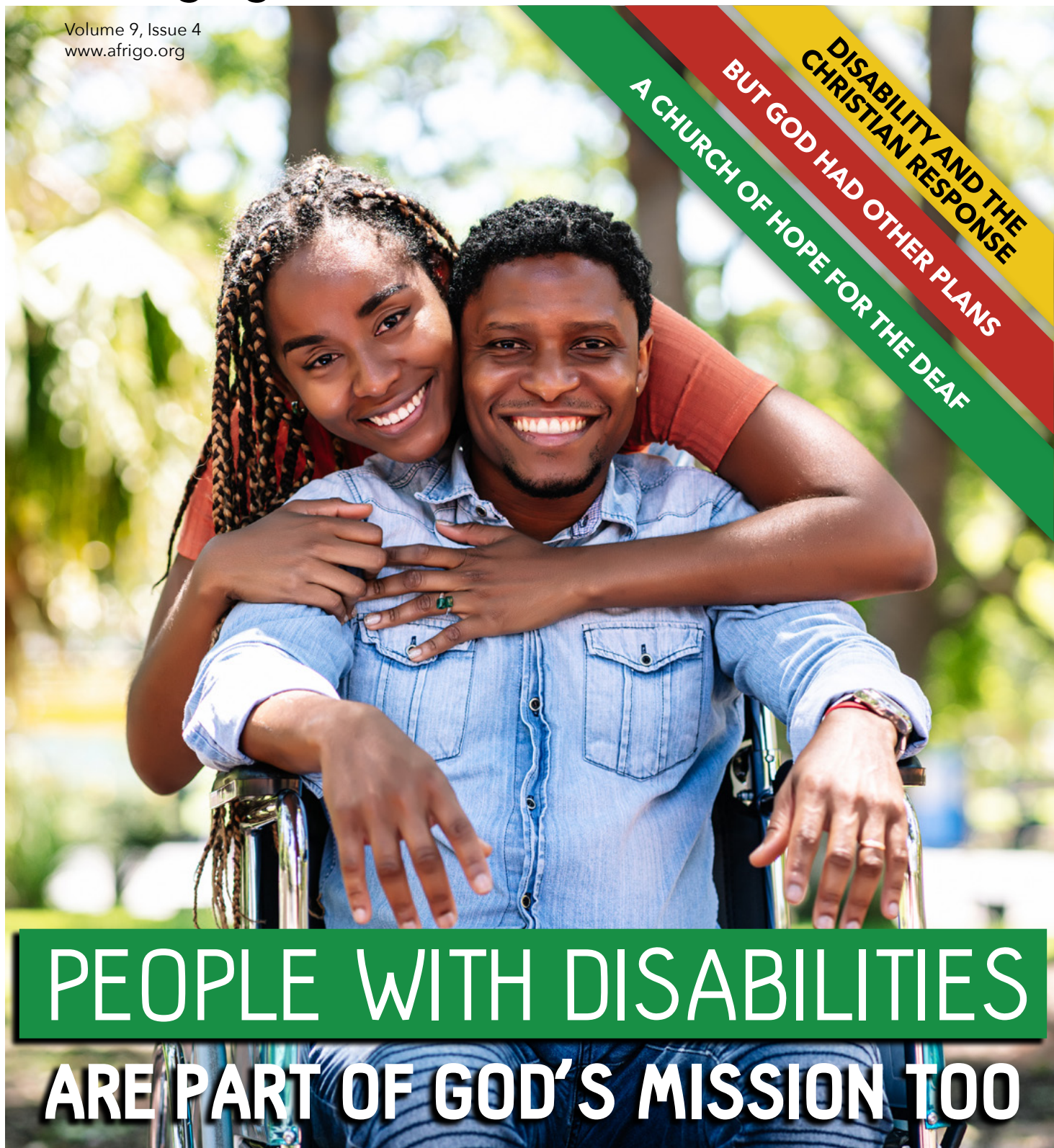


AFRIGO

Encouraging the African Church in world mission

Volume 9, Issue 4
www.afrigo.org



DISABILITY AND THE
CHRISTIAN RESPONSE
BUT GOD HAD OTHER PLANS
A CHURCH OF HOPE FOR THE DEAF

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
ARE PART OF GOD'S MISSION TOO

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AFRIGO is a publication aimed at raising awareness, mobilizing, training, and inspiring churches and individuals in Africa towards global mission.

Managing Editor: Kate Azumah

Design: Pilgrim Communications

Cover photo: Freepik

The views expressed in the various features in this magazine are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Stock photos are occasionally used. Pseudonyms are used when there are security concerns.

WELCOME PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

BY JOSEPH MWAURA



When you hear the words “people with disabilities”, what thoughts immediately come to mind? Persons with disabilities include those with “long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations).

The things we believe about disability affect how we think about people with disabilities and the way we treat them. As Christians, it is important that we are informed about the truth. When we are exposed to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs from other sources, we need to hold them up against the Bible to see if they agree with God’s Word and his ways, or whether they contradict them. As Christ’s disciples we need to think and act like Jesus.

Of the 35 recorded miracles in the New Testament, 23 involved people with disabilities. This gives an indication into the heart of God for people with disabilities and how much he prioritizes them. Jesus went out of his way to encounter and to include people with disabilities because he loved and valued them.

In John 9:1-7, Jesus makes it clear that disability is not a result of sin or a curse. His disciples focused on who sinned but Jesus shifted their attention to the “why”. In this story, the disability was a way of displaying God’s glory through Jesus’ compassion and healing.

We are to abandon ways of thinking and doing that are unlike Jesus’ ways and consider people with disabilities in the manner that God does. A paradigm shift is possible when we discover how God views and treats people with disabilities and how he wants us to view and treat them also. We have to dispel myths about disability and replace them with the truth: from ignorance and pitying to caring, establishing relationships, and co-labouring in God’s vineyard.

In the Great Banquet story of Luke 14:15-24, the master represents God, and the servants represent us the Church. God

calls us to welcome the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame. In the Old Testament, King David orders Mephibosheth to be brought from Lodebar to the king’s table (2 Sam. 9:1-13). Lodebar is a place of no pasture, no recognition, isolation, neglect, and emptiness while the king’s table is a place of abundance, satisfaction, honour, and fulfilment.

The Church doesn’t need to go far; people with disabilities are a mission field at our doorstep. Becoming an accessible congregation isn’t about doing something extraordinary. It’s about adopting a mindset that every congregation, no matter its size, can embrace: a posture of inclusion. Making your church accessible to individuals and families affected by disability starts with intentionality. A welcoming congregation creates a space where all people feel seen, valued, and embraced. This change begins with small meaningful actions that demonstrate that everyone is truly welcome.

Jesus commands us to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” All means all!

In this edition of AfriGO, we highlight how the Church can include and minister effectively with and to people with disabilities. Our Called article is about Francis, who despite his dreary beginnings as a child with a disability, discovered his worth

and now serves other people with disabilities. For Perspective, Florence shares from her rich experience the realities facing people with disabilities and how the Church can communicate God’s love. Our Feature story focuses on the Igreja Baptista do Calvário church in Angola and their initiatives in reaching the Deaf community. Enjoy these inspiring stories and share with others. Happy reading!

Joseph Mwaura is the founder and director of New Hope Sport Centre in Naivasha, Kenya. He is an All Ability sports coach who is passionate about serving and sharing the message of hope in Jesus Christ with underserved young people, families, and communities. He can be reached at newhopesportscentre@gmail.com.

CALLED: FRANCIS MUGWANYA



THEY HAD WRITTEN MY STORY BUT GOD HAD OTHER PLANS

AS TOLD TO NENKINAN NEHEMIAH DESHI

When I was 17 years, I experienced a shift in perspective that changed my life. I met a missionary pastor at a nearby orphanage and he took me through scriptures like Jeremiah 1:5 that redefined my identity. I moved from asking God why I was the way I was to asking what he wanted to accomplish through my condition.

I am 58 years old and from Luwero, Uganda. I presently work in Kampala and run a ministry called Father's Heart Mobility Ministry. I was born into a big family as the second of nine children. At age three, I contracted polio and eventually lost my ability to walk. This was a significant challenge for my poor rural family and we faced stigmatization.

I'm thankful to God for my parents, however, who didn't believe that the disability should crumble their child or his potential. My dad worked meagre jobs to raise money for a wheelchair but he was defrauded. He then bought a bicycle for my brother to ride so we could both go to school. Many people told my father I was a waste but he and I persisted.

My parents went to an Anglican church and we were mandated to attend Sunday school. At age 11-and-a-half, my parents signed me up for a confirmation course and our teacher intrigued me. He was poor and lived a basic life, and

he said Jesus was the reason. I asked to receive Jesus but I didn't feel joy. I was still angry and upset about my condition till I met the missionary at age seventeen.

I got my first wheelchair at age 12 when my dad encountered a social worker with an organization catering for children with disabilities. He pleaded my case before her and she gave me my first wheelchair.

After my encounter at age 17, I decided I would spend my life acquiring wheelchairs to serve people who were in my condition. I later took up a job with the New Hope Orphanage in Uganda. While there, I would save money from half a year's

salary to buy a wheelchair for someone who needed it. In 2006, the Gaba Community Church in Kampala where I now worship and serve as an elder invited me to work at their orphanage called Bethany Village. I worked there in 2011 and during this period, the pastor

connected me to organizations like Joni and Friends and Free Wheel Chair Mission. Through these partnerships, I was able to give out more wheelchairs. In 2011, I resigned to run the Father's Heart Mobility Ministry full-time. I had the name since 2002 and the inspiration is to let people like me know that God truly loves them.

I married Adrienne in 2010 and together with our three children, a team of three people, and about 20 volunteers, we now run the ministry. My wife wrote a book in 2019 titled *A Wheelchair for Francis* and it has been instrumental in getting the word out about our work.

Presently, we have given out close to 23,000 wheelchairs in 115 districts of Uganda and have sent a few to South Sudan, Congo, and Kenya. I have also had the privilege of serving on the National Council for People With Disabilities in Uganda. People thought my life's story was already written, but God had other plans. <https://fathersheartmobility.org>.

Many people told
my father I was
a waste.

PLEASE PRAY FOR:

- Good health for Francis.
- Francis, his family, and his team as they travel for outreaches every month.
- God's provision; monthly missions now cost about \$5,000.
- Grace to balance his time between his many professional and church roles, his family, and having sufficient rest.

DISABILITY

AND THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

BY FLORENCE NAMAGANDA

Ten to 15 per cent of the African population has some form of disability. This large number of more than 80 million people are the most marginalized in accessing basic services needed to live a quality life. Only five to 15 per cent of the people with disabilities have access to health, education, and assistive devices worldwide (WHO, 2011). This has significant consequences on the persons affected including high mortality rates, unemployment, sexual abuse, stigmatization, discrimination, and endemic poverty. Most children with moderate to severe disabilities do not reach their 10th birthday. Their caregivers are often left to care for them single-handedly with no support.

The inadequate service provision for people with disabilities is attributed to negative attitudes and beliefs, lack of awareness about the needs of persons with disabilities, limited skills and capacities of service providers, fragmented and uncoordinated efforts, and inadequate interventions by governments.

Unfortunately, the Body of Christ across Africa has not significantly addressed this issue. In many cases, we perpetuate harmful beliefs, viewing disabilities as a result of demonic possession, punishment for sin, or lack of faith. This leads to unrealistic expectations that all individuals with disabilities can be cured if they demonstrate sufficient faith, engage in fasting, make offerings, confess their sins, or live faultless lives. Such attitudes contribute to feelings of grief and rejection among people with disabilities, rather than offering them the acceptance and support they need.

The Bible and disability

Psalm 139:11-13 reminds us that we are all “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God. Genesis 1:27 emphasizes that we are all created in God’s image and therefore worthy of love and dignity regardless of our appearance or abilities. Jesus himself exemplified

the response expected of the Church. He demonstrated that we are not only called to welcome individuals but also to minister to their needs in meaningful and practical ways.

We cannot truly call ourselves followers of Christ unless we embody his love (1 Cor. 13) or claim to have faith if it is not accompanied by action (Js. 2:15-17).

Practical ministry to PWDs

Addressing the needs of people with disabilities requires both advocacy and action.

- 1. Share the gospel and prayer:** It does not matter if you think they don’t understand. Share the best way you can and pray for God to minister to them.
- 2. Raise awareness:** Churches and Christian organizations can play a role in changing perceptions about disability. Teaching and preaching about the value of every human life can help dispel myths and break down the barriers of stigma and discrimination.
- 3. Advocate for rights:** Christians can advocate for policies and practices that promote the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. This includes supporting inclusive education, accessible healthcare, and economic opportunities.
- 4. Create accessible spaces:** Churches should lead by example, ensuring that their facilities are accessible to all. This includes ramps and adapted seating, and inclusive communication like sign language interpretation and braille resources.
- 5. Empower through ministry:** People with disabilities should be active participants in church life, not just recipients of ministry. Empowering them to use their gifts enriches the whole Church and reflects the diversity of the Kingdom of God.
- 6. Support families:** Families of people with disabilities often carry heavy burdens. Offering

support, encouragement, and practical assistance makes a world of difference.

Conclusion

The challenges are great, but so is our hope in Christ. By working together, we can create communities where every person, regardless of ability, can thrive and fulfil their God-given potential. The Church has a unique role to play in leading the way toward a more inclusive and compassionate society. We are serving Christ himself in welcoming and loving those who are often forgotten. As Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). May we be known for our love, our compassion, and our commitment to justice for all.

Florence Namaganda is a Ugandan social entrepreneur, philanthropist, and neurodevelopment therapist with 18 years of experience. As founder and director of the Mukisa Foundation and Special Children’s Trust in Uganda, she leads organizations dedicated to restoring hope and dignity to children with disabilities and their families. She can be reached at: <https://www.facebook.com/namaganda.florence>. Read more about her work here: <http://bit.ly/4i8CJZ4>, <https://mukisafoundation.org/>





A CHURCH OF HOPE FOR THE DEAF

BY EDUARDO CHIVINDA

The Huambo province in Angola was strongly affected by the civil war that hit the country after independence, leaving deep weaknesses in its social, economic, and structural systems. There is a need for almost everything and many struggle with daily survival. Amidst these difficulties, people with hearing impairments are left behind and forgotten. They are a silent presence and many do not notice their existence. The deaf get lost among the hearing but one church is noticing and making a difference.

Escola Pamosi: Together

The Igreja Baptista do Calvário in Huambo is part of the Baptist Convention of Angola. It is pastored by Sabino Teck de Degamba and his wife, Rosângela Teck, who together spearhead the church's Deaf ministry. Rosângela shares that they began the Deaf ministry because the church had three deaf children they couldn't communicate with. They started looking for other deaf people and a survey around the church identified 28 children with special needs. The director of special education

in the area challenged them in 2003 to create inclusion classes.

They built two mud classrooms for a pre-school class and a first-grade class. Classes began in March 2004, and onwards, support came from Brazilian Baptist churches through the Junta de Missões Mundiais, leading to the founding of the school, Escola Pamosi, which means "Together". Alongside the school, the Deaf ministry also started at the Igreja Baptista do Calvário, and the first deaf person was baptized in 2005.

Escola Pamosi is one part of the ministry. There are also weekly Bible studies in small groups, Sunday school, interpretation during Sunday services, and a monthly city-wide meeting for deaf youth. Escola Pamosi currently serves 200 students including the deaf, intellectually disabled, visually impaired, Down syndrome, attention-deficit, and other students without special needs but from low-income families.

At the school, most students enroll after age nine, if they are brought. A small number of deaf students go on to higher education. Most of the deaf who attend university are oralized,

meaning they became deaf after already being literate. Being deaf often means little access to important information. They rely on interpreters but there are moments when they are alone with no one to inform them about what is happening. They must draw conclusions only from what they see.

Deaf ministry

The Igreja Baptista do Calvário was the first Baptist church to have a Deaf ministry. "We saw that some deaf people were coming from far away, so we decided to start the Deaf ministry in other churches where we had deaf members," explains Rosângela. This was the foundation for the expansion of the ministry in the province. Since the creation of the ministry, deaf missionaries have been incorporated and the work has continued to other provinces with the intention of reaching more people with hearing impairments.

In 2020, it became clear that there was a need to reach the deaf in the municipalities within the province and plant churches that, from the beginning, would focus on evangelizing and

discipling deaf individuals. The Radical Inclusion Project was thus born and two churches with a vision for inclusion were planted. The current focus is to reach the deaf in provinces with no Deaf ministry.

Training and sending

As part of the expansion plan to other provinces, interpreters and deaf workers have been sent to the provinces of Uíge, Moxico, and Benguela. The project has been progressing well but it needs to move faster because other religious groups are expanding in the area. The programme has been growing and the goal is to reach the deaf in all the provinces of Angola, including those in the villages.

With the launch of the first Angolan Sign Language dictionary, the teaching of sign language began. Since then, it has been taught to many people and many interpreters have been trained. Initially, Rosângela was the one teaching, but today, the instructors of *Língua Gestual Angolana* (L.G.A.) are deaf. The ministry offers different training modalities: some undergo theological training, others receive training for three to six months in the Radical Inclusion Project, and others participate in hybrid courses for deaf workers.

One of the teenagers at the time, Francisco Cassinda Epamba, participated in the sign language course. He had recently become deaf at the age of 15 and was very sad. Francisco understood the gospel, was baptized, and soon began presenting Jesus to other deaf people. Francisco grew spiritually and decided

to attend seminary. He completed a bachelor's degree in theology and the Brazilian Baptist Mission Board adopted him as a local worker. Francisco became the first deaf person to be ordained a pastor. He is responsible for the national expansion of the Deaf ministry in Angola.

Every semester, the seminary offers courses in sign language (based on the Angolan Sign Language dictionary compiled in Luanda) and trains hearing people to be sign language interpreters and Deaf church workers. Basic doctrinal courses are available for the deaf through an interpreter. Deaf people and their families are invited to take a course in Angolan Sign Language and to learn about Jesus. Interpreters are also trained to provide support during services and to assist the deaf and their families.

Rosângela's hope is to start programmes in all the Baptist churches of Angola and send deaf missionaries door-to-door to find deaf people who are marginalized. Ultimately, the goal is to send workers to the villages around the cities where scattered deaf individuals have never been exposed to the gospel and do not have the opportunity to attend school.

People with hearing impairments are left behind.

Social impact

The Deaf ministry has made a difference in the lives of the deaf and their families. They developed communication, enabling integration into society, access to education and professions, the building of their homes, knowledge of Christ, and integration into local churches. Some left behind addictions and regained their dignity. Others became evangelists and



Francisco Cassinda Epamba

PRAY FOR:

- More Deaf ministry workers to be sent into the villages.
- God's grace and provision for the Deaf ministry in Angola.

missionaries. In Angola, the Deaf ministry operates in Huambo, Bié, Luanda, Namibe, Benguela, Uíge, Moxico, and Huíla. In the interior of Huambo, it is active in Longonjo and Ukuma. One lesson learned is that a deaf person cannot be isolated from family. The Deaf ministry must provide accessibility and integration into the family, the society, and the Kingdom of God.

Rosângela hopes that the Church in Africa will understand that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone and no one should be forgotten. She emphasizes: "The Church, by providing accessibility to the deaf, blind, intellectually, and physically disabled, shows love without favouritism. It is our responsibility to glorify God and be God's instrument to promote his glory among all nations, all tribes, and all peoples, even those who do not use an oral language but a sign language. Our mission is to be witnesses to all and to prepare the Church to welcome everyone, including those with special needs. We must prepare favourable conditions for them to grow in Christ as any member of his body."

Rosângela's vision for reaching Angola's Deaf has plenty of space for others to join. It goes beyond one person's vision, and she is eager to work with others to evangelize and disciple the Deaf. Salvation is available to all who believe in Jesus (Jn. 3:16).



Sign language interpretation at church service.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

If you are a church member and you think of Persons With Disabilities (PWDs), maybe you think of curses, demons, healing, saliva, or noises. My challenge today is that we as the Church train ourselves instead to think of Jesus's words in John 9 when confronted with questions about disability: "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'"

There is a growing awareness and acceptance that disability typically resides in the society rather than in the person. It is often the attitudes of the society around the individual that are the disabling factor, hindering the individual's full and effective participation. Unfortunately, this is just as true within the Church; we can feel uncomfortable when faced with noisy or dirty PWDs. We might say they need healing or deliverance from curses or demons, and if it doesn't work, we say they do not have enough faith. All of these are ways that the Church effectively "disables" the PWDs in their society. How can we respond instead?

First, remember that people with disabilities are all created in God's image. Even the most severely disabled child is created in a way that demonstrates God to those around him. Like all human beings, a PWD has feelings, creativity, reasoning, and needs all based in the image of God. He is designed to give glory to God and is created for relationship with God and with those around him. Just as with all human beings, this image is distorted by sin, and we all equally need this image to be corrected, which can only be done through submission to Christ. Unfortunately, these things are often forgotten when we are interacting with a PWD who might not be able to demonstrate God's image in the "normal" or expected way. However, we actually can learn unique things



Photo credit: Church of Pentecost, Ghana

from PWDs within the Church that we cannot learn from the "normal" people.

What PWDs can teach us

We learn what it looks like to serve without getting anything in return. We learn to be fragile jars of clay where the light shining out from us is the light of Christ, and not our own abilities or good works. We learn what it means to be fully dependent on God. We learn that it is possible to have fullness of joy based in our "being" relationship with Christ rather than our circumstances or "doing". First Corinthians 12 talks about the wholeness that comes in embracing each part of the Body, saying that the weaker parts are often the most indispensable. Without incorporating these "weaker" members, we are in fact often removing some of our greatest strengths.

Changing our ways

Many churches believe that they need special training, materials or immense financial resources in order to incorporate PWDs. These are not bad, but they are not necessary. The Head of the Church just calls us to "carry one another's burdens", "love your neighbour", "mourn with

those who mourn and laugh with those who laugh." Using Jesus as an example, the Church can easily incorporate this precious part of the Body by being present. Visit a family at their home. Help transport them to the doctor, or be their doctor. Wash their laundry. Watch the child while the mother runs errands. Help them get to church, pushing the wheelchair or carrying the child to give his mother's back a break. Include them, love them. Most of all, follow the model of Jesus and touch them. Hold them, hug them, pray with them, listen to them. These things show them and their families Jesus. Tell them about the freedom available to them in Jesus, even if you're not sure how much they understand. The Spirit does not need the mind to demonstrate himself to those created in his image.

I challenge us, the Church, the Body of Christ, to strive toward the wholeness that incorporates each jar of clay. Only in this fullness of the Body can we experience and demonstrate the fullness of his glory.

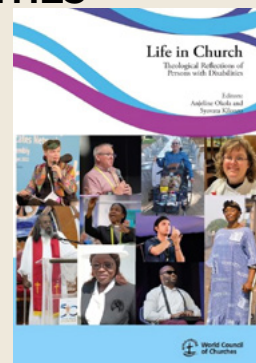
Written by Martha, a missionary therapist.*

RESOURCES FOR REACHING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Life in Church: Theological Reflections of Persons with Disabilities

This book by the World Council of Churches is in two parts. The first part features theological reflections on the lived experiences of 10 persons with impairments from Kenya, Zimbabwe, DR Congo, South Africa, India, Costa Rica, the UK, and the US. The second part shares the recent WCC statement, "A Gift of Being: Called to be a Church of All and for All," which is a collection of 132 statements under

headings such as: "Valuing Human Diversity", "Creation as an Act of Love", "The Gift of Life", "Vulnerability, Limitation, and Healing." It is available for free download here: <https://bit.ly/3VeK936>.



Deaf Bible Society®

The Deaf Bible Society's mission is to provide the Bible by video in the world's many sign languages. Their website, <https://deafbiblesociety.com/> has resources such the [Deaf Bible App](#) with access to God's Word in 58 of the world's sign languages, [Deaf Church Where](#), which helps to locate and connect with a Deaf church near you, and tools for Deaf ministry and sign language Bible translation. You may visit their website to find out more about their work and other available resources.

All Ability Sport



This guide is designed to help people involved in sports ministry to think through the needs of people with disabilities and how to include them. It highlights categories of disabilities and how to grow in inclusion, and shares practical tips for communication and interaction. It is available for free download here: <https://www.readyssetgo.tools/en/resource/allabilitiessporttoolkit>

BOOK REVIEW: DISABLED VILLAGE CHILDREN

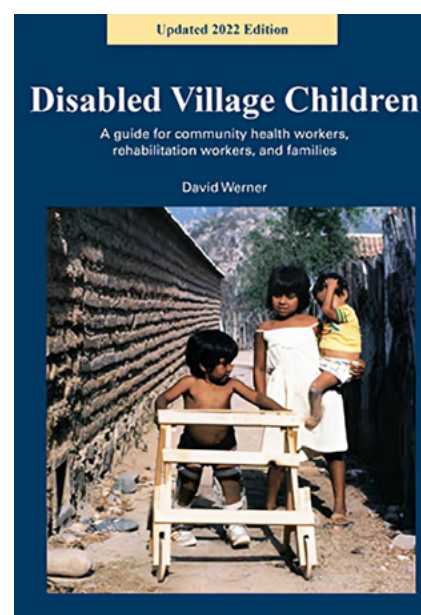
The resource book *Disabled Village Children* was originally published in 1987 but is still considered a vital handbook for those who want to assist children living in rural areas or urban places without resources. It was entirely compiled to empower parents, community members, and friends of children with disabilities to assist them in practical ways.

Included in the book is a diagnostic section for conditions like cerebral palsy, common birth defects, and hypothyroidism. Some of the conditions are rare in cities and the developed world, but can still be found in rural settings with poor healthcare.

Of particular interest are the many practical strategies which can be implemented without expensive materials or equipment. These include exercises to strengthen weak limbs,

strategies to modify wheelchairs, instructions on walking aids, designs for therapy devices, toys for blind children, and a huge number of other useful items.

For example, making movements or facial expressions and asking a child to copy them is one way to teach them. This requires no special equipment at all. Or, one can use a round log of wood to teach a child to balance. Many illustrations have been added to show how to manage certain therapies, which are also useful in explaining to parents and other local people how to assist their child. The book can be purchased as an e-book from the publisher, or as a hard copy at https://store.hesperian.org/prod/Disabled_Village_Children.html. However, the publisher has also made the content of the book available on their website at no cost at <https://bit.ly/3ZdyqTz>. **Extra resource:**



Read how a missionary is raising her child with special needs on the mission field here: <https://bit.ly/3ZBqehn>

GO! NEWS OF AFRICA'S MOBILIZING CHURCH

SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE

The Ministry to Persons With Disabilities (MPWD) of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana organized its maiden conference for sign language interpreters at the Pentecost Convention Centre in Gomoa-Fetteh from 13-14 September, 2024.

The event aimed to equip the 120 interpreters in attendance for effective ministry. In his opening address, Pastor Alexander Nyame, the National

Coordinator for MPWD, highlighted the challenges faced by the over two million persons living with disabilities in Ghana and stressed the importance of the church's vision to reach the nations including persons with disabilities.

The interpreters are expected to return to their communities better equipped to communicate with and support individuals with hearing impairments.

The Vice-Chancellor of the Pentecost University, Apostle Prof. Kwabena Agyapong Kodua, called on Christians involved in specialized ministries to serve with spiritual depth and great character. He highlighted the dual message of Calvary; the power to heal and the grace to care through various interventions. He encouraged believers to rely on the power of Christ for the grace to support those with disabilities.

Earlier in the year, the MPWD embarked on a week-long visit to Tamale in the north of Ghana to provide assistive devices to those in need. The ministry collaborated with Joni and Friends to donate wheelchairs, white canes, and crutches to PWDs in the area including those incarcerated in the Tamale prison.



Participants at the conference

CAPRO's Multimedia & IT Workshop Inspires Missionary Innovation

Calvary Ministries (CAPRO) recently held its inaugural International Multimedia and IT Workshop in Lagos, Nigeria, from 7-11 October, 2024. Under the theme, "Envisioning the Next Generation", the workshop aimed to inspire participants to develop and apply media and IT skills for advancing the gospel. Attendees were encouraged to explore fresh perspectives and strategies for their mission fields. Seventy-three participants attended on-site, joined by others online, with the majority

from CAPRO and a few from partner organizations.

The workshop featured plenary sessions, devotions, and times of prayer. Participants joined specialized workgroups facilitated by professionals in areas such as digital ministry, news reporting and publishing, content creation, video production, filmmaking, live streaming and event photography, online radio, design creation, rapid e-book production, and file server management. For many,

this experience went beyond skill-building with personal testimonies of breakthroughs and perspective shifts in their roles as missionaries.

With 4.8 billion people now owning smartphones, missions can reach previously isolated populations through digital tools.



GLOBAL MEMBER CARE CONFERENCE

The fourth Global Member Care Network Conference (GMCN) on the theme "Caring for the Harvest Force" came off in Nairobi, Kenya from 28 October to 1 November, 2024. It drew 359 participants including 134 from Africa, and others from Latin and North America, Asia, Europe, and Australia.

The Conference focused on how to care for missionaries and their families whether they were serving

at home or abroad. Sessions included plenaries that tackled topics such as "suffering in mission: balancing suffering and self-care", "a holistic approach to care", "transition from a supernatural to natural views of care and vice versa", "the Church as a member care provider" among others. A myriad of workshops also addressed issues including "crisis and trauma care for African missionaries", "rest

and sabbatical", "counselling children", "strengthening missionary marriages", "caring well for singles in missions", and "supporting families with special needs and disabilities".

The conference concluded on the idea of strengthening the network in order to exchange experiences and also to contribute to the African missions movement with the creation of contextual member care resources.

CARE BEYOND PRICE

BY KATE AZUMAH

In a North African country, five local Christians serve 18 children with disabilities and their Muslim families. They work from a one-room respite day care centre at a mission hospital and attend to children with severe cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and other undiagnosed mental health disability. They receive far less salaries than what they would in other professions but the impact they make is priceless.

The centre was started 15 years ago by a foreign missionary serving at the missions hospital as a therapist for children with disabilities. He initially provided care for the children in their homes, and as he transitioned back to his country, he got a room at the hospital and trained local women to carry on the work. Two of those women continue to serve today.

The families come from low-income backgrounds and pay a highly subsidized fee. When any of the children needs further medical care, the hospital's charity wing sometimes supports with the bills. The 18 children are between four years and 20 years old, and come in about twice a week as their mothers run errands or take a break. The staff feed them, change them, play with them, and do a basic programme to build their abilities. Occasionally, they organize outings and picnics for the families and siblings to know each other. They also visit the families at home, and this affords the opportunity to build deep relationships.

Beyond respite care

Many times, a neighbour will ask the parents, "Why do you have a Christian



Representative photo: AFP©EU NEIGHBOURHOOD INFO CENTRE

in your house?" and they will respond, "Because these people love and care for our child. They are different. You have not seen anyone like them."

When the mothers bring their children to the centre, they often stay and talk to the staff about what is happening at home; their struggles and how neighbours are treating their children. It is the job of one staff member to just sit and interact with the mothers. The mothers do not have such people in their lives who would listen, and so the staff comes alongside to share truths from God's Word and to pray with them. Conversion is illegal, and no families have come to Christ yet, but they are ministered to in other ways.

One family had a daughter with severe cerebral palsy who was always sick with other health challenges. The couple didn't have a healthy marriage and the husband beat his wife. The centre's work allowed the staff to step into the mother's life in her vulnerable moments. They visited her, helped with basic needs, and engaged in hours of conversation. Often, this woman would come to the centre and help with the other children. She always wanted to be with the staff. When her daughter died, the staff were the first people she called. She knew they loved her daughter, unlike neighbours who said she was lucky that her struggle was over. After her daughter's death, she

started care-giving for another child at the centre.

Staff experience

The staff say their work has strengthened their relationship with God and the families. They are learning to process a theology of suffering and are grateful to be used by the Lord. The more they grow in intimacy with the Lord, so does their love for the children and their burden for the families.

The staff has to deal with cultural and religious stigma towards children with disabilities. Paying their salaries is always a challenge as the work is hardly self-sustaining. The centre could create a high-level programme and charge a lot of money, but their work is geared towards families without the resources. Finding real believers who have a heart for the children and their families is difficult. At the beginning, some of the staff were working for the money only, but through discipleship, they have developed a real desire to show Jesus' love to those they serve.

Every believer and every church can minister to people with disabilities and their families in meaningful ways. Sitting with them, touching, talking, hugging, and helping with care make a huge difference. Welcome them even when they make noises and drool saliva. It may make church inconvenient and uncomfortable, but ultimately, it makes the Body of Christ complete.



Photo: AIM Stories

PEOPLE GROUP:

THE INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED

Among every people group and every community are people of all ages who are differently-abled intellectually either from birth or due to injury. Often, these brothers and sisters are hidden out of shame or remain at home, especially when their condition is coupled with other complex or mobility impairments.

Perceptions about individuals with intellectual impairments vary widely - from beliefs of curses and demon-possession, to feelings of shame of having a defective family, and in some cases, indifference. Families of persons with intellectual impairments often face crushing medical bills, along with societal stigma. This stigma can lead to severe consequences, such as losing housing or income because landlords, business owners, or customers do not want to associate with intellectually disabled individuals, fearing it will bring bad luck or harm their businesses.

Unfortunately, few communities genuinely welcome or support these individuals. This lack of support extends to medical professionals, who often dismiss them and fail to offer parents hope for a fulfilling or meaningful future.

It is vital that our churches recognize that our brothers and sisters with intellectual impairments are made in the image of God and include them in the community. Depending on ability, they can be given opportunities to serve, such as passing out programmes, singing in the choir or greeting. Even those who cannot serve in traditional ways can still minister to the congregation through their enjoyment of worship. We must make sure that each person has the opportunity for a spiritual relationship and to gain spiritual habits which are useful and encouraging.

AT A GLANCE

- Muslims often treat the intellectually impaired with great kindness because they are instructed to do so by the Sunnah and the Hadith.
- Divorce rates are higher among parents with disabled children because of financial and emotional stress, and community rejection.
- Early intervention and therapies can greatly increase a person's abilities and opportunities. Valuing them is a great testimony to the value God places on each life.

PLEASE PRAY FOR

- The families of persons with intellectual impairments to get needed community support, especially from the Church, to care for their loved ones with dignity.
- Understanding that each person, no matter their abilities, is an image-bearer of God.
- Churches to avoid labelling them as cursed or dismissing them if the leaders have not managed to "heal" them, and for intentional ministry to them and their families in ways that honour God.

Source: Yesutor Gbewonyo Amedofu, Founder & Head of interventions, AIDDIN.



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