with disabilities are perceived as "disabled people" whose impairment is not just one aspect of their being but rather the overarching condition dripping into every crack of one's life and shaping every moment.

Within the dominant fabrication of disability, gender is there but rendered completely invalid. This is especially true for people whose disability is apparent—or becomes visible in a particular moment. For some, racist imaginations of Black male hypersexuality immediately disappear once an impairment such as blindness enters the scene: The ableist gaze turns the Black man into a child, crippled and bereft of any self-determination. Both his blackness and his gender are no longer threatening since blindness declares them invalid. Or in yet another example, a six-year-old girl, Ashley, underwent a highly experimental medical intervention designed to freeze the child's physical and sexual development because physicians classified her as "severely disabled," and the declared goal of her parents was to "realign" Ashley's cognitive mind with her physical body. They decided that Ashley may age in chronological years, but her body will maintain a six-year-old's appearance, size, and weight for the rest of her life. The "Ashley Treatment" continues to be an option elected by parents and other caregivers of intellectually and developmentally disabled children.

The examples of the blind Black man turned into a child discursively and the girl frozen in an ongoing physical childhood point to a fact often overlooked in critical gender studies, namely, that gender (in any form) is nothing everybody has and retains. Instead, even in its binary construction as man/woman, gender is a signature only bestowed upon certain groups, i.e., temporarily able-bodied (TAB) people. An intersectional analysis opens avenues to look at *gender as a privilege denied* to those who are not in line with the social normativity of the "healthy" body.

What does this mean theologically? The creation story talks about God creating the world and all creatures: plants and birds and wild animals and so on. Each time a certain species is created, the text emphasizes the variety: God creates plants of every kind, birds of every kind, and wild animals of every kind, but when it comes to humans, no broad variety is mentioned. Humankind is created in God's image, and the only differentiation is gender: humankind is created male and female. Therefore, gender is God's gift to be revered and cherished. This might mean female bodies, male bodies, bodies containing both, and others containing something in between: in short, gender of every kind. Consequently, any attempt to deprive someone of enjoying this gift can be labeled a sin. Likewise, to attach gender exclusively to bodies that conform to ableist social standards is sinful.

A critical task of Christian theology today is to disentangle the unholy dichotomy of either being disabled or having a gender. To be created in God's image means to be wanted and seen by the Holy One as having gender of every kind and bodies of every kind. According to this fundamental anthropological understanding, healing can be reinterpreted as the process of the Christian community coming to terms with the violent implications of ableism and of welcoming all bodies the way they are. Maybe today Christian discipleship involves nothing less (in the words of Sharon Betcher) than "creating spaces, pockets of other worlds, of Crip Nations."

Conclusion

Without the presence of people with disabilities, the church does not reflect the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). For centuries, societies and structures have neglected to equally value the humanity of disabled people. Even in nations with laws intended to prohibit discrimination based on a person's disability, the pandemic demonstrated in stark relief the

ableist practices that discriminate against people with disabilities. Indeed, we live in a world that is neither designed for disabled people nor functions with them in mind.

Certainly, there are regional and cultural distinctives in how people with disabilities are viewed and treated. In some parts of the world, disability is viewed as a curse for wrongdoing or a matter of shame for the individual or family members. But the call of the church to move toward justice for marginalized people, full inclusion, and greater belonging for all God's children is not and should not be subject to the winds of cultural realities.

This invitation applies to ecumenical organizations as well. It is incumbent on every member church of the WCRC to take these matters to heart within their own denomination or communion. There is strong support for disability efforts in ecumenical circles and a willingness to work collaboratively across denominational and faith-based lines to advance the work of inclusion, justice, and belonging for and with people with disabilities. That bodes well for the WCRC and member churches seeking to respond to God's call to work for the full and just participation of people on the margins in our churches and in the world.

Reformed churches are best positioned to be at the vanguard of societal change that would usher in a more just, disability-inclusive society. Applying lessons learned from the disability voices during the pandemic would be a gift toward a more wholesome world. A genuinely Reformed church is one committed to ever reforming until "the whole body [is] joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped" (Ephesians 4:16). The church's pilgrimage towards becoming is a journey toward attaining "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). The body of Christ is revealed in its fullness in our experience when we recognize that each "joint" has something of value to supply. People with disabilities can offer much more to the fullness of life to a world more willing to recognize, receive, and respond.

To conclude, we call on the WCRC to assume a more directive role in bringing about the full inclusion, welcome, and belonging of people with disabilities, both within the church and in wider society. We make these six proposals:

Specific proposals

1. The WCRC must prioritize advocacy for the inclusion and full belonging of people with disabilities within churches. This begins with improving physical access, but to embrace people with disabilities as full members of Christ's body means including people with disabilities in ministerial, liturgical, and episcopal roles, social structures, leadership, and decision making. Those who experience the church as inaccessible theologically, socially, programmatically, or in other ways must be provided long-term accommodations.
2. The WCRC must encourage each member church to conduct accessibility audits periodically to identify barriers of attitude, communication, and physical access. Churches should complete an accessibility audit that includes and is guided by the strong participation of people with disabilities in their midst, since they are experts in what will help a church become more accessible. (Sample accessibility audit: <https://www.faithward.org/everybody-belongs-serving-together/church-accessibility-audit/>)

3. The WCRC must establish a disability policy of its own and distribute it widely, serving as an exemplar and model while encouraging member churches to establish their own disability policies. Creating a disability policy must include significant participation from people with disabilities. (Many denominations have created disability policies that could be shared. Here is one template of a sample policy: <https://www.faithward.org/everybody-belongs-serving-together/church-accessibility-policy-template/>)
4. Advocacy within churches must find its way into the wider society. The WCRC must urge its churches and associate bodies to place emphasis on engaging governments and non-governmental agencies, advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities, urging governments to sign and ratify the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and to propagate national legislation which contextualise these rights in all societies.
5. The WCRC must encourage churches to become aware of their legal responsibility under such laws and become exemplars of the actions that reflect commitment to providing for the full inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in all the spheres of the church's life and life in community.
6. The WCRC must adopt a consistent practice in how it uses language related to disability and those who live with disabilities.

Questions for Discussion

1. In your context what language is used to speak of people with disabilities? What do these terms indicate? What would be better language to use?
2. What conscious and unconscious biases are present in your church and society with regard to ability?
3. What can our churches do better to ensure better accessibility, both in terms of space as well as in terms of theological thinking?
4. What do people with disabilities teach us about God and the world around us?

For further reading:

Reformed World, Volume 70, No. 1, "Disability and the Church" (World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2022)

The Gift of Being: Called to be a Church of All and for All (Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, World Council of Churches, 2016)

Everybody Belongs, Serving Together (Reformed Church Press, 2021)
[everybody-belongs.com](https://www.everybody-belongs.com)

Towards Inclusive Church: Disability Inclusion Policy Guidelines (NCCI—Indian Disability Ecumenical Accompaniment, 2019).

Michelle Eastman, @disabilitytheology, "Disability and the Bible"
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CfxYMCFJyne/>

Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Brazos Press, 2022)

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