

Differently Able: For a Church Where All Belong

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Published in 2020 by SCM Press, 3rd Floor, Invicta House, 108–114 Golden Lane,
London EC1Y 0TG.

SCM Press is an imprint of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd (a registered charity)
13A Hellesdon Park Road, Norwich NR6 5DR, UK

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www.concilium.in

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ISBN 978-0-334-05960-8

Printed in the UK by
Ashford, Hampshire

Concilium is published in March, June, August, October, December

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Editorial

As soon as we ask what is disability, and even more when we want to define a disabled person, many difficulties arise: regardless of the distinction between physical and mental, when is an impediment or dysfunction transformed into a disability that characterizes the existence of a person? Is a (missing or deficient) function of the body to be decisive here? Since “my” body is essentially finished, what really limits my existence and my body? Disability, if we want go on using this word, depends from age, situation, family, and affects all levels of human existence: body, mind, learning, behaviour... and religion.

The ground of this reflection is therefore anthropology: indeed, religions’ anthropologies could help or deny the identity of persons. From the point of view of critical theology, it is important first of all to analyse what in the history of thought has differentiated the ‘different’ or, more directly, which have been and continue to be the conditions that exclude from the common good people who do not want or can not be assimilated or “normalized”. Among these assumptions, there are also positions of various religions and, in particular, the perception that Christianity has had and still has of diseases and limitations as consequences of a history of sin. These and similar positions give positive sanction to and helps to configure the pre-religious fear of diversity: from here, they contribute to creating the figure of the ‘monster’, of the ‘witch’, of the ‘unfortunate’ (literally, without grace) who are to hide, to let disappear. Above all, in modern liberal and consumerist society, a certain spirituality and a certain theology also give the risk of blessing the ideal of a human body and existence according to the canons of an (an)aestheticizing perfection that only creates further suffering.

On the contrary, reforming the Church is building a church as hospitality. In this question, it is about getting voice to the positive experiences that are resilient to any form of normalization of the different. We think, however, that it is also important to give a voice to the families and to

the people who live their lives accompanied by a stable impairment. Too often, non-disabled people prejudice this discourse. Giving voice to others would perhaps be instructive and certainly less paternalistic; it can help theology to rethink in depth its anthropology and its vision of the church. After all, sin means rebelling against the fact that the limit constitutes the centre of the garden (D. Bonhoeffer), that diversity and identity contribute together to human maturity, that the value of a person is the ability to share the weakness of our created being, that is grace. De facto, when we think about different abilities we are thinking about questions of power and asking for the capability to empower people.

Articles are divided into four parts. The introductory part contains only the text of H.S. Reinders. We asked him to present the theology of disability as such. It highlights the tension that studies on disability have created within theology. The second part offers a critical reading of our traditions: from the point of view of catechesis and education (Veronica A. Donatello), of biblical hermeneutics (Markus Schiefer Ferrari), of systematic theology (Luca Badetti), and of the understanding of church (Po-Ho Huang). Starting on the side of disabled people offers new possibilities for reflection. Rethinking humanity is the task of the third part. It is about reviewing our ideas of what it means to be human and what the task of his story is (Bernhard Nitsche). For example, rethinking the charitable model can also contribute to improving the path for the defence of the rights of people with disabilities starting from our common dignity (Anne Masters) and from our living in solidarity and compassion a common house (Stephen Arulampalam). From this point of view, Christian theology can offer a model even outside its own tradition (Naeimeh Pourmohammadi). The fourth part offers some provocations to continue theological reflection. A brief commentary on the work done in the WCC in the meantime (Samuel George) helps to focus on what is already being done worldwide. Two contributions take as a starting point the position of disabled people in the liturgy (Talitha Cooreman-Guittin) and in the ministry (Miriam Spies), two sensitive areas that often reveal themselves as moments where the various speeches can receive their own falsification. Our program ends with a look into the heterotopia of places where the good face of solidarity can be shown and which we are ensured by the hope of being healed in our wounds (Martin Lintner).

Editorial

Whilst thinking and building this volume of *Concilium* two facts particularly affected us. The first concerns news relating to the abuses committed by Jean Vanier. Although these crimes were carried out by him on adult and non-disabled women, his figure certainly remains scarred and his writings and thoughts acquire a completely unpleasant light: as this volume testifies, we cannot act in watertight compartments, but the intersectionality of the problems forces us to have a critical look that points to the structural transformation of the problem. We must recognize the merit of L'Arche for having had the courage of an independent and transparent investigation of what happened.¹ The second stumbling block was the pandemic that hit the whole world so hard and undermined it as a whole. We have felt impaired in our potential and much of humanity is still in this situation. We have lived relegated, cut off from decisions, impeded in movement and observed on sight. Normality has become oddity, or perhaps we have only seen more clearly than ever those barriers and divisions that the so-called normality is capable to set. The egoity of the rich world has seen the violence of its societies turn against itself. This does not allow us to relativize the issue of disability, but affirming that this is an expression of the violence of modern society: the state of exception (G. Agamben) has revealed its globalizing power. The church is not unscathed from it.

Margareta Gruber, Po-Ho Huang, Gianluca Montaldi

Note

1. See <http://www.arche-france.org/larche-annonce-resultats-lenquete-sur-son-fondateur> [last visited on 25/06/2020].

Part Four: Reforming the Church

Liturgical Imagination at Full Stretch: Possibilities for Leadership of Disabled People

MIRIAM SPIES

Disabled clergy are beginning to stretch leadership practices, but overall ministers with disabilities remain the “un-imagined”. This paper will encourage imagination in liturgy to help disabled people lead. Imagination interrogates discriminatory practices in determining who is “perfect” enough to lead worship. Imagination helps live in liturgical time as “crip time”. Imagining a person with a disability not only receiving the Eucharist but presiding at Jesus’ table can affirm the existence and gifts of disabled people as well as others participating. Through stretching our imagination about leadership, time, and sacraments, the ministry of disabled people can challenge and transform the church.

Liturgical theologian Saliers writes about liturgy embodying humanity at full stretch before God and neighbour.¹ Disabled people are beginning to stretch leadership practices, but overall ministers with disabilities remain the “un-imagined” and the “essentially excluded”² in pastoral ministry. The church’s obsession with perfection must be interrogated to reground us in who we are worshipping and why we are called to worship. Liturgical imagination can help perceive and use time in a counter-cultural way. When disabled bodies both receive and preside at the sacrament of communion, our discipleship of love, mutuality, and vulnerability can be witnessed and celebrated, and our Christian witness can be transformed. Liturgical leadership by people who continue to be excluded can serve as

a subversive witness to God's kingdom on earth.

Growing up the daughter of two preachers I did not imagine becoming a minister, not because of my Cerebral Palsy, but rather because the work seemed very demanding. As a young adult I sensed a call to serve and was ordained five years ago in The United Church of Canada. As I sought ordination, I named that people's experience of me transforms once we establish a relationship, using a lens of the social model of disability, but when seeking a call, this reasoning no longer fit. People could not imagine my body in settings like liturgical spaces with all that entailed (a power wheelchair, limited fine motor skills, and affected speech). I was ordained and served in one congregation for three years, but the question of access for presiding in other congregations remains. I intend to spark the imagination and heart for justice, waiting to be borne from worshipping God together.

I Perfection and Leadership

Many believe that the identity of the minister communicates much about who the church is or wants to become. The mandate from Leviticus that said priests were to be "without blemish" (Lev. 21:16 NRSV) has barred women and queer people from ministry and continues to in many denominations. Nearly three decades ago, Herzog found that persons with disabilities were discouraged from entering ordained ministry because their "deviance" did not fit the expectations of The United Methodist Church.³ Nowadays, the church's obsession with perfection, especially in leadership, may not be explicitly said, but is communicated in which parts of the building are accessible, the people who are serving and who are being served, and the presence of those in leadership. This messaging, regrettably, has seeped into the hearts of disabled people. While presenting about disabled leaders in the church, Fubara-Manuel encountered a person with impaired sight who asked, "Do [you] truly believe in the possibility of a blind person or crippled person serving as the moderator of the general assembly of our great church?" Prodding the question further, she found that "his worry was that a disabled moderator would be a distraction to the image and message of the church."⁴ The United Church of Canada has never had a moderator with a disability, though soon after the Very Rev. Giuliano was elected he was diagnosed with cancer and underwent treatment. In writing

afterwards, he recalled, “I dreamed of leading our church for a time from a place of strength, wisdom, and creativity. Instead I have been offering my weakness to the church... I would not have chosen it, but I cannot deny that it has been a gift to me and to others.”⁵ Perhaps if the cancer diagnosis came earlier, he would have withdrawn sensing his disability as a distraction too, instead of embodying grace and weakness as part of God’s call.

The weekly liturgy is the primary public expression of the church. Jacober notes training is deemed necessary to lead, saying, “Corporate worship always seem(s) to morph from a time of responding to God to being in awe of the talents of others.”⁶ Liturgy should, indeed, liberate people from our culture that “denies limits and glorifies the ‘perfect’ body and mind.”⁷ In and through the liturgy another way of being can be revealed. The United Church of Canada stresses ministry of the whole people of God. “This means,” writes Caron “worship, including worship leadership, belongs to the whole people of God.”⁸ This is very challenging to live out. When a group of United Church ministers came together to write about ministry amidst their chronic illnesses, they mourned how often they are assumed to be spectators rather than leaders or experienced as less able because they sat to preside or they were named as almost divine because of their ability to lead. “Either way,” they wrote, “we are not ordinary human beings with the foibles and gifts that make us who we are as persons.”⁹

The church has created liturgical boundaries in relation to leadership, but as Spurrier says, “These uneasy liturgical boundaries are also an important place for tracing the work of beauty and disability.”¹⁰ Worship can be a place of transforming our fears as well as our expectations of perfection to a space where the Body of Christ is interdependent. In her research, Fox encountered a pastor with disabilities that affect his speech and movement along with his learning abilities. As a senior pastor, “he named his disability as helping to nurture a safe and healing congregation, since he is not ‘perfect’ according to conventional standards.”¹¹ Liturgy that embraces people’s knowledge and experiences is full of possibilities.

Without glorifying disabled bodies or using them as tools for teaching, disabled bodies, as well as other marginalized bodies, are vital for liturgy as humanity at full stretch.¹²

An United Church congregation in Hamilton, ON, has the practice of handing out scripture readings on Sunday mornings as people come into worship. More often than not, a man in a power chair picks up a reading. As he comes to the center of the circle to read, another member reaches for the microphone and holds it in front of his mouth. Parking his wheelchair, the paper crinkles as he unfolds it. Returning to the circle he isn't the congratulated, he isn't used as a sermon metaphor, and he isn't told that he should not read every week; rather his leadership is expected, imagined, and supported. Titchkosky says, "It is thus a very strange disruption, indeed, to regard disability as key to the plan, as not only a possible participant but a desirable one."¹³ By disrupting cultural and church notions of perfection, the congregation not only makes space for this man but desires his leadership amidst them. In its statement, "A Church of All and for All," the World Council of Churches affirms that disabled people challenge the culture where perfection in the worldly image is our priority, where weakness is criticized and failures concealed, rather than living into God's image.¹⁴ Re-imagining space and time in the liturgy for disabled ministers and leaders is not only about the leaders themselves, but about the whole congregation. The WCC statement concludes: "To feel truly welcome in the church, persons with disabilities need to see people like themselves in leadership roles."¹⁵ The bodies of disabled liturgical leaders expose the masquerade of perfection, revealing that all bodies are needed and affirmed and that interdependent practices can be imagined.

II Liturgical "Crip" Time

Disability is disruptive to the world, to people's experiences, and even to churches and their liturgical practices. One way is in the area of time. Time has become managed in our capitalist society. The gift of liturgical time is counter-cultural, as taking time for God and for others is indeed a liturgical act. Sailors reminds us that liturgy is not something to be checked off a list, but rather a transformation that takes time: "The transformative power of God's self-giving in and through liturgical action has to do with the shaping of perception, of knowing, of feeling over time."¹⁶ For many Western mainline denominations our need to order time runs into liturgical practices. Spurrier spent a few years studying a congregation where a majority of its parishioners live with disabilities and mental health issues.

She comments that participants could be entrusted with more work of the church, including liturgical leadership, but adds, “sharing responsibility for such work would slow time [...] in ways that also disrupt efficient patterns of church gathering.”¹⁷ Like many congregations, they struggle with imagining time for all peoples to share in liturgical leadership.

Our Western experiences of keeping the worship service to an hour or of limiting the liturgy writing to one person limits involvement. Kim-Cragg writes, “The belief that worship must be decent and orderly may be behind most of [the] reluctance to change.”¹⁸ Cerebral Palsy has affected my speech. Imagining me as a presider requires congregations to imagine time differently. For some my speech begins as unintelligible, but over time becomes easier to understand. When people remark how my speech has improved, I respond that it is rather their listening that has improved. Some people tell me that my speech invites them to listen more attentively. While I strive to keep my sermons and prayers shorter, I challenge the community not to be bound by the *chronos* clock, but to live by *kairos* time. Time in becoming accustomed to how one speaks is not only an issue of disability but includes others within the full stretch of humanity. Ministers from racialized backgrounds, immigrant and Canadian-born, experience congregations complaining of not understanding their speech or citing it as a reason not to call them. If we use imagination in liturgical time, disability can disrupt capitalistic values and return us to living in God’s time.¹⁹ Working in liturgical time, we are called to settle into a different rhythm of activity and sabbath, celebration and mourning, where one is not judged by productivity, but rather is invited into deeper relationship with God, creation, and one another.

Disability activists have claimed “crip time” which as Kafer explains:

is a flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies... Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.²⁰

As crip time bends the clock to meet our bodies and minds, liturgical time

creates imagination for valuing different approaches to participation and leadership. A liturgy that counters society's (de)valuing of time would imagine leadership in a liturgical-crip time where leadership is not judged based on worshipping in under an hour, and where we can encounter Jesus Christ who has died, is risen, and will come again.

III Presiding at Communion or Eucharist

The whole of worship is experienced through our bodies, including the movements of the sacrament of communion. We follow Jesus as he commanded: "Take, bless, break, and pour. Do this in remembrance of me." The intentionality of these actions slows us down to be present to our relationship with Christ. The first time a minister presides at the sacrament of communion is often sacred. A couple weeks after my ordination, I presided at communion in my home congregation. Sitting in one of the pews was Rev. Seiichi Ariga, a United Church minister who studied with my parents. Following the service, with tears in his eyes, he said to me, "You were Jesus for me." Initially, I felt discomfort, as many in the church have spiritualized disabled people with damaging effects. However, upon reflection, I think he spoke to me as a minister who faced barriers in the church and society because of his Japanese heritage, one marginalized minister encountering another. My embodiment at the table made space for him to identify with the pathos of Christ and to experience the visible grace of God: "Our pathos, the reality of human life, our daily struggle to make sense of longings, hopes, fears, joys, provides an experiential link."²¹ Both of our marginalized identities and bodies were welcome at the table, and in that mixture of joy, struggle, and yearning we continued to be shaped as Christians, imagining God's kingdom on earth as a place where both of our leadership gifts are not only welcome or tolerated but desired.

Many disabled people have been excluded from participating in the sacrament, let alone presiding at the table. Eisland spoke about how communion became a ritual of segregation and degradation, a solitary practice rather than a corporate one because of her inability to kneel at a rail. Sharing the story of a theologian who was denied entrance to seminary until he could perform the sacrament "appropriately", she notes, "In making the Eucharist a physical practice of exclusion, the

church demonstrates a tangible bias against our nonconventional bodies and dishonours the disabled God.”²² Participating in the prayer of great thanksgiving led by a disabled minister, receiving the elements from someone with a disability, and/or accompanying disabled people receive the elements can be an act of resistance.

Postcolonial scholars, like Kim-Cragg, note how the Eucharist has the potential to be liberating or oppressive for women and other marginalized groups who have been denied both access to it and authority to officiate it. And so, she argues,

There is a subversive performance happening when a woman priest [...] lifts up the chalice. She is denouncing authority that demonizes women’s bodies and dismisses their leadership. When a transgender minister stands at the communion table having overcome the barriers of transphobia in family, church, and society, the wall of heteronormativity and gender binary is broken down.²³

Although Kim-Cragg is speaking about gender identities, when disabled people preside at the Eucharist, there is also a subversive performance happening. I have struggled to find spaces to offer ministry, as a queer disabled woman. With the limitations of my movements, I require assistance in the actions of breaking and pouring. While some have been denied the privilege to preside due to this inability, my presence at the communion table reflects how my life, and indeed all of our lives, are interdependent and are vulnerable. When the limits of disabled people are imagined or expected, a space opens for creativity and interdependence in the liturgy. The church is called to be a place of interdependence: how we depend on God and how God depends on us, how we depend on Jesus Christ as our Teacher, as the Bread of Life and how Jesus depends on us, his disciples in anticipating and co-creating the kingdom of God as the Body of Christ.

A ministry of interdependence may sound beautiful; it is also messy and disruptive. It requires communication and trust as well as honesty about our limits and creativity in working together. Presiding at table with lay members or another ordered minister who perform the actions as I speak the words bears witness to our common humanity, our vulnerability,

and thus our need for God and each other in our discipleship of Jesus. We embody the interdependent body of Christ. With humility, I hope my leadership is “an altered body practice of the Eucharist [that] is the evidence that the grace of God comes through grace. Hence, it is at once a call for justice and a recognition of the value of nonconventional bodies.”²⁴ Those gathered are participating in this subversive act of resilience. Our words and actions must join together in this sacrament of communion, of interdependence, of justice pointing to new life and liberation.

Even without a “marginalized” presider at the table, our words in remembering the Christ who subverted systems and sought justice, the table can be one where all bodies are imagined. Though, without my Cerebral Palsy, I would not have perceived the beauty of interdependent body at Christ’s table in the same way. As Robitscher reflected on her experience in ministry, “God was being mediated to them in a new way—or perhaps in an old, New Testament way. Not the perfect ‘priest=Jesus’ model, but the ‘Disabled God.’”²⁵ The table bends time to fit my body, to fit the bodies of others who are enacting the words of institution, and to fit the real bodies of those who receive the gift of bread for the journey and cup of blessing. Imagining disabled people and other marginalized leaders as presiders at the table of Jesus Christ, liturgy can act as a commitment to justice, sending us forth to transform the society to be one based on solidarity and love.

In witnessing to the love of God through the broadness of humanity, liturgies can stretch our imagination so that we encounter disabled people as leaders. Psalm 40 offers both a liturgical lament and call to possibility: “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry... He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.” (Ps. 40:1, 3) As disabled leaders seek to praise God with congregations, imagination around expectations of leadership, time as well as the call to be fed and sent forth will be expanded. I am heartened by the possibilities of liturgical imagination for every body’s leadership. Congregations as contextualized settings should be investigated further as age, race, gender, sexual orientations, and other identities help shape imaginations. Let us continue to be stretched into possibility and transformation, where disabled leaders are imagined and expected, for the sake of God’s love.

Notes

1. Don Saliers, "Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 28.
2. Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2011), 39.
3. Albert Herzog, "'We Have This Ministry': Ordained Ministers Who Are Physically Disabled," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Don Saliers and Nancy Eiesland (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 187-199, here 188.
4. Jessie Fubara-Manuel, "Together with All the Saints: Journeying with Persons with Disabilities," in *Walking Together: Theological Reflections on the Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, ed. Susan Durber and Fernando Enns (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2018), 101-110, here 103.
5. David Giuliano, *Postcards From the Valley* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2008), 1.
6. Amy E. Jacober, *Redefining Perfect: The Interplay Between Theology and Disability* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 68.
7. Don Saliers, "Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 19-31, here 29.
8. Charlotte Caron, *Eager for Worship: Theologies, Practices, and Perspectives on Worship in the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 2000), 204.
9. Charlotte Caron and Barb Wire Collective, eds., *Not All Violins: Spiritual Resources by Women with Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses* (Toronto: United Church Pub, 1997), 173.
10. Rebecca F. Spurrier, *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 209.
11. Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 119.
12. See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 115.
13. Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*, 34.
14. World Council of Churches, "A Church of All and for All," (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 12
15. World Council of Churches, "A Church of All and for All," 15
16. Don Saliers, *Worship As Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 283.
17. Spurrier, *The Disabled Church*, 119.
18. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 72.
19. See John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 82.
20. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.
21. Don Saliers, "Human Pathos and Divine Ethos," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight Vogel (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 278.

Liturgical Imagination at Full Stretch

22. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 113.

23. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Postcolonial Practices on Eucharist," in *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, ed. Stephen Burns and Pui-lan Kwok (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 86-87.

24. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 115.

25. Jan Robitscher, "Through Glasses Darkly: Discovering a Liturgical Place," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 144-164, here 154.

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STEPHEN ARULAMPALAM — “My education comes from experience,” Stephen Arulampalam pointed out in an interview, referring to Sri Lanka’s prolonged civil war and the violence, displacement, and imprisonment that he and family members experienced during those years of conflict. Given that background, perhaps it is not surprising that his interests as a theologian and ordained minister have focused on bridging the differences between Sri Lankans of Christian and Hindu faith traditions. “Theological education helps us to understand the nature of Christ’s actions in our own context,” he said, and in his theological studies, he has searched for a relevant Christology for Sri Lanka’s post-war context. His current positions as lecturer in church history and chaplain at the Theological College of Lanka, came from his earlier work in facilitating conflict resolution seminars for Tamil and Sinhalese youth and training laypersons in dealing with post-war trauma, from scholarly writing on topics such as reconciliation and non-violent approaches toward peace.

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