

# Making Space, Offering Voice

## Leadership of People with Disabilities in God's Mission

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### Abstract

*By looking closely at the biblical narrative of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), this article raises how Jesus enables and promotes the participation and, even more so, the leadership of people with disabilities in God's transformative mission in the church and the world. Through examining each scene in the story through a disability lens, this article aims to challenge the church on how it views leaders with disabilities in God's mission, making space for our voices and our witness as disciples of Christ.*

### Keywords

*Disability, discipleship, voice, advocacy, leadership*

In the past, people with disabilities have been marked as recipients of mission and ministry. In recent decades, there has been a shift to serving in ministry with people with disabilities, which emphasizes that we are able to serve in mission, too. In this article, I focus on the need to experience ministry and mission led by people with disabilities using the familiar story of the man born blind in the gospel of John. Conner explains, "Missiology is always crossing boundaries in order to grasp a fuller understanding and experiences of God at work in the world."<sup>1</sup> Through dismissing the idea that disability is a result of sin and creating space for the new disciple to have a voice, Jesus crosses boundaries of what is expected of him and the man. By identifying himself as a disciple, the man born blind crosses the boundaries of who can offer leadership, where, and how. Together, they participate in and offer leadership with God in making a new

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Conner, *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 69.

creation, the transformed beloved community. This is the mission of God that people with disabilities are being called to lead: a mission never complete, but always becoming. This paper will weave together exegetical work on the experience and need for leaders with disabilities. By looking closely at the biblical narrative of John 9:1-41, I hope to raise how Jesus enables and promotes the participation and, even more so, the leadership of people with disabilities in God's transformative mission in the church and the world.

The story of the man born blind does not fit the typical healing narrative in which an individual seeks Jesus out to ask for healing, Jesus performs the healing, and the individual as well as the crowd is amazed. The story unfolds as follows: a theological question examining God's purpose sets the scene, healing occurs, Jesus leaves the scene, the man and his parents are questioned by neighbours and leaders, the man is turned away from community, and Jesus seeks out the new disciple. This paper will examine each element of the narrative.

### God's missional purpose

Many theologians focus on the beginning of this story: that is, on who or what caused his blindness. Jesus, asked about the cause, answers in terms of its purpose in God's mission. It is not unique to ask, "Why?" Reinders reminds us that the why question is important to understanding an action's purpose or meaning, or a state of being: "When they manage to open up to a new situation, they notice they will change . . . Providence, to cut a long story short, is about how the love God sends into our lives guides us in discovering a new self, the self that finds itself at the other side of the chasm and, in that sense, is transformed to receive a new future."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the man's blindness is the same as the purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection: the world is transformed by us working together in God's love. The World Council of Churches' *Together towards Life* argues that transformation is needed for mission, which is how Jesus speaks of the healing: "Mission provokes in us a renewed awareness that the Holy Spirit meets us and challenges us at all levels of life and brings newness and change to the places and times of our collective journeys."<sup>3</sup> Jesus' answer is to call to the man to be leader of the mission of God's transformation in our lives.

Interpretations of this healing story still equate disability with sin and pain, and healing with blessing and joy, and for some, suggesting that this is where the

<sup>2</sup> Hans Reinders, *Disability, Providence, and Ethics: Bridging Gaps, Transforming Lives* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 162–63.

<sup>3</sup> Jooseop Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes – with a Practical Guide* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 14.

transformation occurs. For example, Bruener writes, “This particular man’s awful birth happened, Jesus now says, so that . . . God’s grace in this man’s life (could) gradually become worldwide knowledge. This man’s initially awful life was subsequently especially blessed.”<sup>4</sup> We do not know the quality of the man’s life before he entered into a relationship with Jesus. We do know, I would argue, that he had been in relationship with his family and with his faith community before Jesus came on the scene. And we know that it was after the healing that he was excluded by his own community. Indeed, he took on an essential role of a disciple, but it is dangerous for readers, preachers, and scholars to identify someone’s life as painful, lacking meaning, and without connection as a result of their disability. The document “A Church of All and for All” notes how the very presence of people with disabilities disturbs the human notion of perfection and what God’s reward means. Their responses, which come from places of pity via charity or banishment,<sup>5</sup> prevail in our commentaries and societies today.

This interpretation rises from our fear of disability. Nancy Mairs is a woman who lived for three decades as an able-bodied person and now lives with multiple sclerosis. She writes, “To know that one arouses dismay and fear and pity simply sickens the spirit of anyone, whether sound of limb or mind or not. One is tempted to withdraw altogether, at least from the company of ‘normals,’ so as to avoid the indignity; but disappearance from the scene, however welcome to both parties, won’t lead to change.”<sup>6</sup> As well as the temptation to withdraw, this narrative of having an awful life makes some fearful of the reality of disability, leading them to be emotionally and physically distant. By naming the man as a beggar, the neighbours’ words evoke feelings of pity and fear. Moltmann echoes the impacts of this fear when he writes:

And yet this fear of being made to feel insecure by the presence of persons with disabilities has produced many defense mechanisms. Some persons with disabilities are treated like lepers. They are banished from public life; and where they do appear, people flee and depart. Such a defensive attitude can also surface in nursing homes where those with disabilities are with “those like them” and material care replaces human respect . . . But the more persons with disabilities are pushed from public life, the less we know about them. And the less one knows about the lives of those with disabilities, the greater becomes the fear of them. It is this fear that is disabled through encounter and through communal life with persons with disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Dale Bruener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 565.

<sup>5</sup> Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Non-disabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville, TX: Abingdon Press, 1998), 113.

By dismissing the notion that disability is a result of sin, Jesus disrupts this narrative that disability is something to be feared or hidden away from the leadership of community. Though the man had been given an identity as a beggar, he takes on a new identity as a Christian disciple. By continuing to be in conversation with the leaders and with Jesus, by continuing to be a voice in God's mission, the man born blind does not withdraw or accept the leaders' interpretation of him. Instead, he develops his own transformative voice, taking space, and stepping forth in leadership.

## Participating in God's new creation

In the healing scene, Jesus makes a mud pie, which echoes the second creation story in Genesis. God's world continues to be recreated through love. Through the waters of baptism, Christians are incorporated into the body of Christ and empowered to do the work of mission, transforming God's world until it is on earth as it is in heaven. John pauses in the story to interpret the name of the water (Siloam) where the man goes as the "one who has been sent," clearly associating the water with Jesus as the one who was sent by God. In and through the waters of baptism, we are sent to participate in the mission of God as our identity as a Christian takes shape.<sup>8</sup> This identity forms over a lifetime. In *Together towards Life*, the WCC affirms that "baptism in Christ implies a life-long commitment to give an account of this hope by overcoming the barriers in order to find a common identity under the sovereignty of God (Gal. 3:27-28)."<sup>9</sup> Bruener notes this is the shortest description of a conversion: "I went, I washed, I saw."<sup>10</sup> The man's participation in this is the beginning of his formation as a disciple as he is sent on to overcome barriers placed by the leaders in order to point to God creating and recreating a new creation.

Without a conversation with the man, Jesus simply asks the man to go and wash, modelling the simplicity and the profoundness of actions for God's love. Without needing help, the man follows Jesus' invitation, modelling his independence in action and faith. Bruener writes, "John's Jesus is asking his hearers to be as simple and as uncomplicated in their interaction with Jesus and in their interaction, conversation, counsel, and even occasionally, in their evangelism with others – asking us, simply, to be human beings with other people."<sup>11</sup> The new disciple models the same simplicity and uncomplicated nature of evangelism in his subsequent interaction with the Pharisees. The focus shifts from Jesus to the individual being healed. As Grant writes, "Its aim is to communicate

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 391.

<sup>9</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Bruener, *The Gospel of John*, 578–79.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 567–68.

something about the nature of discipleship and the necessity of having faith in Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> To participate in discipleship, the disciple is marked by Jesus as his own. When he encounters barriers, he remains grounded in who he is and whose he is.

### **Making space: I am**

Jesus makes space for the disciple to speak and discover his own truth. It is by leaving the scene that Jesus encourages him to confess his faith and be transformed as his disciple. The mission first understood as Jesus going to him becomes the mission of the disciple to transform the community of God. *Together towards Life* lifts up this shift: “Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18-31) to further God’s mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus does not take the time to explain how and why he healed the disciple; he chose this man to further God’s mission. Grant offers, “Indeed, despite his anonymity, the man born blind comes alive in this healing narrative in a way that few characters do. He appears not simply as a broken figure in need of compassion and healing but as a person in his own right. We are able to get to know him as a thoughtful, brave, amusing, but above all, ordinary person.”<sup>14</sup> I echo Grant’s words at not making the character into a form of charity and a source of inspiration for others, though would add that we are also able to get to know him as a transformative disciple, both as he better understands his relationship to God and Jesus, and as he speaks truth of God’s mission in the world. Bruenner writes, “The man speaks up for the first time with, for this Gospel, the remarkable self-definition: ‘I am the man.’”<sup>15</sup> From these first words, the disciple connects himself to Jesus, the one who declares, ‘I am.’” These words also signify that he has not changed despite his healing, though the neighbours only seemed to know him by his characteristic of blindness. In stepping away from the scene, Jesus makes space for the disciple to advocate for himself and to make his first acts of discipleship, proclaiming his belief in Jesus Christ.

The language of mission from the margins became popular with liberation theology and remains so. *Together towards Life* states that mission from the margins “seeks to be an alternative missional movement against the perception that mission can only be done by the powerful to the powerless, by the rich to the poor, or by the privileged to the

<sup>12</sup> Colleen Grant, “Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Saliers (Nashville, TX: Abingdon Press, 1998), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Grant, “Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives,” 79.

<sup>15</sup> Bruener, *The Gospel of John*, 577.

marginalized.”<sup>16</sup> There needs to be an intentional creation of space. It is not about moving those from the margins to the center but transforming how we understand the center and power. And with that, we all grow in identifying ourselves as disciples participating in and offering leadership in God’s mission.

I am someone who says that my cerebral palsy makes me who I am, though it isn’t all of who I am. To be portrayed as only a person with a disability makes invisible the ways in which my gender, sexuality, age, privilege, training, occupation, and family, among other things, have shaped and continue to shape me, my ministry and my leadership. Disability on its own does not define a person. Grant suggests that it is the “absence of the man’s disability that brings his identity into question suggests that for people who knew him, ‘blindness’ was his defining characteristic. The man’s insistence that he is the same man they once knew points out the fallacy of this thinking. From his perspective, his disability was never his defining characteristic; he knows himself to be the same person.”<sup>17</sup> Just as one’s gender is important and yet not all that defines a person, so is the case for disability. All too often, we in society, as well as in church, group people by physical markers and assumptions. On the one hand, we may say we are able to “look past the disability” and on the other hand we may say “their disability precludes the possibility of effective ministry,” both of which echo the harmful narratives of disability as sin, pain, and limitation. *Together towards Life* states: “Marginalized people have God-given gifts that are under-utilized because of disempowerment and denial of access to opportunities and/or justice.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus gives this disciple opportunity, a relationship that is not the norm in churches today.

Robistscher illustrates this beautifully through her dialogue with the religious leaders of her day. She recalls, “Consider the conversation with a member of the Commission on Ministry (COM) at the end of a long day of interviews:

COM: Do you know who Rev. Nancy Chaffee is?

Jan: Yes. She was one of the first persons (with a disability) to be ordained to the priesthood. I believe she has cerebral palsy.

COM: Well, I hope you don’t become like Nancy Chaffee.

Jan: Why?

COM: Because she is a ‘one issue’ person.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Grant, “Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives,” 81.

<sup>18</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Robistscher, “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, TX: Abingdon Press, 1998), 158.

One might argue that the man only became a disciple because of the healing of his sight. However, Grant argues that the man's witness is of much greater importance than the physical healing:

Although the healing provides the catalyst for the unfolding events, it does not produce an immediate response in the man. He is not presented merely as a stock character representing faith in Jesus. Neither is he portrayed as a victim deserving of pity (recall that he does not request healing). Rather, the story depicts a real person involved in a deliberative process about a personal experience, a process that is expressed through conversation with the religious authorities. Thus, the story is not so much about what Jesus did as what the man is doing.<sup>20</sup>

The disciple identifies himself as the same man, signalling that it is more than the disability that defines who he is or how he participates in God's mission.

### **Infantilization vs. making space**

The parents are not initially in the conversation but are called on to interpret what occurred. They did recognize the disciple as their son, knowing him not only by the label of disability. They did not know how his sight was regained or who "opened his eyes." Instead of speaking for him, the parents said, "Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." John wrote that they said this out of fear of being excluded from the synagogue. Some commentators refer to this as a "cop-out", demonstrating to Christians the importance of telling the truth in tough situations.<sup>21</sup> However, I hear these as words of affirmation from parents to their son, and words of challenge from his loved ones to powerful people with harmful assumptions. Though their motive might have been fear, the result was the same as when Jesus left the scene: the disciple now has the space to tell the truth of God's mission in the world.

In asking his parents instead of him, the leaders fall into the trap that leaders and theologians continue to fall into today. When I am out with another adult, like one of my parents or a friend, my voice and my experience have often been discounted or silenced. People look to them for answers, as if saying, "Is that true? Can you confirm?" As one simple example in biblical commentaries, Sloyan writes, "John 9 tells of a courageous little Jew who keeps telling the truth and will not be silenced by intimidation."<sup>22</sup> In the text, the man is simply never described as "little." And though commentators might be tempted to use such descriptors to demonstrate his lack of power, this continues to

<sup>20</sup> Grant, "Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives," 84.

<sup>21</sup> Bruener, *The Gospel of John*, 589.

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Sloyan, *Interpretation: John* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 116.

infantilize the man, as the leaders did when they addressed his parents instead of conversing with him directly.

Instead of infantilizing people, the church must see people with disabilities as disciples needed for God's mission. Conner writes, "The church has often uncritically accepted the world's estimation of people with disabilities. Why so many crimes, so much abuse, so much discrimination against people with disabilities? Because people with disabilities are commonly more vulnerable and, to put it bluntly, viewed as less than fully human both outside and within the church. Churches must speak into this issue of righteousness and justice."<sup>23</sup> When the church holds "an attitude of paternalism and a superiority complex,"<sup>24</sup> ministry and mission suffer. *Together towards Life* reflects on the call of the church to reject values and practices that destroy community life: "Christians are called to acknowledge the sinful nature of all forms of discrimination and to transform unjust structures. This call places certain expectations on the church. The church must refuse to harbour oppressive forces within its ranks, acting instead as a counter-cultural community."<sup>25</sup> The church participates in the sin of infantilization when people with disabilities and other disciples and leaders from the margins are not given space to proclaim our truth of who we know God to be and how we are called to participate in and help lead God's mission.

### **Transformative voice: Belonging → transformation**

When the leaders eventually talk with him, the disciple tells the truth with confidence and integrity. Bruener writes,

The man could have protected himself from hostility on both sides if he had replied more guardedly, "I don't really know for sure; I'm not trained theologically; but in my humble opinion – though I may be wrong, don't hold this against me – I think he might be a prophet." No such people-pleasing in our man: "He is a prophet," without any qualifications whatsoever. The last time our man referred to Jesus he called him "the man" . . . Our man now speaks right up, without equivocation, knowing full well he will alienate one significant portion of his hearers.<sup>26</sup>

The disciple's voice is transformative in God's mission even as he transforms his own beliefs and commitments to Jesus Christ. Brown notes, "In each of these the former

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the Lens of Disability Studies* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Bruener, *The Gospel of John*, 582.



blind man gives voice to statements that betray an ever deepening knowledge of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> The coming realization of who Jesus is, for him and the world, moulds his heart and mission of discipleship: he refers to the one who healed him as the “man they call Jesus,” then Jesus is a prophet, then he is from God, and finally, the important Johannine statement, “Jesus is the Son of Man.” This is why Bruener refers to the disciple as the man who always tells the truth to honour Jesus: “The healed man is impressive: he never lies, not even to Jesus at the end. He is the prototypical ‘person who always tells the truth’, touched by, and so coming increasingly toward Jesus in every encounter until finally he is at the Lord’s feet in worship.”<sup>28</sup> In the gospel of John, truth-telling and discipleship are closely related. This disciple does not fear the truth but rather seeks to bring others to know the truth of Jesus.

All too often, the voices of people with disabilities are marginalized and our capacity for discipleship, mission, ministry, and truth telling is minimized. In recent years, the study of disability theology has expanded greatly. Academic and church life have started on a continuum from inclusion to belonging, a place where people with disabilities are part of mutual relationships and engage in meaningful community. And while I thank God for and deeply respect the work of theologians like Tom Reynolds, John Swinton, Bill Gaventa, Amos Yong, and so on, voices of people, including women, living with disabilities themselves must also be heard.<sup>29</sup> Fubara-Manuel writes,

An African proverb states, “Only the one who wears the shoe knows where it pinches.” Only PWDs [persons with disabilities] can adequately engage with the issues and concerns for inclusion of PWDs. Others can only give volume to the voices of PWDs and re-echo the concerns observed, heard, and seen. But this echo, while great, is not enough. PWDs must be at the table to discuss ways in which disability can be an essential part of the church’s ministry and commitment.<sup>30</sup>

The story in John 9 demonstrates how Jesus creates the space needed for the disciple to claim and live into God’s mission in the world. Fubara-Manuel continues, “In the expressions of Jesus’ humanity, we are taught a pilgrimage of mutual edification of all.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, 377.

<sup>28</sup> Bruener, *The Gospel of John*, 561.

<sup>29</sup> They all have intimate, transformative relationships with people with disabilities. As well, some have shared experiences of depression, a disabling condition.

<sup>30</sup> 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), 105.

Healing takes place when there is sincere welcome that tells of valued partnership.”<sup>31</sup> Jesus models partnership that prioritizes the voices of the most marginalized.

A common way to interpret healing stories is to say that people are healed when they are restored to belonging in community. That the disciple was kicked out of the community after he regained his sight turns on its head this popular way of interpreting physical healings as social ones. This understanding of healing is echoed but also deepened in *Together towards Life*: “Healing is more about the restoration of wholeness than about correcting something perceived as defective. To become whole, the parts that have become estranged need to be reclaimed. The fixation on cure is thus a perspective that must be overcome in order to promote the biblical focus. Mission should foster the full participation of people with disabilities and illness in the life of the church and society.”<sup>32</sup> The disciple threatens the status quo of the community. Instead of belonging he is thrown out. His understanding of the activity of God challenges them. He can no longer fit in. Belonging simply for the sake of belonging neither heals nor promotes God’s mission.

There is so much offered on helping people with disabilities belong in community. The excellent work on the ministry of inclusion and belonging must go further, into transforming how power and ministry are lived out. Conner suggests this witness to God’s kingdom would have “a transformative effect on both the world and the church,”<sup>33</sup> and is the transformation of partnership that Fubara-Manual identifies. bell hooks, an anti-racist feminist scholar, speaks about this transformation of power/love. She writes, “We cannot know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power, if any feeling of vulnerability strikes terror in our hearts.”<sup>34</sup> The man is thrown out of community because the leaders felt their power being threatened. Although this text has been interpreted in ways that can produce the horrible effects of antisemitism, in my reading of the text the importance lies in how faith communities react toward and react against the leadership of people with disabilities. This shifting of power by those who were once outsiders (women, queer, racialized) is not new, nor will it end with this wave of people with disabilities seeking leadership. Conner sees this ongoing shift as essential for the church’s mission: “The only way that people with disabilities who are part of the body of Christ can fail to offer their contribution to the ministry and witness of the church in our iconic witness is if they are not afforded a place within Christian

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>32</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 221.

congregations. The absence of their concerns and presence in theological schools and congregations diminishes the church's capacity for ministry and the fitness of our mission."<sup>35</sup>

This next example is quoted at length as it demonstrates the limits people with disabilities have also put on ourselves because of fear of disrupting the status quo:

During a seminar presentation at a theological college, I made a case for PWDs to be given leadership positions at all levels of the life and worship of our church. The moderator of the session, with a somewhat perplexed expression, asked if I really meant it. Do I truly believe in the possibility of a blind person or a crippled person serving as the moderator of the general assembly of our great church? His question was confusing and troubling at first, seeing as the moderator had a sight impairment. It was confusing that a theological tutor would ask that and troubling that he had apparently put a ceiling on his leadership potentials or possibilities within the church he serves. But then, the moderator was simply being realistic within the social construct of disability. He is no stranger to the stigma associated with disability as well as the fear and ignorance exhibited by the church. His worry was that a disabled moderator would be a distraction to the image and message of the church.<sup>36</sup>

The movement from belonging to transformation may seem to some, even among those of us who live with disabilities, as a distraction or disruption to God's call. Robistscher reflects on how her leadership was seen, and how this surprised her, as the church had been a place where she experienced belonging: "I didn't realize how frightening I was to people who had never seen a person with a disability in such positions before. 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 of which Nancy Eiesland writes so eloquently."<sup>37</sup> That distraction and disruption may alienate some. Some may experience it as a shift away from or degradation to the power they hold. Our continually shifting culture certainly plays a role in this. As more and more women enter positions of power in the church and society, men may feel threatened or like they are "losing their church." I have heard the inference from church people, "Isn't it enough that you belong?" That sentiment is repeated to people across marginalizations when they seek to transform the church. When Black, indigenous, queer, disabled, women, etc. seek positions of power and speak critically of how the church has acted historically and is presently behaving, people ask, "Isn't it enough that you belong? We are in relationship with you; why do you still seek change?"

<sup>35</sup> Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Fubara-Manuel, "Together with All the Saints," 103.

<sup>37</sup> Robistscher, "Through Glasses Darkly," 154.

The man in John's gospel, as far as one can tell, had been included in the community and his family while he lived with blindness. It was when he raised his voice, disrupting the system he had belonged to, that he was asked to leave. The disciple disrupts the leaders' sense of power by proclaiming Jesus as a man, a prophet, and Lord. The leaders experience him giving power to someone else, to Jesus, outside their normal power structures. Yong writes, "Perhaps we might be able to appreciate that this man's now sighted identity, deeply formed by the lifelong experience of blindness, gave him a perspective on the world different from that of his normative interrogators."<sup>38</sup> He challenged the status quo and was seeking to transform it as a new disciple of Jesus.

As a woman with cerebral palsy, I am grateful that I continue to belong in faith communities, both in my own denomination and in national and international ecumenical settings. However, when I have applied for paid accountable positions in congregational ministry, I have been turned down several times. Even though I see myself as a traditional minister in beliefs and practices of worship, teaching, and pastoral care, who I am and what I represent frightens people, disrupting what they think power is and how the church exercises power. As long as we fit in with the prevailing notions of power and ministry, we can and do belong. We can have loving relationships and may even be celebrated as a participating member of a congregation, welcome to come to the table. And yet, that shifts when we seek to be the minister who welcomes others in the name of Jesus Christ. That is what gets the door closed, yet again.

Even when the disciple is no longer welcome in his synagogue, his relationship and his ministry with Jesus continue. Jesus seeks the disciple out again, engaging *him* in conversation (neither the parents nor the Pharisees). It is through the relationship with Jesus and the love of God that transformation occurs, for the individual as well as the community that emerges from Jesus' mission. The disciple proclaims his faith in Jesus as Lord – proclaiming the good news for himself and for the world as a transformational leader in God's mission!

## Conclusion

Through journeying in the story of Jesus and the man born blind, Jesus demonstrates to our church today that people with disabilities are needed for God's mission in the world. By creating space for the witness of this disciple and by the disciple sharing his own experience of Jesus, they both point to the transformation of God's beloved community. This is our next step as church and as disciples with disabilities, to move from

<sup>38</sup> Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and The Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 50–51.

belonging to Christ's body, to actively transforming with God the community to be a reflection of God's promised kingdom. We cannot control how other disciples respond, yet people with disabilities can continue living out our call to serve God. *Together towards Life* affirms,

Participation in God's mission follows the way of Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45); who tears down the mighty and powerful and exalts the lowly (Luke 1:46-55); and whose love is characterized by mutuality, reciprocity, and interdependence. It therefore requires a commitment to struggle against and resist the powers that obstruct the fullness of life that God wills for all, and a willingness to work with all people involved in movements and initiatives committed to the causes of justice, dignity, and life.<sup>39</sup>

May we all find our space to serve as transformative leaders in God's mission.

<sup>39</sup> Keum (ed.), *Together towards Life*, 17.