Disability Theology:

A Journal of Learning from Participation in Recent Conferences

by

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Introduction

It has been a privilege to be part of the small conversation group Bishop Susan Bell brought together to think about what the growing field of Disability Theology has to say to the Diocese of Niagara and our understanding of our participation in the mission of God. Prior to the invitation to be part of this group, I had only a vague knowledge of this growing area of theological inquiry. I have recently taken the opportunity to attend conferences focusing on this topic area. The first conference was partly hosted by McMaster Divinity College, and was entitled, "Deep and Wide: A Conference on Ecclesial Engagement with Disability Across Canada." The conference was held on May 10 through May 11, 2024 and the conference was held across multiple sites, including Calgary (Ambrose Seminary) and Vancouver (Northwest Seminary), in addition to the Hamilton site at McMaster Divinity College. The conference theme was "A Deeper Communion." The conference sought to explore ecclesial engagement with disability across Canada.

The second conference was the annual gathering of the Institute on Theology and Disability which was held June 17 through 20, 2024 at Boston College. This conference brought together a diverse and deeply thinking community to explore intersection of theology and disability from the perspectives of participants who were academics, practitioners, and interested others.

Disability issues have always been alive among God's people, but for various reasons that will be discussed in this paper, these issues have been largely ignored or

misunderstood. In the sphere of civil society it was not until 2005 that the Province of Ontario passed legislation for mandatory accessibility standards. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) aimed to identify, remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities. Sometime before, and certainly since, churches have concerned themselves with the accessibility of their buildings. Certainly, such attention was much needed. However, the field of Disability Theology, which in many ways was launched by the publication of Nancy Eiesland's book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability,* has shown us that there is much more for the church to consider.[1]

Our working group has done some reading, and we have begun the work of becoming familiar with the body of work in Disability Theology. We will soon begin to take stock of the ways in which this learning may impact our understanding and practice of ministry and engagement in God's mission. This paper seeks to summarize some of the learnings I have had from my experience attending these conferences and reflections on the experience afterwards. I can certainly affirm that the experience of attending these conferences has been and epiphany in many ways.

One aspect of this epiphany was a new awareness of the ableist language that creeps into our liturgy. Following the conference I attended in June, I returned to St. Jude's to celebrate the Eucharist at the Sunday morning liturgies. Planning the service for that Sunday before I had left for the conference, I had chosen "Eucharistic Prayer 4,"

[1] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

from the Book of Alternative Services.[2] I was struck by the words as I celebrated the Eucharist:

> From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with *memory, reason, and skill*; you made us the stewards of creation.[3]

The prayer seems to assume that "memory, reason, and skill" are blessings given to all members of humanity. Where does leave the members of Christ's body who have intellectual or physical disabilities, where these gifts are either absent or severely limited? Does this imply that such people are less than human? I am uncertain whether I could bring myself to say that prayer again.

The conferences have also caused me to think about several people with visible disabilities who attend St. Jude's and the extent to which we are a truly inclusive community. Dr. Léon van Ommen, who leads the Centre on Autism and Theology at the University of Aberdeen, told the conference about a beautiful moment in worship that he had witnessed. The offering was being received with the passing of the plate and a young man with a visible disability was clearly desirous of making a gift. He held his hand over the offering basket held by the usher, but he found himself temporarily unable to open his hand. His hand was perhaps in some sort of spasm. What made the moment beautiful was that the usher expressed no rush and showed that they were content to wait upon the young man as long as he would want. Eventually, the young man's assistant sitting with him asked, if he desired some assistance in making his gift. The young man agreed and was aided in opening his hand. There was a shared joy in the gathering as the community

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[2] Anglican Church of Canada, ed., *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, 8. pr (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1993), 201.

[3] Leon van Ommen, "Address to the Institute of Theology and Disability" (Lecture, Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, June 17, 2024).

witnessed the participation of the joyful giver.[4] Van Ommen's story seemed like a parable. How often are we rushed through the formalities of worship without giving thought to the needs of all the faithful gathered who may have special needs to enable them to participate fully in our liturgy? Are we willing to wait on persons with special needs? Are we able to listen to the needs of diverse worshippers and do we take their needs seriously when we do hear them?

The Disabled God

Nancy Eiesland wrote her book, *The Disabled God*, in 1994, thirty years ago.[5] On the occasion of this significant anniversary, both conferences had much to say about the impact of Eiesland's work. I admit that I was somewhat surprised to learn that this 'new' field in theology had been growing up for this length of time. With colleagues I met at these conferences, I wondered aloud how far behind those of us becoming alive to this work in the Diocese of Niagara must be. Almost universally I was assured that the church *everywhere* is only just beginning to come alive to the issues that this field of study is highlighting. Our beginning steps in the past few months have put us ahead of most.

Lisa Powell spoke about the influence of Eiesland's work in her lecture at the Institute.[6] Dr. Powell is the Director of Justice, Diversity, and Gender Studies at Ambrose University in Davenport, IA. Her forthcoming book celebrates the anniversary of

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[4] van Ommen.

[5] Eiesland, *The Disabled God.*

[6] Lisa Powell, "Address to the Institute of Theology and Disability" (Lecture, Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, July 18, 2024).

Eiesland's, *The Disabled God*, and is itself entitled, *The Disabled God Revisited*.[7] In her lecture, Powell summarized Eiesland's major theological claims, discussed some critiques of Eiesland's work, and explored the question of what is means to call a theology 'liberatory'.

Eiesland's Major Theological Claims

Nancy Eiesland was a sociologist and professor at Emory University and the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. Eiesland was born with a congenital bone defect and underwent numerous operations in her youth, experiencing considerable pain and disability. While completing a Master's degree at Candler, Eiesland complained that the church, for all of its professed concern for the poor and oppressed, ignored the disabled. It is said that her professor told her, "That is *your* work."[8] Eiesland became an activist and eventually consulted with the likes of the United Nations on disability rights issues.[9] *The Disabled God*, came out of Eiesland's Master's thesis and has had an enormous influence.

Eiesland makes several important theological claims that have become foundational for the field of Disability Theology and its influence upon the church and Christian practice, including matters of Christology and theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

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[7] Lisa D. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2023).

[8] Douglas Martin, "Nancy Eiesland Is Dead at 44; Wrote of a Disabled God," *New York Times*, March 21, 2009, sec. Obituaries, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/us/22eiesland.html.

[9] Martin.

Christology and Theological Anthropology

Eiesland's central claim, that *God is disabled*, begins with the Christological foundation of the incarnation. As God incarnate, Jesus Christ, takes on our humanity. As Eiesland writes, "Christology is fundamentally about human experience and human bodies as partially constitutive of God. God is with us: Emmanuel (Matthew 1:22-23)".[10]

Eiesland contends that it was only at the resurrection that the disciples first understood the person Jesus for who he was as the incarnate God.

> Only through the lens of resurrection could they understand the meaning and significance of the life of Jesus on earth. In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied *both* impaired hands *and* feet and pierced side and the imago Dei.[11]

Appearing to his disciples following his resurrection Jesus says, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:36-38). Eiesland observes,

> Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.[12]

The implications of this theological anthropology are many. For example, this understanding repudiates the conception that disability is a consequence of sin. To be

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[10] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99.

[11] Eiesland, 99–100, emphasis added.

[12] Eiesland, 100.

sure, injustice against persons with disabilities is sinful, however, disabled bodies are not "artifacts of sin, original or otherwise."[13] Disabled bodies participate in the *image of God*, not *despite* their impairments, but *through* them.

Eiesland also argues that Jesus' presentation of his scarred hands, feet, and side to his disciples decenters the taboo attached to disability that results in physical avoidance of the disabled. Jesus' invitation for his disciples to touch his wounds—"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." (John 20:27a)—calls for his followers not only to embrace those with disability, but also to explore their own (perhaps hidden) disability. Eiesland argues that the wound in Jesus' side invites us to consider the internal damage done by spears plunged deeply into human flesh, and to remember the hidden, non-visible disabilities that are carried by all human beings. Eiesland writes:

> For many people whose hidden disabilities keep them from participating fully in the church or from feeling full-bodied acceptance by Christ, accepting the disabled God may enable reconciliation with their own bodies and Christ's body the church. Hence, disability not only does not contradict the human-divine integrity, it becomes a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.[14]

God the Son is the disabled God. Jesus remains true human and wounded in the ascension. In Jesus' broken body we see God incarnate in true humanity. We learn that full personhood is available to genuine humanity.

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[13] Eiesland, 101.

[14] Eiesland, 101.

Ecclesiology and the Eucharist

The Eucharist is central to Eiesland's understanding of the church and ours. The church is nourished and shaped by the broken body received. Eiesland points out that the bodily experience of Holy Communion relies on the brokenness of Jesus. Eiesland argues,

> It is the *disabled God* who is present at the Eucharist table—the God who was physically tortured, arose from the dead, and is present in heaven and on earth, disabled and whole. This is the dangerous memory of the crucified and resurrected one. For in Jesus' resurrection, the full and accessible presence of the disabled God is among us in our continuing human history, as people with disabilities, as the temporarily able-bodied, as church, and as communion of struggle.[15]

As the body of Christ, the church shares the reality of Jesus' body with the reality of its impaired hands, feet, and side, yet it also consists of the body whose life and unity comes from the Holy Spirit. "In summoning us to remembrance of his body and blood at table, the disabled God calls us to liberating relationships with God, our bodies, and others."[16]

The church is constituted as a *communion of struggle*. As bodies are not perfect, there is no perfect church. The church, Christ's body is broken and marked by sin. Yet the church as a "communion of struggle" is made possible "though not made easy, by brokenness."[17] As such, the church's first challenge is a to cultivate a willingness to risk conversion.

The members of the church represent an essential diversity, interrelated by necessity and often hating the very differences that make us indispensable to one another.

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[15] Eiesland, 107; emphasis added.

[16] Eiesland, 107–8.

[17] Eiesland, 108.

We recognize our differences and hold in trust our common calling as people of God, the foundation of church. We are called always to embrace the diversity of God's people, and to empower people with non-conventional bodies as full members and participants in the life of the church.[18]

Eiesland offers a story that describes her lived experience of the Eucharist in most churches she has attended. When everyone else would go forward to kneel or stand at the altar rail to receive their communion, she would often be informed by an usher that she did not need to do the same. She would be given the opportunity to receive where her wheelchair was positioned among the pews. Eiesland observes that rather than asking the question how her presence in a wheelchair should challenge the local church's practice of exclusion, the decision-makers chose to make her disability the 'problem.' For her, the experience of receiving the Eucharist was transformed from a communal experience to a solitary one; "from a sacralization of Christ's broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body."[19]

Critiques of Eiesland

Powell described several critiques that have been raised about Eiesland's work over the years. Some have criticized Eiesland's almost exclusive focus on *physical disabilities* without reference to mental, emotional or other dimensions of disability. We might ask how Jesus' wounds speak to these realities.[20]

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[18] Eiesland, 109.

[19] Eiesland, 112–13.

[20] Powell, "Address to the Institute of Theology and Disability."

Some criticize Eiesland for a romanticization and naturalization of *impairment*. Powell quoted one critic who has said, "Bodies are amazing and gross and weird, and strange—why do we have to feel so positive about it? Why is it important for us to feel that way?[21] Powell observes, "Trying to expand the normality and body positivity presumes that all bodies need to be considered 'beautiful' and forces everyone to feel good about their bodies. Not all will 'feel good' about their disability for many reasons. There is a type of hegemony inherent in the notion that all should rejoice in their disability.

It should also be remembered that many disabilities are created by tragic or horrific events. We might think, for example, of Jesus' own wounded body, or currently of the suffering children of Palestine whose bodies face amputation, starvation and malnutrition impairments, just as children worldwide suffer in the face of war and civil unrest.[22] In certain circumstances disability may be the cause of great lament.

Another critique raised the question of *whether Jesus' resurrected body should really be considered 'disabled.'* One might easily argue that Jesus' resurrected body could be described as 'super-abled.' Jesus' resurrected body is able, for example, to appear behind locked doors, to disappear without notice, and most surprisingly defy even death. This critique, however, is surely answered by the fact that Jesus body and its scars are a sign of redemption and hope, that the gospel transforms painful wounds to provide a wholeness more profound.

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[21] Unknown author quoted in Powell.

[22] Powell.

Nancy Eiesland: Summary

Nancy Eiesland characterized her book as a work of *liberation theology*. For our Diocese of Niagara whose members include the disabled and able-bodied, those with visible disabilities, and those with non-visible disability, this book demands that we examine our practices, our structures, and our images about both persons with disabilities and about able-bodiedness. Nancy Eiesland's legacy continues to move the church toward a new order that includes liberation for all.

The Problem with Normal

Disability Theology highlights the problem of 'normal.' The idea of *normal* is entirely a social construction. Our idea of what is normal in terms of our body or mind is constructed by a society that uplifts the characteristics it prefers. Several speakers at both conferences spoke to this problem.[23]

In his essay, "Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality," Stanley Hauerwas explores dimensions of the question: 'what is normal?'[24] Exploring the ideas of *normality* and *difference* he offers a critique of the 'principle of normality.' What is normality? Hauerwas notes that normality, as it is often formulated, can be dangerous for people with developmental disabilities. "The most stringent power we have over another is not physical coercion but the ability to have another accept our definition of them."[25] Hauerwas argues that what is required is not a common *norm*, but a *form of community*

[23] With apologies to the speakers, I don't recall who they were specifically. I do recall at least one of theme referencing the work of Stanely Hauerwas, with which I was familiar.

[24] Stanley Hauerwas, "Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality," *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health* 8, no. 3–4 (September 23, 2008).

[25] Hauerwas, 24.

which respects diversity and seeks to enable each member to accept the "gift of differentness," and to accept that difference without regret.[26]

Adherence to what we might call the 'cult of normality' has had tragic results in human society. Various political mechanisms have been utilized to enforce normality. Statistics are often used to provide the suggestion of an objective, 'scientific basis,' for the definition of normal. Techniques of population management, including eugenics, have been justified to enforce normality. Ideas of normality coerce people to conform. The *status quo*, together with the principalities and powers of society, benefit from the constructions of normality.

It would benefit us to reflect on the words of the Apostle Paul who challenges us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Paul's encouragement seems to reject the *normal* and calls us to embrace the diversity of Christ's body, the church.

> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:

We might observe that Paul calls us to repent, to turn from the cult of normalcy and to resist the world's way of seeing others. We are called to live with one another as vulnerable human beings, relying upon one another. Wholeness is not the product of self-sufficiency or independence, but rather of the genuinely inclusive communion that results

[26] Hauerwas, "Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality."

from sharing our humanity with one another in light of the grace of God. To exist as a finite creature is to be contingent and vulnerable.

Disability: Models of Understanding

Several presenters at the Institute and Deep and Wide conferences described the various models of understanding that influence thinking about and interactions with persons with disabilities. It may be helpful to summarize some of the more influential of these here, along with some of their more obvious strengths and weaknesses.

The Medical Model

The Medical Model looks at disability in terms of biological inferiority and functional limitations. It does not consider social or geographic considerations. The World Health Organization's *Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps* provides an excellent example of this model in its definitions.

> *Impairment*. Any loss or abnormality of psychological or anatomical structure or function.
>
> *Disability*. Any restriction or lack of ability (resulting from an impairment) to perform an activity in a manner or within a range considered normal for a human being.
>
> *Handicap*. Any disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal for that individual.[27]

The reliance of these definitions upon socially defined understandings of normality is striking. This model places the source of 'a problem' within a single impaired person and concludes that solutions are found by focusing on the individual. The Medical Model

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[27] World Health Organization, ed., *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps: A Manual of Classification Relating to the Consequences of Disease* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1980).

assumes that the first step towards a solution is to find a cure that will make disabled people more "normal" (to use the WHO terminology). Such 'solutions' invariably prove to be inadequate or counterproductive because disabled people are not necessarily sick or cannot be improved by therapeutic treatment.

This model has dominated the formulation of *disability policy* for years. While therapeutic approaches may enhance the lives of some disabled people, this model does not offer a realistic perspective from the viewpoint of disabled people themselves. To begin with, the label of 'abnormality' is problematic.[28] Also, the model imposes a paternalistic approach to problem-solving which, although perhaps well intentioned, concentrates on care in such a way that ultimately provides justification for institutionalization and segregation. This restricts disabled people's opportunities to make choices, control their lives and develop their potential. Finally, this model tends to foster existing prejudices in the minds of employers. Because the condition is considered to be 'medical,' a disabled person is considered to be, *ipso facto*, prone to ill health and sick leave, to physical deterioration, and likely to be less productive than other work colleagues.

The Charity Model

The Charity Model depicts disabled people as victims of circumstance and deserving of pity. The Charity Model and Medical Model are together the most influential models in shaping thinking about disability among persons who regard themselves as non-disabled. There are multitudes of charities that focus on disability in

[28] This, of course, is the other side of the coin in what has already been said concerning the "problem with normal."

what has become a competitive business of fund-raising. The media is full of graphically illustrated appeals, in which disabled children (especially) are depicted alongside young 'victims' of famine, poverty, child abuse and other circumstances. Whilst such appeals raise considerable funds for services and equipment which are not provided by the governmental agencies, many disabled people find the negative victim-image thoroughly offensive. In fact, the images are so disturbing that these are often labelled as *disability porn*.[29]

The Charity Model is problematic for the way that it is dis-enabling and the cause of much discrimination. Because disabled people are seen as tragic victims, it follows that they need care, are not capable of looking after themselves or managing their own affairs, and need charity to survive, all of which also supports the institutionalization of disabled persons. Moreover, the idea of being recipients of charity tends to threaten the self-esteem of people with disabilities. In the eyes of "pitying" donors, charitable giving carries with it an expectation of gratitude and a set of terms imposed upon the beneficiary. This is not only patronizing, but it severely the limits the choices open to disabled people. Again, employers are tempted to view disabled people as charitable cases. Rather than address the real issues of creating a workplace conducive to the employment of people with disabilities, employers may conclude that making charitable donations meets social and economic obligations.

This is not to say charities, caring, and charitable acts, which enrich society and bring desperately needed funds are entirely unhelpful. It does, however, highlight the need to educate charity managers and professionals to review the way they operate and

[29] Beware that this term also refers to sexually graphic material.

ensure that funds are channeled to promote the empowerment of disabled people and their full integration into our society as equal citizens who requiring dignity and respect rather than pity.

The Social Model

The Social Model views disability as a consequence of environmental, social and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with impairments from maximum participation in society. It is best summarised in the definition of disability from the Disabled Peoples' International: "the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others, due to physical or social barriers."[30] The philosophy underlying this model originates in the US civil rights movement and has been championed by several disability rights organization worldwide. The argument follows that from a socio-political viewpoint, disability stems from the failure of society to adjust to meet the needs and aspirations of a disabled minority. This presents a radically different perspective on disability issues and parallels the doctrine of those concerned with racial equality that "racism is a problem of whites from which blacks suffer." If the problem lies with society and the environment, then society and environment must change. If a wheelchair user cannot use a bus, the bus must be redesigned.

The strength of this model lies in it placing the onus upon society and not the individual. At the same time, it focuses on the *needs of the individual*, whereas the Medical Model uses *diagnoses* to produce categories of disability, and assumes that

[30] Disabled Peoples' International, "DPI United," accessed August 12, 2024, http://dpi.org/.

people with the same impairment can be lumped together as having identical needs and abilities, the social model advocates for social change.

The Social Model faces challenges, however. Significantly, it must be noted that as the population gets older the numbers of people with impairments will rise, making it harder for society to adjust. It should also be noted that while environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of the experience of disability, and indeed are disabling themselves, to suggest that these social factors are all there is, is to deny the personal experience of physical and intellectual restrictions, or of illness.

The Economic Model

The Economic Model focuses on the extent to which a disability prevents a person from working and considers the financial implications for individuals, families, and society. This model is unhelpfully rooted in the assumption that a person's worth is tied to their productivity. Policy makers use this model primarily to assess the *economics* related to disabled employees and the distribution of disability related benefits. The challenge of allowing for the dignity of meaningful work and the economic participation of disabled persons remains. Application of the Economic Model is often used to justify policies that ensure that benefits that are part of most social security systems are not designed to remove disabled persons from poverty. The public policy maker must balance the equity inherent in the right of the individual to self-fulfillment and social participation through work, and the efficiency of the economic system to provide economic prosperity for all

The Religious Model

The Religious Model of understanding disability has long been fraught with difficulties. In this model disability is viewed as punishment inflicted by the divine upon an individual or family. It may be understood that the 'sin' resulting in such punishment was committed by the disabled person, someone else in the family, such as a parent or grandparent, or a community group.

In other cases, 'evil spirits,' are thought to be the explanation for variations from norms of behaviour, especially those related to what may be understood medically as mental illness, or epilepsy. Acts of exorcism or sacrifice may be performed to expel or placate the responsible evil force at work. Disabled persons are often persecuted in these scenarios and sometimes even killed. The stigma related to the 'evil presence' often extends to a whole family and often leads to social exclusion. In still other cases, the suffering related to the disability may be considered as a promise of—or preparation for—some future reward.

Christians recognize echoes of this sort of understanding within their tradition and sacred texts. For example, John's Gospel describes an encounter between Jesus and his disciples and a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus the question that betrays their understanding of the man's disability, "Rabbi, who *sinned*, this man or his parents, that he as born blind?" (John 9:2, emphasis added). In his response, Jesus clearly rejects the disciple's understanding that the man's impairment must be a form of punishment either for his own sin or of another, but Jesus does provide and alternative 'religious' interpretation. Jesus claims, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3b). We may understand Jesus' claim as referring only this this man, rather

than persons born blind in general. Much can (and has) been said about John's inclusion of this story in his Gospel narrative. John seems to use the account to warn his readers against a form of *spiritual* blindness that is evident among some of Jesus critics. That said, the passage highlights that many religious traditions, including Christianity, have sought to understand disability with a model which at times is less than helpful (at best), or sinful in itself (at worst). Much of the work of Disability Theology seeks to undo the harmful effects of such misunderstandings in religious communities and wider society.

The Identity Model

Like the Social Model, the Identity Model sees disability as a social construction. Within this model, disability is not viewed as something to be ashamed of, nor is it made secondary to membership in a more socially accepted identity group. With this model the movement toward Disability Pride was born and the existence of *disability culture* began to be recognized.[31] Where the Social Model led people to use person-first language when speaking of "persons living with a disability," this model does not emphasize such language, and generally prefers to refer to "disabled persons."[32]

Summary: Models of Understanding Disability

In addition to the models of understanding disability I have described here, there are many other models, some of which are permutations and combinations of the models described above. I have tried to summarize a few of the significant models of

[31] For more information, see AmeriDisability, "What Is Disability Pride?," accessed August 14, 2024, https://www.ameridisability.com/how-to-display-disability-pride/.

[32] This is, generally, my own usage in this paper.

understanding discussed in the literature and at the conferences I attended. It was my experience that understanding these models helped me to better understand some of the history of this discussion as well as the approaches that have been taken over time. Importantly, it helped me to better understand the experience of disabled persons who have been viewed, and often discriminated against, in light of these models of understanding.

Disability Wisdom in Worship and Prayer[33]

Rebecca F. Spurrier and Sarah Jean Barton presented their findings from collaborative research coming out of a discussion they led at the 2023 meeting of the Institute.[34] At the 2023 meeting they had shared resources they had collected for worship and prayer. In their 2024 presentation, they presented their findings from research that followed how these resources were received among disabled persons. Their findings illuminate what was most meaningful for the disabled persons who participated in the study within the practices that were shared. Among their findings, the following stands out.[35]

(1) The disabled God is God with us. Nancy Eiesland's important theological insight continues to be a source of empowerment for disabled Christians. This insight

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[33] Sarah Jean Barton and Rebecca F. Spurrier, "Disability Wisdom in Worship and Prayer" (Seminar, Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, June 17, 2024).

[34] Rebecca F. Spurrier is Associate Dean for Worship Life and Assistant Professor of Worship at Columbia Theological Seminary; she is the author of *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). Sarah Jean Barton is a lay episcopalian and holds a dual appointment in the School of Medicine and Duke Divinity School as Assistant Professor of Orthopedic Surgery and Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics, Duke Divinity School; she is the author of *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022).

[35] Barton and Spurrier, "Disability Wisdom in Worship and Prayer."

encourages disabled Christians even in the face of the ableism they experience in the church, still God is present with them and for them.

(2) Disabled people are made in the image of God. The observation that God, in all of God's glory, appeared with scars, encourages disabled Christians. As persons made in God's image, disabled Christians can understand God's love for them, their inherent dignity as bearers of the *imago Dei,* as well as their vocation as participants in the divine life and God's mission in the world.

(3) God works out God's purposes through disabled clergy and leaders. Disabled Christians are gifted by the Spirit in beautiful ways. Disabled leaders may be empowered to lead change the responds to the needs of the disabled and other marginalized persons. They may lead the worship of the entire community and take responsibility for any roles to which God may call them.

(4) When disabled people participate things do change and this is a participation in divine. Disabled people recognized that their own participation is the life of the church is transformative of the entire body and a sign of a fuller life in God.

(5) Interdependence and relationality. Disabled persons appreciated the fact that God often communicates through interdependence and relationality. These are charisms of the church that are simultaneously 'ordinary' and 'miraculous.'

(6) Intersecting identities and intersectional justice. Disabled persons are more than their disabilities. They find their identities in many different realities, as children of God, as parents, as teachers, as members of various ethnic and racial communities. Many justice issues present themselves at the intersection of these various identities and the life of the church in prayer and witness is a vital place for exploring these themes.

(7) The importance of the Eucharist. Disabled persons expressed deep appreciation for the Eucharist and the experience of grace within it. In the Eucharist we experience connection and belonging. The Eucharist is the site where communion, connection, belonging, interdependence, and reliance upon God are experienced profoundly.

(8) The importance of music. Music can provide a space where participation is broadened. Theologies are also embedded in music and therefore it is important that worship planners carefully curate the resources that are used. Music can also be a place where our 'ideas of perfection' are decentered.

(9) Consensual and non-consensual participation. Disabled Christians expressed that consensuality is an important for them. They are appreciative when what will happen in worship is made explicit in advance. This form of hospitality allows disabled persons to be prepared and anticipate any challenges they may face as they participate. For example, if worship is to include 'the Passing of the Peace,' what is the community's culture around touch? What if worship participants are uncomfortable with forms of touch such as hugs? Consent (and especially, the lack thereof) should be universally respected and community should take care that worshippers understand this value.[36]

Disability and the Bible: Dismantling Ableist Readings

Andrew R. Davis was the featured speaker on the first evening of the Institute's gathering at Boston College.[37] In his presentation, Davis addressed the question that lies

[36] Barton and Spurrier.

[37] Andrew R. Davis is Professor of Old Testament at the Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry. In addition to his academic work, Professor Davis is active within the Down Syndrome community and is a volunteer coach for the Wellesley STARS Special Olympics swim team.

between the context of the Bible at the time of its writing, and the world and context of the reader today. Davis asked, "should we focus more on the world behind the text, or should our focus be on the world in front of the text?"[38] Davis noted that much recent scholarship in readings concerning disability in the Bible have focused on ancient settings. While this may be the natural domain of the academic biblical scholar, the pastor-preacher biblical scholar must always ask the question of what we learn from our present experience. Reading the Bible through the lens of Disability Theology and current context is therefore important work. Davis acknowledged that there remains a gap to be addressed between these two areas of scholarship. Davis offered comments on a few biblical texts where he noted the insight Disability Theology offers for understanding.

The Story of Joseph

The story of Joseph and his family is well known. Joseph was the favourite son of the patriarch Jacob. Jacob displayed extra affection to Joseph, who was born to his father's old age, presenting him with a specially crafted garment. Joseph's jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually ended up incarcerated, but where he was ultimately promoted because of his special gifts to became a ruler of the land, second only to Pharaoh.

Davis brought to our attention the work of Samuel Levine who has posited that the Bible's description of Joseph might fit with the suggestion that Joseph was autistic.[39]

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[38] Davis, Andrew, "Disability and the Bible: The Pluraformity of the Bible" (Lecture, Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, June 17, 2024).

[39] Samuel J. Levine, *Was Yosef on the Spectrum? Understanding Joseph through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources*, First Edition (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications, 2019).

Joseph's behaviors, interpersonal relationships, special gifts, and personal development are often difficult to understand, and at times seem to defy explanation. Levine presents a portrait of Joseph as an individual on the autism spectrum. Viewed through this lens, Joseph emerges as a more familiar and less enigmatic individual, exhibiting both strengths and weaknesses commonly associated with autism spectrum disorder. What his brothers viewed as the father's favoritism may have simply been the accommodations that his father provided because he understood his son. Joseph's social awkwardness and the difficulty Joseph has in interacting with others combined with a highly focused skill set has many of the traits common to autism.[40]

Jeremiah 31:8-9

Jeremiah 31:8-9 speaks to the promise of a return from the exile of God's people. One of the interesting features of this passage is the textual variations between the Masoretic and Septuagint texts. The Masoretic text is the basis for our New Revised Standard Version translation:[41]

> [8] See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
> and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
> *among them the blind and the lame,*
> those with child and those in labor, together;
> a great company, they shall return here.
> [9] With weeping they shall come,
> and with consolations I will lead them back,
> I will let them walk by brooks of water,
> *in a straight path in which they shall not stumble*;
> for I have become a father to Israel,
> and Ephraim is my firstborn. (Jeremiah 31:8-9)

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[40] Levine.

[41] Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Carol Ann Newsom, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version; with the Apocrypha; an Ecumenical Study Bible*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); emphasis added.

It is striking to note that the Septuagint text makes no mention of the "blind and the lame" (v. 8), even though their inclusion in the passage seems important for an understanding of the passage. God is bringing *all* God's people back, but it seems from the Masoretic text, that God is especially accommodating the blind and the lame. Interestingly, God does not accommodate them by healing them from their disability, but by providing a straight path where they will not stumble (v. 9).

Further Resources

More resources are needed as we seek to reinterpret ableist readings of the Bible. *The Bible and Disability* is a helpful (but quite expensive) resource.[42] One highlight from this commentary comes from the passage Acts 8:26-40, which tells the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is very disabled, *cut off* from so many opportunities, and is found reading about a likewise disabled suffering servant (Isaiah 53). When the eunuch is baptized, he receives 'a name that will not be cut off' (Isaiah 56:3-5).[43]

As the editors argue in the preface, "that the experience of people with disabilities has been absent from the standard scriptural hermeneutic has not only been 'to the detriment of people with disabilities' but has also been 'a profound loss to the church'".[44] That these resources are not readily available should be of concern to church leadership.

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[42] Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal Carl Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

[43] Melcher, Parsons, and Yong.

[44] Melcher, Parsons, and Yong, viii.

Let Justice Roll Down: A Practical Theology of Disabled Prayer

Sarah Jean Barton's address, "Let Justice Roll Down: A Practical Theology of Disabled Prayer" was inspired by her son whose name is Amos.[45] 'Amos' is also the name of the biblical prophet who wrote, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The name is derived from the Hebrew verb, *to carry*; and has the meaning, *borne by God*.

Barton told us the story of a time when she had been teaching the book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request,* by Amy Kenny.[46] Kenny's work brought matters of prayer to Barton's attention and interest, and she began to wonder what should our bodies call forth? What sorts of prayers are borne in our bodies and in the bodies of the disabled? What possibilities for prayer does the experience of disability make possible? What are the possibilities for prayer that are borne in the bodies of nonverbal persons, those unable to form prayers with language?[47]

Barton outlined the ableist assumptions that often accompany prayer with and for the disabled. As Kenny points out in her work, the most common assumption brought to the intersection of prayer and disability is that the disabled are in need of *healing*, cure, or restoration. Such prayer is often offered on behalf of the disabled without asking if such healing is what they desire. Practices of prayer often assume a capacity for attention. Many people without obvious disability find it challenging to hold their attention for a

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[45] Sarah Jean Barton, "Let Justice Roll Down: A Practical Theology of Disabled Prayer" (Lecture, Institute for Theology and Disability, Boston College, July 19, 2024).

[46] Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

[47] Barton, "Let Justice Roll Down: A Practical Theology of Disabled Prayer."

long prayer. What about people with Attention Deficit Disorder? The *centrality and necessity of speech* is another assumption brought to prayer. What, again, about prayer for those who are nonverbal. The place of *stillness, silence, or certain postures of prayer* are also problematic for many disabled persons. Very often, persons who are not able to accommodate themselves to these expectations are viewed as disruptive to the gathered worshipping community and, therefore, again become subjects for prayer requests.

Barton asked the question about how our practices and theologies of prayer might be transformed. For Barton this begins with understanding that disabled prayer is a practice and theology of the ordinary, and not a practice of production. Such prayer notices what happens among and in one another in the encounter with the divine. Disabled life opens us up to more expansive possibilities inaccessible to groups of exclusively non-disabled persons.

Barton observed that justice-making is the hallmark medium of how God communicates God's self to us (see Amos 5). Disabled prayer is prayer that refuses to cease seeking creative embodiment of God's power in rolling, prolific justice. Such prayer may be seen in various expressions. (1) Disabled prayer as *joy*. Perhaps our most joyful activities already form a prayer of joy. Barton quoted Julia Watts Belzer, one of the Institute participants who has said, "God has wheels" (see Daniel 7:9).[48] What if the disabled take joy in the way that they navigate the world? Wheels may by part of their engagement with God. What would happen if we tried praying out of our exuberance or awe?

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[48] "As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire." Daniel 7:9 (NRSV)

(2) Disabled prayer as *lament*. This is not the sort of prayer that is 'prayed at' disabled persons. This is lament that comes out of the experience of exclusion, ableism, and thwarted callings. Laments are also embodied, often in uncomfortable ways, a kind of wordless prayer where anger or sadness encounters God. Disabled persons are able to lament daily in their lives which experience injustice.

(3) Disabled prayer *in loving community*. Where we learn something of God's loving listening, care, and desire for justice there is a loving community that embodies prayer. Lament calls communities into action, addressing itself not only the listening God, but also those of us who commit injustice but seek repentance and transformation. In community we encounter the God of justice and that is encountered in prayer.

(4) Disabled prayer as *disability justice*. Disabled justice is a vision of the kingdom of God and universal collective liberation. Prayer gives us a thirst for justice and allows us to imagine God's future. In Mark 10, Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Justice transforms ableist prayer toward a prayer of partnership and helps us to discern what help is needed. Justice helps us to see our own internalized ableism. When Jesus' disciples hear Bartimaeus cry out, they view him as a nuisance. When Jesus hears Bartimaeus he stops to listen. Prayer shaped by justice stops to listen, gives regard to the humanity of others, "[respects] the dignity of every human being."[49]

Barton's address was one of the highlights of the Institute gathering for me. Her idea around 'prayer as joy' found resonance in a story that I heard earlier in the day. I was seated beside Phil Letizia, who has authored the forthcoming book, *Held in the Love*

[49] From the "Baptismal Covenant", Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*.

of God: Discipleship and Disability.[50] Phil is the Senior Minister in a large Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He was telling me the story of a young man named William who was to join the church through formal membership. In the reformed tradition, membership is considered an important step and normally requires an intellectual accent to certain articles of faith. William has a condition known as Angelman's Syndrome, a condition I am very familiar with as my nephew lives with the same condition. Persons with Angelman's are non-verbal, and if they do use words, they lack their 'normal' meaning. William would not be able to assent to articles of faith in the prescribed manner of the Presbyterian Church. But William takes great joy in the church's music. Joe explained to me that instead of being asked to assent to articles of faith, William would be invited to respond as he might naturally do to his favourite worship song. His response and offering to the community would be considered as his affirmation of faith, just as legitimate as any other member would make.

Closing Reflections

I want again to express my gratitude for Bishop Susan Bell for convening the conversation group reflecting on these matters and to the group members who are a vital part of the conversation we need to have in our diocese. I am also grateful for the Leadership Grant that was made available to support conference expenses in Boston.

The constraints of time do not allow me to discuss all that I learned in these conferences and my study over the summer. Several of the people I met at the conferences have published books which I hope to read soon. Of particular interest are

[50] Phil Letizia, *Held in the Love of God: Discipleship and Disability* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2024).

those by Sarah Barton, Phil Letizia, Julia Watts-Belzer, and Amy Kenny. I hope that I will be able to provide an annotated bibliography in the near future.

I could also say much more about local resources and partners that are available to us. For example, Karis Disability Services (formerly Christian Horizons) is engaged in outreach in Ontario. I met several people from this organization at both conferences and I believe that they may be of assistance to us in our learning journey.

I will conclude however with a short reflection on two significant impacts I've experienced in this learning journey. I have described the first as a new awareness of disability issues that go far beyond accessibility. I am thinking about ministry and mission in very different ways as I consider my own ableist assumptions and language, as I reflect on biblical texts, and as I relate to parishioners and family living with disability.

At this point of my journey of learning I feel a profound deep sense of hopefulness for the future of our church which seeks to follow Jesus in the path of justice and radical hospitality. It seems that God is always showing us new dimensions of the kingdom he is bringing and calling forth among us. The conversation we have begun is a step in the way of Jesus. God has blessed our church with a great diversity of people. As we learn from one another, in that blessed diversity, we learn about God—even the Disabled God—who carries our fragile nature in his own. I am convinced that our continued learning will be fruitful in helping us embody more fully our participation in the mission of God.

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