

Enabling abilities in disabilities: Developing differently abled Christian leadership in Africa

**Author:**Kimion Tagwirei¹ **Affiliation:**

¹The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Kimion Tagwirei,
kimion22tc@gmail.com

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It is heartening to realise that Christianity is inclusively membered by differently abled people. Paradoxically, although the Church has cared for, and engaged with persons living with disabilities (PWDs) throughout history, African Church leadership has been exclusively made up of predominantly identically abled persons. Researchers report that ecclesial, infrastructural, leadership, and ministerial structures do not accommodate PWDs, mainly because of misunderstandings about disabilities, discriminatory traditions, hermeneutics and theologies. Disabilities are often generalised as repercussions of disobedience, sin, curses or defeat by evil spirits and witchcraft. Consequently, PWDs are misjudged as lacking abilities to be effective ecclesial leaders. While calls for inclusivity are loud globally, little research has been done to reconcile disabilities and abilities in ecclesiology and Christian leadership. If the Church merely proclaims but neglects demonstrating inclusivity, the gospel can be mistaken as paying hypocritical lip service in this regard, and rendering the Church exclusive, insensitive and imprisoning when it should be inclusive, sensitive and liberating for everyone, regardless of their impairments and (dis)abilities. Drawing from the inclusivity of Jesus Christ, missionary demands of the Church to minister to, with all creation as well as eschatological reflections, under grounded theory and reviewing related literature, this article unpacks the significance of inclusivity, identifies (dis)abilities and argues that Church authorities should consider, appreciate, accommodate, empower, develop, and enable PWDs to be part of ecclesial leadership for inclusionary transformation in and beyond Church walls.

Contribution: This article advances transformational inclusivity in ecclesiology and Christian leadership.

Keywords: Church; abilities; impairments; disabilities; inclusivity; Christian leadership; integral mission; transformation.

Introduction

Christianity comprises people with a wide range of abilities. In contrast, Church leadership is primarily represented by identically abled persons. Several publications say that ecclesial locations, leadership, buildings and services do not accommodate people living with disabilities (PWDs). Bowa (2022:389) stated that, in Africa, attitudes are generally discriminatory regarding disability. Tagwirei (2021) revealed the marginalisation and isolation of persons living with hearing impairments in ecclesial communication, services and programmes. Crisp (2022) reported the same for PWDs in Ghana. Mbao (2020) postulated that some churches in Africa have built vocational schools for people who live with sight and hearing disabilities, or who have other special needs, but PWDs are still 'not taken as a serious concern of the Church in as far as participation in church matters is concerned'. When churches do care for PWDs, Masango (2019:1) stated that churches often over-care and overprotect PWDs, mainly because they do exclude PWDs from identifying and addressing their needs:

Because of guilt, they want to do everything for them, as if they are not capable of functioning within that community ... They simply take over their lives, which results in the fact that these people become objects of those who care for them. They are called names and are described by their function or through their disability. This is how they lose their names in life ... For example, they are called digole [*handicapped*]. (Masango 2019:1)

Publications such as Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (2023), Aineah (2023), Amanze (2019), Nkomazana (2019), Sande (2022), and Peta (2017) have called for inclusivity, but there is a critical gap relating to the reconciliation of disabilities with abilities in African Church leadership and ecclesiology, which needs attention. The Church carries a significant integral mission to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in all areas of life. The Church should be inclusive – for example, by showcasing neighbourly love (Mk 12:31; Mt 22:39) and equality before God

(Gl 3:28; Rm 2:11; Ac 10:34–35). By redefining and over-viewing disabilities, Church, leadership as well as inclusivity in Africa, this article offers suggestions for developing people who are differently abled, so that they can be part of Christian leadership and help achieve inclusive transformation in Africa.

Understanding (dis)abilities in Africa

As Africans tend to over-spiritualise extreme opposites, such as interpreting extreme wealth or extreme poverty and exceptional largeness or smallness from a superstitious viewpoint (Tagwirei 2024a:2), many Africans misunderstand and mistake disability to be a result of perversity, sin, delayed or neglected repentance or witchcraft. Unfortunately, even if all disabilities had these causes, excluding PWDs from Church life and services cannot be justified. The question is, how will the Church accommodate disabilities when one of its presently exclusive groups of incumbent pastors, elders, deacons, department leaders and followers have an accident, are injured, or lose their legs and become wheelchair bound? It is likely that, unless we redefine and address (dis)abilities today, inclusivity may remain a pipe dream in ecclesiology and Church leadership. Impairments such as injury or illness can cause loss or differences in physiological and psychological functionality, or limit opportunities to interact with others because of cultural, hermeneutical, theological, attitudinal and environmental barriers. Studies on disability (e.g., Okoli 2016, White 2017; Whitley 2023) suggest that the most prevalent types of disabilities relate to hearing, speaking, visual, physical or mental impairments, as well as autism and albinism.

The World Health Organization's (WHO 2011:3) *Report on Disability* states that 'almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning'. It causes confusion when people publicise varying positive and negative perspectives on disability and thereby trigger both inclusion and exclusion (Bowa 2022:388). Yet, as Nyangweso (2018:9) argues, disability is a part of the human condition, which everyone is likely to experience at some point in their life. That is why the *Report on Disability* (WHO 2011) describes disability as a complex, dynamic, multidimensional and contested umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Whether it is caused spiritually or physically, Nyangweso (2018:9) asserted that disability affects about 80% of people – most of whom are in developing countries. That means disability is a grave issue in dire need of attention.

According to Retief and Letšosa (2018), several models shape people's conceptualisations about disability. Thus, it is crucial for the Church to reconsider disability as not being the result of a curse, disease or demon, and that PWDs are in need of spiritual deliverance. I am aware that the Bible mentions disability as a disease; for example, Leviticus 26:14–16, Deuteronomy 28:28–29; 2 Chronicles 26:16–23; Judges 14:2;

16:21; 1 Kings 13:4; Proverbs 30:17; Acts 13:4–12; Zechariah 11:17; and John 9:1–3 refer to blindness, deafness, 'dumbness', leprosy and paralysis as caused by disease and curses, and sometimes as divine punishment for disobedience, unbelief and ignorance. In some instances, the Bible presents PWDs as unworthy to live in society; for instance, in 2 Samuel 19:24–28, King David's servant, Ziba, bars Mephibosheth, who was physically impaired, from accompanying David on a trip. Mephibosheth was considered unworthy to be with the king because of his disability. Whether they are conscious or unconscious of such biblical reflections, the majority of the contemporary churches in Africa consider disability as caused by curses, punishment for disobedience and sin, or diseases in need of repentance, prayer, God's forgiveness, deliverance, and healing. Yet, disability is not always because of sin, as the case of a man who was blind from birth in John 9 reflects. Disciples believed that either the man or his parents had sinned against God, and God had punished him for that sin, but Jesus clarified that neither the blind man nor his parents had sinned, but that he experienced blindness 'so that the works of God might be displayed in him' (Jn 9:3). As described by Otieno (2009:n.p):

Although Biblical and theological views of disability have led to a discriminatory and exclusive approach to viewing PWDs, it is important to point out that perspectives that take an emancipatory and inclusive approach to disability issues are also found in the Bible and Christian theology.

Scriptural passages such as Jeremiah 31:8–9, Isaiah 33:23–24; 35:5–6; and Micah 4:6–7 present God's love, grace and restoration of PWDs. Ultimately, King David eventually modelled inclusivity when he accommodated Mephibosheth to always eat at the King's table, although he was crippled on both feet (2 Sm 9:13). Such fellowship reflects Christ-like love, grace and inclusivity for those who are traditionally excluded. I am also aware of some biblical stories like the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14) in which a man who did not put on wedding dressing was thrown out, as well as parables of sheep and goats (Mt 25:31–46), wheat and tares (Mt 13:24–30), which seemingly portray Jesus Christ as exclusive. However, this submission agrees with Koplitz's (n.d.) who interprets that dressing in Mathew 13:11–12 referred to attitude and demeanour. The man represented those who display negative attitude and misdemeanour to God. Thus, Jesus Christ was not being exclusionary in dismissing him, but he did so as a call for repentance and reformation. Jesus Christ was never exclusionary because he demonstrated extraordinary inclusivity by dying for everyone to be saved as confirmed by many verses such as John 3:16, 1 John 2:2, Hebrews 10:10, Romans 6:10, John 1:29, Mathew 20:28. Similarly, the story of wheat and weeds (Mt 13:24–30) displays the presence of evil and good as well as Jesus Christ's grace for everyone. Tagwirei (2024a) perceives that, while metaphorically identifying the existence of good as wheat, and evil as weeds, Jesus Christ called for the two to coexist to accommodate proclamation and demonstration of the gospel for inclusionary transformation. As God is patient and does not want anyone to perish (Pt 2 3:9), labelling others as wheat and weeds or goats and sheep was not meant to

exclude any, but to clarify their cases and challenge them towards repentance, salvation, redemption and everlasting life in and with God. Furthermore, the provision of One Spirit through which all believers are baptised (1 Cor 12:13) exhibits inclusivity, and the Great Commission (Mt 28:18–20) accommodates everyone.

Some PWDs have, and can be healed physically. Jesus Christ healed a paralysed man (Mk 2:1–12), a man who was deaf (Mk 7:31–37); a man who was blind (Jn 9:1–41), Bartimaeus, a blind beggar (Mk 10:46–52), and other people who were blind and lame (Mt 11:5). Considering that Jesus Christ 'is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb 13:8), he can heal PWDs. However, healing is not only physical. While the dictionary meaning of healing is:

[T]o make free from injury or disease, to make sound or whole heal a wound, to make well again, to restore to health heal the sick or to cause [*an undesirable condition*] to be overcome ... (Mirriam-Webster.com:n.d.)

I agree with Otieno (2009) who believes that, for PWDs, their healing is not only about fixing or restoring health, but creating environments in which everyone can participate fully. Thus, while some PWDs are not healed physically, they can flourish, serve God and utilise their God-given abilities fruitfully if they are included and fully accepted, appreciated, empowered and supported even when their impairments are not physically healed.

All in all, regardless of its cause, disability does not mean inability. God still graciously enables PWDs to do many things with their different abilities. That is why PWDs can excel in sporting, business, political and social activities. Thus, I find the absence of PWDs in Church leadership to be a sign of predominantly traditional, hermeneutical, theological and attitudinal misconstructions. Their absence from Church leadership is a serious cause for concern. As alluded to by Setyawan (2022), the Church should be godly, lovely, gracious and inclusive. Church leaders and followers should demonstrate inclusivity in order to serve everyone.

Understanding inclusivity

According to Krischler, Powell and Pit-Ten Cate (2010), inclusivity is an ambiguous concept which has been defined differently in accordance with one's experiences, but it is mainly characterised by acceptance of diversities, identification and utilisation as well as mitigating each other's weaknesses. For this article, in view of PWDs, inclusivity refers to inclusion, togetherness, accommodation, cooperation, identification and utilisation as well as mitigation of each other's weaknesses.

Mwambwa (2020) states that PWDs should not be considered as service users or beneficiaries, but should be part of organisational leadership. While the majority of PWDs are yet to be fully included in politics and business, thereby

guaranteeing their rights in African public life (Charles, Gie & Musakuro 2023; Virendrakumar 2019), scholars such as Virendrakumar et al. (2018:534) report that the majority of African countries have started creating opportunities to improve their participation. They add that African politics is opening up for PWDs to elect and be elected into public office. The extent varies between countries, and barriers to holistic inclusivity still exist. Thus, conclusions cannot be drawn and universalised. Nevertheless, the fact that some PWDs are now included in political processes and leadership is highly commendable. Since Christians are letters that are read by everyone (2 Cor 3:2), they should exemplify inclusivity to the extent of influencing and transforming the secular world towards total inclusion. Christians can only do so when they accept, accommodate and involve everyone in being Church followers or leaders, regardless of their impairments. I agree with Neuso (2022) that inclusivity is not just being accepted, namely:

It is more like being of, and being eagerly taken in. Inclusion begins with presence. It is difficult to welcome individuals when they are not actually present among you. Presence is only a starting point, not a signal to stop. Once PWDs come through your doors, they must be able to participate in the activities and programs you offer, as well as have access to the different locations and facilities in which they take place. Although an accessible building is essential, it is through interactions and relationships with others that welcome is truly communicated. (p. 14).

Accordingly, inclusivity means hospitality, fellowship [*koinonia*], worshipping God together [*leitourgia*], identifying and assisting each other [*diakonia*] without overdoing it and making PWDs feel pitied and dehumanised. Furthermore, according to Neuso (2022:14), inclusivity comprises accommodative and accessible architecture, infrastructure, attitude, communication, programming, and liturgy. When everyone is able to move in and out, access and participate in the Church without physical, psychological or other barriers, there is inclusivity. If a denomination is inclusive, it must prove that disability does not mean inability, by enabling everyone to be followers and leaders, regardless of their impairments. An inclusive congregation recognises the gifts and abilities of everybody. Just as everyone needs opportunities to use their God-given gifts in church, PWDs deserve the same. When it is offered, inclusion will be realised. That is why Otieno (2009) said that Christianity accepts all people as equal. The same notion is expressed in Genesis 1:26–27, which explains that all human beings were created in God's own image and likeness. Jesus Christ modelled such impartiality, loved, ministered to and accommodated everyone (Jn 13:34; 1 Jn 2:2; Jn 1:29). As such, the Church becomes Christ-like when it embraces inclusivity. According to Romans 15:7, believers should accept each other, just as Jesus Christ accepted them as they are. As Deuel (2016) explains, inclusivity is not only ministering to, but with each other by recognising, affirming and enabling everyone to participate in *missio ecclesiae* fully. That means being part of followership or leadership regardless of impairments.

Overviewing the Church and inclusivity in Africa

Accommodating and including each other in ecclesiological affairs has been problematic since time immemorial. According to the World Council of Churches (2023:n.p.), 'it is usual for faith communities in Africa to exclude persons with disabilities ... due to their impairments'. Much talk has taken place about the need for inclusivity; nevertheless, ecclesial governance, infrastructure, *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *leitourgia* and *diakonia* remain exclusive and insensitive to PWDs.

As overviewed before, under understanding disabilities in Africa, African cultures have been discriminatory. Often churches interpreted the Bible literally and narrowly, and have been viewing disability as the result of a curse, disease or demon, or submission to witchcraft, thereby demeaning all PWDs, even if some of them are sinless cases through which God seeks to demonstrate his works (Jn 9:3) – which can be either of healing, or sustaining PWDs and proving that he can enable those who are regarded by society as unable to do anything. Yet, as an example which confirms that disability does not mean inability, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Ellen Gould White, who lived with a partial visual impairment from birth, became one of the greatest contributors to the development of the SDA Church, and was considered a prophetess of the church whose contributions shaped SDA Church doctrines (Gyasi 2020:53). Similarly, a Reformed Church pastor in Zimbabwe with a hearing impairment has reportedly been ministering well within the church (Mswazie 2017). Pastor and academic Daniel Kyungu, who withstood disability, took up ecclesial, university, and business leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kyungu 2020), and a number of other PWDs have been serving in capacities in different African countries. However, as Princely (2023) observes that churches have become breeding grounds for exclusion, PWDs are generally excluded from Church leadership. Princely (2023) adds that PWDs are still viewed as victims of their circumstances who have nothing to offer and should, instead, be pitied and subjected to charitable donations. Matungwa (2020:49) has a similar view, and says that PWDs have endured inaccessible buildings, negative attitudes, ignorance, deviant doctrines and exclusion from the life of the Church.

Sande (2019) indicates that there are invisible barriers that militate against PWDs in Zimbabwean Pentecostal ecclesiology, liturgy and leadership. Numerous churches in Africa lack doors that accommodate wheelchairs, and messages are not communicated in sign language. Moreover, there are no interpreters to embrace those with hearing impairments, and braille literature for those with visual impairments is not provided. According to Neuso (2022:14), many African congregations do not recognise the deep reservoir of gifts, talents, and assets that reside among PWDs. He asserts that 'when one's focus remains only on what a person cannot do as is often the case with regard to PWDs, it becomes easy to overlook all that a person might have to offer. It is not the presence of disability that hinders a

congregation from benefiting from the gifts of its members'. In view of the need for inclusivity to be not only accepted in, but included in programming as preachers, liturgists, singers, elders and pastors, the Church is not and will not be inclusive unless and until she involves everyone:

It is important to avoid making assumptions that PWDs should all serve in particular ways, whereas people without impairments should serve in others. Opportunities to serve should be aligned with people's gifts, talents and passions, not allocated according to one's disability labels. (Neuso 2022:4)

From *kerygma*, *leitourgia* to *koinonia* and *diakonia*, PWDs are generally pitied, and isolated as if they cannot participate like everyone else. In *Ecclesia Today* (2021:5), an unnamed writer reports a touching story about a young man who was born hearing but developed a hearing impairment after an accident and dramatically found himself excluded from the hearing Church, mostly because of language and related barriers. The writer explains that, 'bearing in mind the inclusiveness of the gospel and missionary nature of the Church, it should have been accommodating all people regardless of their different abilities as God embraces all humanity' (*Ecclesia Today* 2021:5). Even though, as Nkomazana (2019:67) says, the focus of the Church in Africa is supposedly on healing – through which evangelists, prophets and pastors emphasise caring and normalisation of the bodies of people with disabilities – the Church marginalises and devalues PWDs as sick and in need of deliverance. Instead of excluding PWDs from service and leadership, the Church in Africa must develop differently abled leadership to foster inclusive transformation.

Developing differently abled leadership in Zimbabwe

Going beyond accepting PWDs as followers, to accommodating everyone in leadership development and practice, is recommended. Such inclusivity conditions the Church to identify and address disabilities and policy gaps, develop an inclusive ecclesiology and theology of disability, and include PWDs in leadership development programmes, as suggested in the following subsections.

Identifying and addressing (dis)abilities

As said before, the Church has been obstructing the participation of PWDs in ecclesial leadership. From a global view, this is what Spies (2020) means when she says that, 'for countless years, people with disabilities have been understood to be the recipients of ministry – not ministry leaders'. She adds that the Church has been an obstacle, rather than a nurturer of the ministry of leadership. Deuel (2016) agrees that the Church should identify and remove obstacles holding back PWDs from attending and participating in ecclesial governance and life. The Bible calls on us to avoid putting stumbling blocks in front of the blind (Lv 19:14). In light of traditional, hermeneutical, theological, attitudinal, government, economic and political issues that could obstruct PWDs from rising to leadership, it is crucial

for the Church to break down the barriers so that everyone can be involved. The Church should stand up like Job, who declares that 'I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame' (Job 29:15). Hwang (2019) explicates that Jesus Christ, through his incarnated life, was the bridge between God and all humanity. Therefore, the Church, like Jesus Christ, should connect people with God:

Inclusion is easy to talk about, but hard to practice. But it's possible. It begins with you and me ... I realize that I am blessed to be a blessing for those who are excluded and marginalized. I should be a voice for the voiceless. We all are called to be in solidarity with those who are excluded, to break through the barriers and build bridges. May it be so. (Hwang 2019)

As proclaimed by the Statement of the World Council of Churches (WCC 2003) about a 'Church of All and for All', which is based on Ephesians 2:14, Jesus Christ came to tear down the walls; hence, when dealing with issues of disability, one should remember the walls that have been built: 'walls of shame; walls of prejudice; walls of hatred; walls of competition; walls of fear; walls of ignorance; walls of theological prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. The Church is called to be an inclusive community, to tear down the walls'. Dominant misconceptions of PWDs as being cursed, disobedient to God, bewitched, demon-possessed, sick and in need of deliverance should be dealt with. If leaders and representatives of churches review and develop their traditions, views, hermeneutics and theologies, so that these are inclusive, as called for by the WCC (2003), they would invite, accommodate and enable PWDs to rise and serve with its leadership.

Addressing policy gaps

The involvement of PWDs in ecclesiastic activities, from everyday worship to assuming leadership positions, has been problematic in Africa. As postulated by Mbaio (2020:1) in relation to Tanzania, African governments have put in place policies regarding the participation of PWDs in national economic development activities, while few churches in Africa have policies that include PWDs.

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), at its 8th Biennial General Assembly in August 2020, adopted an inclusive policy that follows recommendations of the WCC Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, which called for churches to embrace PWDs and facilitate their leadership. The ZCC general secretary at the time, Reverend Kenneth Mtata, commented that, while the inclusive policy presented obligations to churches, society and government to craft policies and assume practices that ensure inclusion of PWDs, women, children and minorities, 'what is left now is to accompany the churches to implement it' (WCC 2020).

Some denominations have already created policies to foster inclusivity, as evident from the establishment of vocational schools for PWDs to augment their professional and life skills. However, in most churches in Africa, policies that include PWDs in integral mission and leadership are still

generally elusive. As most leadership positions are either appointed or elected, someone can only be appointed or elected when appreciated, recognised, valued and supported as able by their local, regional and national incumbent leaders and fellows. When ecclesial policies are silent about PWDs, the traditional inattention of the Church keeps PWDs marginalised as useless and needless. Therefore, it is expedient for the Church to develop clear policies that guide the acceptance and treatment of PWDs as equal members and potential candidates for ecclesiological ministry and leadership. The Church can craft obligatory policies that recognise God-given giftedness and capabilities and should embrace PWDs, regardless of their impairments. It can facilitate announcements, procedures, elections and appointments to include languages and forms that are accessible to everyone. Thus, the Church can use sign language to accommodate people with hearing impairments, use braille for people with visual impairments and build venues that are feasible for people who use wheelchairs. Most importantly, the Church should engage with PWDs to identify and incorporate their needs when formulating policies that welcome them in all operations, services, ministries and leadership – the same as for other people.

Developing an inclusive ecclesiology

Ecclesiology comprises two words: *ecclesia* which means church or assembly, and *ology*, which means the study of. Consequently, ecclesiology is the study of the Church. I agree with scholars such as Zorgdrager (2017), Jones (2019) and Reichert (2023) that ecclesiology encompasses a multiplicity of what the Church is and does and how she (*as the body, and bride of Christ*), or it (*as an institution*) is handled, or handles itself. For example, ecclesiology includes the definition, identity or nature, mission, membership, teachings, sacraments, governance, roles and operations of the Church. In view of this, how the Church understands and conducts itself determines its inclusivity (Stats 2016:3). If the Church recognises itself as followers of Jesus Christ that exist to advance the integral mission of God for the holistic salvation of humanity, it will accommodate everyone in word and deed, by following Christ-like demonstration of inclusivity.

As Stats (2016:5) declares, it is 'only when the message of Christians' lives matches the message of their mouths will they truly be the Church, the people called to embody and proclaim God's good news'. Christians ought to be as loving and inclusive as Jesus Christ, who embodied oneness with God (Jn 10:30). The Bible also tells us to uphold the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Considering this demand, and many other scriptures about inclusion, such as calls for unity regardless of our races, tribes, genders and circumstances (Gl 3:28) and the metaphoric illustration of one body that can only function effectively if its diverse members complement each other (1 Cor 12:12–27), the Church should review its ecclesiology as a lived expression of its godly identity and align itself with inclusivity. The Church should be the missionary agent of God

as he created it to be. It should serve him as a non-discriminatory body of Christ, because the participation of each member is different but complementary and important for the accomplishment of *missio ecclesiae*. This implies that PWDs should be included in participating in and leading *leitourgia* [worship], *kerygma* [evangelism and discipleship], *diakonia* [care for the needy, care for everyone] and *koinonia* [fellowship] services with others. When PWDs worship, and sometimes lead worship, preach, teach, organise and participate in all ecclesial programmes, inclusion can be achieved. The Church must develop an ecclesiology that welcomes, accommodates, facilitates, acknowledges and supports PWDs as congregants, committee members, liturgists, children's ministry leaders, deacons, elders and pastors.

Developing an integral theology of disability

Taking into account retrogressive theological and overgeneralised misconstructions that PWDs are either disobedient to God, cursed, bewitched, sick, demon-possessed or in need of deliverance, it is necessary for the Church to develop an integral theology of disability. Deducing from the integral mission that promotes proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel holistically in all areas of life, an integral theology of disability would give all people room to participate in all dimensions of *missio ecclesiae*. This would include everyone in *kerygma* [proclamation], *koinonia* [fellowship], *leitourgia* [worship services] and *diakonia* [care for the needy, care for everyone, advocacy for justice and environmental stewardship].

Underscoring the lack of incorporating PWDs' voices, Swinton (2011:275) says that 'the theology of disability begins with the recognition that people with disabilities have been at best a minority voice in the development of Christian theology and practice and at worst have been completely silenced within the conversation'. Therefore a theology of disability can contribute to recalibrating aspects of theology and practice that exclude or misrepresent the human experience of disability. Understanding that theological roots are diverse and determined by one's background and exposure, the Church, in its diversity, should develop integral theologies of disability that include PWDs, regardless of being Liberationist, Evangelical, Pentecostal or Catholic. Cooreman-Guittin and van Ommen (2022:3) explain that the predominant ecclesiological understanding of God, the Church and humanness are from a narrow, 'able-bodied' perspective, which often implies that impairment and vulnerability are ungodly, abnormal and unwanted. Yet, eschatologically, 'this earthly realm is not their permanent abode' (Ekeke & Ekpenyong 2024:7). As such, present physical bodies will all perish. According to 1 Corinthians 15:40 to 54, after the second coming of Jesus Christ and resurrection of the dead, God will transform and give his people heavenly, glorified and imperishable bodies:

⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another ...

⁴²So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body ... ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we^{be} bear the image of the heavenly man. ⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality ... (NIV Online Bible Gateway:n.p.)

In view of the above, the Church should not consider their present physical bodies as significantly determinant in any of its engagements. While it is commendable that the Church has cared, been involved in disability ministry throughout history, for example by establishing vocational schools for PWDs and been deliberating inclusivity as mentioned before, it is recommended that it continues reviewing, in order to develop integral and inclusive theologies of disabilities holistically from biblical, missionary and eschatological standpoints. In agreement with Cooreman-Guittin and van Ommen (2022), religious perspectives inform people's worldviews and determine their attitudes and actions in society. Promoting the inclusion of PWDs in Christian leadership can only be realised if the Church transforms its theologies, and develops an inclusive theology of disability. An inclusionary hermeneutics and theology can change ecclesiology and leadership; incumbent leaders and able-bodied congregants would understand that God-given grace and capacities know no impairment. If the Church forms a new theology of disability that appreciates that someone can be impaired and still serve God and people, either as a leader or follower, inclusivity can be actualised.

Including people living with disabilities in leadership development programmes

Given that Christianity is increasing massively in the Global South and declining in the Global North, the need for African Christians to build their hermeneutical, theological and leadership capacities is increasing too. If it is known that PWDs are, and have been less included in ecclesial ministry and leadership, it is imperative for the Church to include them in its leadership development programmes, to prepare them to be part of the burgeoning *missio ecclesiae*. If the Church develops and releases inclusive teams of apostles, pastors, evangelists, counsellors and other ministers of the gospel with varying capabilities, it can demonstrate the impartial gospel of Jesus Christ in all sincerity. If the Church keeps preaching love while excluding PWDs from her ministry and leadership, it is hypocritical. Thus, as the Church advances the gospel and establishes churches and Para-Church ministries, it should include PWDs in its

leadership development plans. In view of the leadership development framework of Malphurs and Mancini (2004), it is recommended that the Church appraises prospective leaders, identifies and enriches their: (1) knowledge, (2) being, (3) feeling, and (4) doing, and meet their other contextual needs, such as economic sustainability. As Malphurs and Mancini (2024) explain, the first competency of knowing refers to developing the knowledge of a leader in line with their respective or prospective positions, that is, developing someone's knowledge of God, the Bible, theology, themselves and other people, as well as prayer, faith and other essentials. The second competency of being deals with the development of a Christ-like character through biblical teaching, learning and grounding. The co-third doing competency of feeling addresses personal and other-centred emotional awareness and management. The other co-fourth of doing focusses on the development of practical abilities, such as strategic planning, teaching, preaching, mentoring and managing conflict and peace (Tagwirei 2024b). Considering global recessions, rife corruption and challenge of integrity in the context of rising evil, developing a competency of tent-making is crucial for self-economic sustainability. One needs to develop self-sustaining skills, invest and multiply God-given resources for economic independence and personal, family and ministry sustenance. This is significant to avoid overburdening recipients in economically volatile contexts. As Krispin (2020), De Vries, Manfred and Korotov (2010) concur, developing leaders enhances individual and collective capacities and transforms present and future leaders. When leaders are developed inclusively, they can uphold inclusive ecclesiologies and leadership. This can transform both the Church and society. Unless PWDs are included in leadership development, the Church may remain exclusive, discriminating and hypocritical. Therefore, the Church can, and should, include and develop people who are differently abled into leadership, in order to transform all dimensions of her missionary identity, operations and impact in society.

Conclusion

Although the Church showcased care for PWDs by reaching out to them with the gospel, establishing vocational schools as well as talking about strategic ways to foster inclusivity, its leadership has remained exclusive primarily due to discriminatory traditions, hermeneutics and theologies. Preaching the gospel of an all-loving and embracing Jesus Christ without demonstrating unconditional love and inclusivity is hypocritical. This article discussed the tendency of Church leaders and followers to misunderstand disabilities in Africa as repercussions of disobedience, sin, curses and witchcraft, and discredited these misconstructions. It argued that (dis)abilities are overgeneralised as, but are not inabilities. Drawing from the biblical calls for inclusivity, embodiment of inclusivity by Jesus Christ, as well as missionary demands for the Church to minister the gospel to all creation (Mt 28:18–20) and eschatological reflections of human bodies as transitory (1 Cor 15:40 to 54), the Church

should develop differently abled leadership to effectuate inclusivity and transformation in and beyond Church walls. This will enable Christians to advance a mutually inclusionary integral mission in the marketplace, society and wherever they go. While appreciating those who have already included PWDs in their leadership structures and enhanced their capabilities, it remains needful for every church to regularly identify and address (dis)abilities, detect and fill policy gaps and develop inclusive ecclesiology and an integral theology of disability while including PWDs in leadership development programmes.

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