

CHAPTER 3 GOING BEYOND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINAL DISABILITY DISCOURSES TO EMBRACE HUMAN RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE

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Summary

Christian doctrines, practices, beliefs and convictions are tools that are shaping perspectives and provide meaning to disability in most religious settings in Zimbabwe. Most Christian and African Traditional religions in Zimbabwe are not yet open to public discourse about disability and even proactively bringing the needs of persons with disability to the centre of their missional agenda. Disability perspectives and proactive strategies to help persons with disabilities are still trapped within Christian sermonic outlets and few charitable deeds. Besides providing an overall religious disability discourse in Zimbabwe, this article explores options for going beyond Christian doctrinal and/or biblical perspectives to a position of complementing institutional activism enshrined in the 2030 Disability Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. This article uses disability theology as a lens to understand Christian doctrinal disability discourse. Qualitatively, this article uses document analysis to gather data. This article concludes that religious communities in Zimbabwe should transform to not merely integrate persons with disabilities and provide charity but also focus on inclusion as a human right as advocated by secular stakeholders such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and African Union Agenda 2063 especially focusing on creating awareness of disability rights and integrating Zimbabwean laws on disability.

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1 Introduction

Internationally, disability issues are topical. It is common to know, meet or live with persons with disabilities in our communities. Disability transverses lines of identity, gender, age, race and sexual orientation and, disability cuts across disciplines. Communities are encouraged to accept that persons with disabilities are 'humans and impairment is a natural part of the human state'.¹ Therefore, it is critical at the onset to accept that the term disability is broad and complex. This article uses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) definition of disability because it is succinct and broad enough to capture the major aspects of disability. According to the CRPD, individuals with disabilities include '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'.² The world over, the number of persons with disabilities exceeds one billion.³ The statistics show that persons with disabilities constitute 16 per cent of the global population.⁴

Zimbabwe has a population of about 15 million people and about 1.4 million people have some form of disability.⁵ Regardless of the large number of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe, persons with disabilities continue to suffer discrimination.⁶ For example, in Zimbabwe, there are negative perceptions about disability to the extent of putting 'women on the receiving end and in a desperate situation such as killing their children for them to be accepted in society'.⁷ The problem with disability is that there is a plethora of factors which militate against persons with disabilities. Notable issues include but are not limited to issues of exclusions, stigma and abuse. Besides the negative experiences of persons with disabilities people either do not understand disabilities or have a keen interest to learn more about them. The civic and civil institutions are no exception, they also struggle to comprehend matters of disability. There is evidence to show that most government and relief organisations lack

- 1 J Byzek 'Jesus and the paralytic, the blind and the lame: A Sermon' (2000) <http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/1100/1100cft1.htm> (accessed 3 March 2023).
- 2 Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN General Assembly A/RES/61/106, Annex I, 13 December 2006.
- 3 WHO & World Bank 'World report on disability' (2011).
- 4 WHO 'Disability' (2023) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health#:~:text=An%20estimated%201.3%20billion%20people%20%E2%80%93%20or%2016%25%20of%20the%20global,experience%20a%20significant%20disability%20today> (accessed 15 March 2023).
- 5 UNESCO 'Zimbabwe launches National Disability Policy' (2021) <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/zimbabwe-launches-national-disability-policy> (accessed 10 May 2023).
- 6 K Biri, T Zimunya & J Gwara 'Personhood and disability in Zimbabwe: A philosophical analysis' in S Kabue, J Amanze & C Landman (eds) *Disability in Africa: Resource book for theology and religious studies* (2016) 387.
- 7 F Machingura 'The "Unholy Trinity" against disabled people in Zimbabwe' in T Chataika (ed) *The Routledge handbook of disability in Southern Africa* (2011) 213.

information and knowledge about disabilities.⁸ In Zimbabwe, and other places persons with disabilities are considered vulnerable populations and this implies that their human rights need to be protected by law.

Accordingly, I argue in this article that the focus of Christian doctrinal disability perspectives should transform to not merely integrate persons with disabilities and provide charity, but also, focus on inclusion as a human right as advocated by secular stakeholders such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and African Union 2063 blueprint especially focusing on creating awareness of disability rights and integrating Zimbabwean laws on disability.

2 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and the social model of disability

Although, there is promising and growing activism about the need for governments and communities to understand disability,⁹ there is still a lack of policies that prioritise human rights and turn into law the lack of inclusion of persons with disabilities. It is worrisome to note that the 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we want' which is strategic planning for the continent for the next 50 years does not explicitly refer to disability.¹⁰ This failure to mention disability in the blueprint contradicts 'the spirit of the SDGs, which clearly and explicitly refer to disability as a key factor to consider in achieving these goals'.¹¹ One resolution propounded by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is that persons with disabilities should be included in all spheres of life especially the political, economic and social. The SDGs' 2030 mantra 'leave no one behind' *especially persons with disability* (emphasis added) is commanding and is an eye-opener not only to give human rights to persons with disabilities but also fostering a law for inclusion. Article 1 of the CRPD states that

the purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

8 F Smith, E Jolley & E Schmidt 'Disability and disasters: The importance of an inclusive approach to vulnerability and social capital' (2012) https://www.sistema.protezionecivile.it/allegati/1476_Disability_and_disasters.pdf (accessed 17 May 2023).

9 K Soldatic & S Grech 'Transnationalizing disability studies: Rights, justice and impairment' (2014) 34 *Disability Studies Quarterly*.

10 African Union 'Common African Position (CAP) on the post-2015 development agenda' (2014) <http://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/library/reports/poverty-reduction/common-african-position-on-the-post-2015-agenda.html> (accessed 18 December 2023).

11 R Lang, M Schneider & M Kett et al 'Policy development: An analysis of disability inclusion in a selection of African Union policies' (2017) 168 <https://online.library.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/dpr.12323> (accessed 18 December 2023).

From this statement, the 2030 SDGs can be interpreted as prioritising the human rights of persons with disabilities. With the aspect of human rights at the fore, the 2030 SDGs framed disability to cut across all its goals and targets. A summary of this is visible in the following articles:

- Goal 1 and Goal 2 focus on the relevance of persons with disabilities. Target 1:2 seeks to reduce poverty by at least half the proportion of persons with disabilities. Target 2:1 focuses on providing sufficient food yearly to persons with disabilities.
- Goal 3 targets good health for persons with disabilities.
- Goal 4 ensures that there is inclusive and equitable education for persons with disabilities. Nations should build and upgrade education facilities that proffer effective learning environments for persons with disabilities.
- Goal 10 aims to reduce inequality among countries. Disability is mentioned as one of the 2030 inclusions alongside age, sex, religion, social, ethnicity and other status.
- Goal 17 mentions the issue of global partnership. The purpose is to increase the availability of high-quality data for representing all national contexts. The information about disability is mentioned as vital in this process. As such, this assists persons with disabilities to raise their concerns using their own national governments.

A close analysis of this approach of cutting across all the SDGs to a greater extent is calling for the reorientation of the long-standing social model of disability emerging into the human rights model. The social model of disability explains the socially created disadvantages or marginalisation of persons with disabilities.¹² Accordingly, this article argues that the Christian church in Zimbabwe has social barriers militating against persons with disabilities. The Christian church is an established institution,

in Zimbabwe and many parts of southern Africa, the church is still a strong and revered institution. The church continues to be the primary place where economic, social, psychological and spiritual needs of the people are met.¹³

Christianity commands a large following in Zimbabwe and is known for providing hope to people. An estimated 86 per cent of Zimbabweans are Christians.¹⁴ These descriptions still present the church as a powerful entity in Zimbabwe; hence it is strategic for the church to use the disability human rights approach to provide charity, transform, integrate and include. The human rights model puts persons with disabilities at the

12 M Oliver 'A new model in the social work role in relation to disability' in J Campling (ed) *The handicapped person: A new perspective for social workers* (1981) <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Campling-handicppaed.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2023).

13 N Sande & B Maforo 'Pastoral ministry from the margins: Pastors' wives in Apostolic faith mission in Zimbabwe' (2021) 47 *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae* 1 at 2.

14 Office of International Religious Freedom '2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Zimbabwe' (2021) <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/zimbabwe/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%202015%20nationwide,than%201%20percent%20is%20Muslim> (accessed 21 May 2023).

centre of all decisions affecting them and most of their problems are in society.¹⁵ The human rights model gained prominence in the CRPD which monitors the efforts of how nations are implementing issues of disabilities. From a strategic perspective, both the human rights model and the CRPD proffer a possibility of developing law and policy which the Christian doctrinal perspective should focus on. To improve discourses about disabilities religious communities should be empowered. Empowerment is a strategy which is used to dismantle and disempower activities by engaging in a collective mobilisation of marginalised groups.¹⁶

3 Disability theology as a theoretical lens

To make sense of the interaction between disability and Christian doctrines, this article uses disability theology as a theoretical lens. Disability theology is emerging as an independent field of inquiry. Be this as it may, as an unfolding relatively new theology, disability theology is still finding space to engage meaningfully with other theologies.¹⁷ Thus, the

notions of disability are categorised in three ways. First, disability is regarded as a stand-alone concept. Second, some people prefer to describe disability as a theology. Third, disability is simply viewed as a religious concept (Christian, Jewish and Islamic).¹⁸

From a historical perspective,

Disability theologies – as an independent field in theological research – developed in the United States at the end of the last century in a dynamic intellectual context, fuelled by the rich theological thinking of renowned theologians such as Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Emmanuel Mounier, Stanley Hauerwas and Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁹

The emergence of the Disability Rights Movement and the Americans with Disability in 1980 influenced the work on disability studies.²⁰ Like gender studies and women studies, disability studies aimed to proffer space to reflect on the experiences of persons with disabilities. The philosophical premise of disability theology centers on analysing religious practices and

15 G Quinn & T Degener ‘The moral authority for change: Human rights values and the world wide process of disability reform’ in G Quinn & T Degener *Human rights and disability: The current use and future potential of human rights instruments in the context of disability* (2002) 13, 14.

16 M Ledwith *Community development: A critical approach* (2011).

17 C Richie ‘Do not hinder them: Educating children with mental disabilities in the church’ (2015) 20 *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (2015).

18 N Sande *African churches ministering “to and with” persons with disabilities: perspectives from Zimbabwe* (2022) 61.

19 T Cooreman-Guittin & AL Ommen ‘Disability theology: A driving force for change?’ (2022) 22 *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 1.

20 As above.

theological teachings focusing on the experiences of persons with disabilities. In general, theological studies are now slowly starting to incorporate research about disability studies in their curriculum. From a disability theology standpoint, it is proper to speak about theologies of disabilities because there are several depending on the doctrines, beliefs, practices and religious convictions. Regardless of the starting point of disability theology, the main goal is to change the church and society to prioritise the plight of persons with disabilities.²¹

This article uses disability theology as a field of enquiry enabling an understanding of the contribution of church doctrines, practices and convictions to the discourse of disability. If theology explores how doctrines are understood, then in the same vein, disability theology proffers reflections on the subject of disability with a bias towards the experiences of persons with disabilities. The starting point of disability theology is observing 'that experiences of impairment (physical, intellectual, psychological, and social) are a significant and relatively unsurprising element of human life, and as such are worthy of theological reflection'.²² Hence, disability theology has come to refer 'to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability'.²³ A typically grounded theology of disability should be a theology for, with, of and by persons with disabilities.²⁴ It is important to interpret scriptures in a way that prevents stereotyping persons with disabilities.²⁵

Further, disability theology is opening innovative ways to understand and deal with disability issues.²⁶ For instance, the work by Nancy Eiesland called 'the disabled God'²⁷ brought a rethinking about the representation of God and how scriptures present a dignified life before God. Besides first looking at how persons with disabilities were accessing places of worship, theologians also began to denounce the way Christian churches' theological anthropology stigmatises persons with disability. The majority of the theologians questioned negative biblical hermeneutics, for instance, the metaphor of blindness is viewed in a negative sense.²⁸ By focusing on the experiences of persons with disabilities, disability theology affirms that 'what God reveals to us – about Godself and about us – through disability

21 HL Ndlovu 'African beliefs concerning people with disabilities: Implications for theological education' (2016) 20 *Journal of Disability and Religion* 29.

22 JB Creamer 'Disability theology' (2012) 6/7 *Religion Compass* 339.

23 J Swinton 'Disability theology' in I McFarland, D Fergusson & K Kilby et al (eds) *Cambridge dictionary of Christian theology* (2010).

24 TK Christiani *Doing theology: Towards the construction of methods for living with disability* (2009) 28 *Asia Journal of Theology* page at 35.

25 J Gillibrand *Disabled church – disabled society: The implications of Autism for philosophy, theology and politics* (2011).

26 D Vermeer 'The theology of disability – A new way of listening, seeing and belonging' *Catholic Communications* 27 June 2014 http://www.sydneycatholic.org/news/latestnews/2014/2014627_1055.shtml (accessed 9 May 2023).

27 N Eiesland *The disabled God: Towards a liberatory theology of disability* (1994).

28 J Hull *In the beginning there was darkness: A blind person's conversations with the Bible* (2001).

and vulnerability, is a key to understanding God's mystery'.²⁹ The cross provides a framework to reflect and connect issues of disability to the other main theologies like Christology, pneumatology, hamartiology, anthropology and theodicy.³⁰ It follows therefore that disability theology's entry of inquiry is challenging the spaces for persons with disabilities in religious settings. More so, disability theology goes on to assert that persons with disabilities must have the same choices as persons without a disability.

4 Prominent problematic scriptures about disability

The Bible which is authoritative in Christian traditions is complex in interpreting disability because besides struggling with personal cultural bias the theologian needs to pay attention to the diverse cultures behind, inside and in front of the texts. In other words, disability 'exclusion is nurtured and perpetuated by negative and discriminatory perspectives on disability, which perspectives are rooted in the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability'.³¹ A discussion about specific scriptures which need interrogation is critical in this article. There are 46 biblical texts which relate to disability.³²

Biblical text such as John 9:4 states that 'this happened so that the Power of God could be seen in Him' provoke a lot of discussion towards the meaning and how religious communities may perceive disability. The story of a man born blind and healed is a source of today's challenges regarding disability.³³ The demeanour exhibited by the disciples of Jesus and the broader society in John 9 bears a striking resemblance to the daily challenges faced by Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Zimbabwe. Drawing inspiration from Jesus's response to the disciples, there is an opportunity to foster unity and build an inclusive and productive society. The manuscript contends that the creation of wealth and sustainable national development hinges on the involvement of all groups in crucial systems such as transportation planning.

Jesus's approach challenges the prevailing belief that disability is a consequence of prenatal sin or the sins of one's parents, a notion that has led to divisive attitudes within families and communities. The dismissal of the idea that blindness or physical suffering directly results from the

29 Cooreman-Guittin & Ommen (n 19) 2.

30 A Yong *Theology and down syndrome: Reimagining disability in late modernity* (2007).

31 MA Bowa 'The Coronavirus pandemic and persons with disabilities: Towards a liberating reading of the Bible for churches in Southern Africa' in F Sibanda, T Muyambo & E Chitando (eds) *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa* (2022) 187.

32 WV Bryan *In search of freedom: How persons living with disabilities have been disenfranchised from the mainstream of American society and how the search for freedom continues* (2006).

33 MC Coloe, MA Beavis & BE Reid *John 1-10* (1984).

sufferer's sin is a significant departure from the problematic understanding of the time.

The manuscript suggests that Jesus's encounter with a man blind from birth prompted questions about moral responsibility for disability, illness, and the problem of evil. Pharisees and Sadducees, guided by their respective interpretations of the law, expelled disabled individuals, considered born in sin, from their ecclesiastical systems. This echoes the broader theological debate in the book of Ezekiel and Job, where the assumption that the righteous should not suffer is challenged.

Jesus's perspective challenges the notion of perceiving disabled individuals as problems to be solved or cured. Instead, he emphasises that being different is a miraculous expression of God's power. According to Jesus, the blind man's condition serves to proclaim God's divine providence and glory. The manuscript underscores the importance of focusing not on the causes of blindness but on the transformative potential of the individual's current state (John 9:4).

Blindness is portrayed in the Old Testament as an unmitigated evil.³⁴ In certain instances, blindness is metaphorically used to symbolise the wickedness of Israel and its adversaries. Ancient Israel maintained an attitude that deemed the disabled, including the blind, as unfit to enter the temple, considering them an affront to God's perfection (2 Samuel 5:8b and Lev 21:17-23).³⁵ According to 1 Samuel 4:4:

The son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel; and his nurse took him up, and fled; and, as she fled in her haste, he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

People were afraid to bring a person with disabilities to King David and this shows how denigrated were persons with disabilities. However, the gesture of King David to invite Mephibosheth to dine with him should be embraced as a sign of inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Besides blindness, physical deformity is viewed negatively in the Bible. According to Deuteronomy 23:1-2 says:

[H]e whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord. No bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

34 MA Beavis 'From the margin to the way: A feminist reading of the story of Bartimaeus' *JFSR* (1998).

35 MM Thompson *John: A Commentary* (2015).

5 Overview of disability doctrinal discourses in Zimbabwe

The above section shows that although the Bible is authoritative it has some common critical texts which are difficult to interpret in the context of disability. The church in Zimbabwe is not homogenous making it a good source to explore the diverse impact of doctrines and disability. The reason is that 'some churches in Zimbabwe and other African countries have had a long history of practices that exclude persons with disabilities from their mainstream structures'.³⁶ In as much as disability is a global issue, the experiences of persons with disabilities are more contextual. Hence, it is important to understand how persons with disabilities live in different places and their challenges are varied,³⁷ also does the Christian doctrines, beliefs and practices.

The missionary churches commonly known as Mainline churches have strong links and are controlled by the West. Historically, 'the settling of European missionaries in most parts of the country resulted in the conversion of large parts of the population to Christianity'.³⁸ The missionary churches established in Zimbabwe had been part of the mother churches in the West and this has made in-road for the establishment of education, health and policies. It follows therefore that the meaningful disability strides especially policies made by the mother churches in the West extends to Zimbabwe. For instance, to a greater extent, Mainline church's perspectives about disability are heavily influenced by the policies used in the West.³⁹ Broadly, mainline churches are implementing disability policies with a positive attitude. There are notable institutions established by mainline churches to cater for the physical needs of persons with disabilities. For example, the Jairos Jiri Association is the largest service provider to persons with disabilities providing skills and community-based rehabilitation projects.⁴⁰ The Zimbabwe Council of Churches which is an ecumenical body for several mainline churches has initiatives to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. In 2021, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches conducted a national survey day which

36 FA Bowa 'Representations of disability in the Old Testament and their implication for the nexus between poverty and disability: Lessons for the church in contemporary Zimbabwe' *Old Testament Essays* (2022) 398.

37 L Scoones 'Livelihoods perspectives and rural development' (2009) 36 *Journal of Peasant Studies* 171.

38 J Muderedzi, AH Eide & SH Braathen et al 'Perceptions and treatment of children with cerebral palsy among the Tonga of Binga in Zimbabwe' (2017) 3 *Cogent Social Sciences* 1.

39 Sande (n 18) 73.

40 Jairos Jiri Association <https://thisabilityhub.org.zw/listing/jairos-jiri-association/> (accessed 16 January 2024).

aims to make empirical research to understand the contextual day-to-day challenges of persons with disabilities.⁴¹

The Zimbabwe Council of churches acknowledges that churches should contribute to health care services and perform humanitarian activities to support persons with disabilities.⁴² The report from the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Disability Advocates Networks showed that:

Many participants hailed the initiative, acknowledging that they had been challenged to reflect on their attitudes towards people with disabilities in church and society. At the assembly, the ZCC adopted an Inclusive Policy. The policy presented obligations to churches, society and government to craft policies and assume practices that ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities, women, children, and minorities.⁴³

The Dutch Reformed Church in Zimbabwe uses an institutional approach to address the needs of persons with disabilities. In 1939 the church established a primary school for the blind. Later in 1948 the Henry Murray School of Deaf.⁴⁴ The Seventh Day Adventist church engages persons with disabilities inside and outside the church. Their mantra is summarised as:

As the church, we are opening our arms wider so that they feel loved and have a shoulder to lean on because that is our duty. It emerged during the interactions that people with disabilities feel neglected by the church. It is our duty to go door to door and ensure that they are included in every aspect of life. We realized that the church plays a critical role in promoting the rights of people with disability. The Bible say every person is fearfully and wonderfully made. Jesus treated everyone equally and dealt with special needs afterwards.⁴⁵

The above mantra demonstrates a holistic approach to interpreting the Bible where there is an emphasis on the church's responsibility and the need to offer support to persons with disabilities.

41 Zimbabwe Council of Churches Statement on Disability <https://www.thechurchnewszim.co.zw/2021/10/zimbabwe-council-of-churches-statement.html> (accessed 16 January 2024).

42 I Sauca 'Greetings from the World Council of Churches (WCC) Geneva to the 8th Biennial Zimbabwe Council of Churches General Assembly' (2020) <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/greetings-from-the-world-council-of-churches-wcc-geneva-to-the-8th-biennial-zimbabwe-council-of-churches-general-assembly> (accessed 8 March 2023).

43 World Council of Churches 'Inclusion reaches new level at Zimbabwe Council of Churches Assembly' (2020) <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/inclusion-reaches-new-level-at-zimbabwe-council-of-churches-assembly> (accessed 26 April 2023).

44 T Marungudzi 'Special institutions for people living with disabilities in Zimbabwe: A socio-onomatics exegesis' (2016) 4 *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 306.

45 F Lupande 'Zimbabwe: Special department opened for the disabled' *The Herald* (Harare) 6 October 2020 <https://www.herald.co.zw/special-department-opened-for-the-disabled/> (accessed 15 January 2024).

African Pentecostals in Zimbabwe to a greater extent still stigmatise persons with disabilities. African Pentecostals believe that healing is a solution to disability. Divine healing is a pivotal trait of Pentecostalism.⁴⁶ Christ's work on the cross released the power to give bodily restoration to persons with disabilities. Without contextual hermeneutics, African Pentecostals use a literal and exclusionary interpretation of portions of scriptures which mention the blind, deaf, lame and demon-possessed. Also, demons and evil spirits are believed to cause disability. Exorcism practiced upon persons with disabilities is a form of liberation and freedom. Chasing demons causing disability is a sign of victory over the powers of darkness by the power of God.

Like African Pentecostals, African Initiated Churches believe that disability is not something that simply happens. African Initiated Churches believe that disability is caused by evil spirits, witchcraft and vengeance spirits, angry ancestors and rheumatism.⁴⁷ When it comes to gods, African Initiated Churches believe that disabilities 'are associated with evil and punishment by the gods'. It is believed that evil-doing by either an individual or a family has repercussions that result in giving birth to a child with disabilities. Thus, disability is a punishment from the gods and ancestors.

African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe believe that disability can be cured. Prophets and leaders in African Initiated Churches use prayer, and fasting to minister to persons with disabilities. Other artefacts used are holy water, oil and eggs. These artefacts are used to cleanse the believer. In some instances, prophets tie strings on the hands, knees and ankles to prevent disability. For complex disabilities like mental health problems, prophets use small pebble stones and 21 days of fasting in the mountains. There are fewer differentiations between types of disabilities:

The African community lumps disabled persons together and analyses them in terms of their bodily impairment ... different kinds of disabilities such as mild, moderate, severe or profound disability. One can also look at psychological impairment. There is also psychological hearing impairment, learning disability, autism, Down's syndrome, intellectual disability and so forth.⁴⁸

Most of the disability perceptions are influenced by narratives from the Old Testament. The Hebrew scriptures do not portray persons with disabilities as equal partners.⁴⁹ The monarchy is responsible for dividing people into

46 CG Brown 'Introduction: Pentecostalism and the globalization of illness and healing' in CG Brown (ed) *Global Pentecostal and charismatic healing* (2011) 3.

47 F Machingura 'The rights of people with disability from a third world perspective: The Zimbabwean Context' in SS Bagchi & A Das *Human rights and the third world* (2012).

48 MJ Masango 'Neglect of people with disability by the African church' (2019) 75 *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 1 at 2.

49 A Rose "'Who causes the blind to see": Disability and quality of religious life' (1997) 12 *Disability and Society* 395.

ethnicity, gender, impairments, and economic status.⁵⁰ It is easier to use the Old Testament because most of the culture resonates with the African indigenous culture. The overall discussion shows that both Christian and African Traditional religious doctrine has negative perceptions of disability. This resonates with the religious model of disability which view disability as a sin.⁵¹

6 Appropriating the Christian doctrinal perspectives within SDGs

It is evident from the ongoing discussion that doctrinal and theological perspectives about disability are sources for the interpretation of disability. Inherently, theology impacts the public and the intimate life of believers. Theology permeates social attitudes, political affiliations, and cultural and economic dispositions of believers. Appropriately, this article focuses on how the doctrinal and theological perspectives of disability respond to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals mantra commanding 'leave no one behind' *especially persons with disability* (emphasis added). The issue of disability is topical cutting across all its goals and targets.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is pushing that disability discourses must cut across all sectors. Churches are strong vehicles 'where economic, social, psychological and spiritual needs of people are met'.⁵² While the church should keep its head within the biblical narrative, however, it needs to include socio-cultural analyses to achieve social justice for all believers including persons with disabilities. Social values and religious beliefs are sources for both the interpretation and construction of the meaning of disability.⁵³ Urgent healing needed for persons with disabilities is not about their bodies but the removal of institutionalised social, economic, political and religious barriers.⁵⁴ Efficient pastoral ministry is a potential vehicle which the church can use to 'transform persons with disabilities'.⁵⁵ Unlike the African Pentecostal quest for bodily restoration, persons with disabilities need food, hospital fees, tuition, and accommodation. The Sustainable Development Goal 1 and Goal 2 focus on the relevance of persons with disabilities. Target1:2 seeks to reduce poverty by at least half the proportion of persons with disabilities. Target 2:1 focuses on providing sufficient food yearly to persons with disabilities. Poverty is one of the factors that affect persons

50 O Vengeyi 'The interpretation of Biblical texts on disability: Then and now' in S Kabue, J Amanze & C Landman (eds) *Disability in Africa: A resource book for theology and religious studies* (2016).

51 J McClure *Preaching words: 144 key terms in homiletics* (2007).

52 Sande & Maforo (n 13) at 1.

53 G Thomas & A Loxley *Deconstructing special education and constructing education* (2001).

54 A Yong 'Disability and the love of wisdom: De-forming, re-forming, and per-forming philosophy of religion' (2009) 9 *Ars Disputandi* 54.

55 Sande & Maforo (n 13).

with disability. There is an interplay between poverty and impairments.⁵⁶ According to the book of James 1:27 'religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'. The book of James encourages believers to care for the vulnerable. However, reading this scripture with a disability theology lens shows that it regarded persons with disabilities as an important category of society's vulnerable who should be cared for by believers. Prioritising accommodation is the right step in moving persons with disabilities into communion.⁵⁷

It is possible that churches can contribute to practice inclusion as articulated by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals about disability. The inclusion of persons with disability shows that churches are participating in God's salvific actions. The effective way for the church to do this is to 'include persons with disabilities in the community and give them space for participation'.⁵⁸ Participating together, persons with disability and persons without disability build on the conviction and belief of living equally together. Participating in doctrinal practices affords theological reflection space as believers partake in worship. Corporate worship and participation in rituals help believers to become transformed by utilising practice. One obvious element needing urgency is facilitating the dignity of persons with disability. The African Pentecostal notion of thinking that persons with disability are candidates for divine healing (de)values them making them more vulnerable. Healing is not a bad thing; the problem is its ability to restrict persons with disabilities from accessing worship spaces.⁵⁹ Love is transformative, it is more rewarding for persons with disabilities to receive love and compassion than healing gestures. Such an approach is in sync with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 3 which is targeting good health for persons with disabilities. It has been noted that the cause of disability is a result of preventable diseases and malnutrition rather than barriers in societies.⁶⁰ A tradition of caring is fundamental in the Ubuntu model of disability. The Ubuntu model of disability argues that 'impairment becomes cognitive, sensory, mental, physical (inclusive of biological) and spiritual diversity that can have a multitude of shared meanings that society, as a human collective, constantly (re) make together'.⁶¹

56 P Coleridge *Disability, liberation and development* (1993).

57 TE Reynolds 'Invoking deep access: Disability beyond inclusion in the church' (2012) 51 *Dialog* 212.

58 N Sande & J Ringson 'Do persons with disability need healing? An African Pentecostal perspective within the selective African Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe' (2021) 30 *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 162 at 179.

59 Reynolds (n 57) 221.

60 C Makamure 'Religion and disability: A reflection on the role of Pentecostal churches in curbing marginalisation of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe' (2017) 4 *Boleswa Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy* 106.

61 M Bergths 'Practices and discourses of Ubuntu: Implications for an African model of disability?' (2017) 316 *African Journal of Disability* 1 at 2.

Transformed biblical hermeneutics opens a window to explore teachings that focus on how the presence of God brings an experience which makes believers transcend the impairment of bodies. Capitalising on the biblical teachings of submitting to one another promotes the aspects of equality and mutuality. Another opportunity for the church is receiving each other as gifts from God and this goes beyond one's abilities. It is high time the church of God goes beyond interpreting the spiritual gifts of God. According to the book of 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul writes that:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

While Paul is correct to describe spiritual gifts, however, the 21st-century church needs a gift of equality and diversity. Without over-spiritualising, equality and diversity is the main gift of God the church needs today to accommodate persons with disability. Persons with disabilities are no strangers to God, but co-heirs and part of the kingdom. Conscious recognition of persons with disabilities is an easy way to appreciate and acknowledge the worship contributions of persons with disability. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 17 mentions the issue of global partnership. The purpose is to increase the availability of high-quality data for representing all national contexts. The information about disability is mentioned as vital in this process. As such, this assists persons with disabilities to raise their concerns using their national governments. Churches have a responsibility to make sure persons with disabilities' needs are supported within the church and advocate them to the government.

Although Christ's death on the cross is given to all humans, the church has a role in interpreting the anthropological dimension of the wounds of Jesus. The church is good at showing that Jesus's wound represented healing, which is broadly correct. Also, the church has to accept the Jesus wounds and broken leg on the cross from disability perspective. Nancy Eiesland's disability theology that speaks of 'God is disabled' needs a fresh sermon in church pews. From the cross to the resurrected Jesus, the wounds and scars were visible. The resurrected disfigured Jesus is a face of persons with disabilities which needs collective acceptance. Enshrined at the centre of the Christian disability theology is to demonstrate that God favours persons with disability to the extent that Jesus bears the image of

the disabled God.⁶² Broadly, the 21st-century church is better placed to accept that our bodies have a limitation. No one should be glorified because they have an able body. It is Jesus who started with an able body and ended up with a disabled body, however, believers accept both forms of Jesus. Without persons with disabilities, the church does not have the full glory of God.⁶³ Playing down the role of persons with disabilities is reducing the notion that God created man in his image and that everything created was good. The image of God is damaged, and this is pictured by man's broken relationship with God.⁶⁴ Disability is part and parcel of life, and anyone can start from being able-bodied and end up with a disabled body. Being able-bodied and disabled bodied shows equality and not flawed humanity.

The barriers created by personal perception or communal doctrinal teaching can be removed by recognising that persons with disabilities are persons. The church should be at the centre of educating both persons with disability and raising awareness to everyone about their plight. Most churches own schools, and it is possible to develop special schools that can help to empower persons with disabilities more than mainstream schools,⁶⁵ however, this position is against the inclusion agenda. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensures that there is inclusive and equitable education for persons with disabilities. Nations should build and upgrade education facilities that proffer effective learning environments for persons with disabilities. Emphasising our humanness weakens viewing persons with disability as charitable objects or projects that need to be completed.

Treating persons with disabilities as charity cases creates more problems for them than it provides solutions to their needs. It is an oversight not to think that persons with disabilities are not able to be productive, independent, and autonomous.⁶⁶

For instance, African Pentecostals' focus on divine healing persons with disability indirectly makes persons with disability projects that the church should pray for and complete. Healing persons with disability is synonymous with completing the project by demonstrating the power of God in the church. It is sufficient to say that it is not healing that persons with disability desire but the

62 JN Amanze 'Disability discourse: Imago Dei, teaching theology from a disability perspective' in H Kroesbergen (ed) *Christian identity and justice in a globalised world from a Southern African perspective* (2014).

63 Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network 'A church of all and for all: An interim statement' (2003).

64 J Swinton *Spirituality and mental health care* (2001) 59.

65 N Sande 'Pastoral ministry to persons with disabilities: A critical investigation of how the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) church can be a safe space for meeting the needs of persons with disabilities (PWD) in Harare, Zimbabwe' PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2018 (on file with the author).

66 Sande (n 39) 147.

church must focus holistically on both material and the psychosocial needs of persons with disability to create space for fellowship with persons with disability and desist from endlessly chasing after uncertain healings.⁶⁷

By so doing, the believers will have an opportunity to engage with persons with disability and get to know them deeper than focusing on their differences. One way of ascertaining that the church is going beyond disability doctrinal perspectives is seen by welcoming persons with disabilities as family members in God's household. Change of perceptions, engagement and acceptance is a transformation process that shows a willingness to change the status quo. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 10 aims to reduce inequality among countries. Disability is mentioned as one of the 2030s inclusions alongside age, sex, religion, social, ethnicity and other status.

7 Conclusion

Different churches in Zimbabwe have varied perspectives about persons with disabilities. Most mainline churches have a positive inclusive approach for persons with disabilities. The inclusion of persons with disabilities is mostly institutionalised where the churches have established schools and vocational training to empower and improve the lives of persons with disabilities. Such an approach is indirectly influenced by their mother churches in the West where the discourses about disability are more positive. Other churches like African Pentecostals and the African Initiated Churches mostly focus on divine healing and curing disabilities influenced by culture. The quest for healing persons with disability has produced stigma and exclusions. The church in Zimbabwe should refine Christian doctrines, practices, beliefs and convictions since they are prominent sources of knowledge about disability to incorporate the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals for disability. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals for disability is calling for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all spheres of life, the political, social, economic and religious. The focus for religious communities should be on inclusion as a human rights human right as advocated by secular stakeholders especially.

67 Sande & Ringson (n 58) 62.