

Excerpt from *Religion, Disability, and Sustainable Development in Africa*

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Chapter 12: Role of religion in inclusion of people with disabilities in education, perspectives from Uganda by Pamela Nizeyimana, Ojok Patrick, Victor Locoro

Religious education provides opportunities to promote spiritual development through discussing and reflecting on key questions of meaning and truth, such as the origins of the universe and life, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty, and truth.

Ilechukwu et al. (2015), in a study published in the Journal of Philosophy on Culture and Religion, indicated that religion should start its campaign for persons with disabilities by fighting against the stigma and discrimination attached to disability in Nigeria. People should know that the causes of illness and consequent disability are not caused by 'sins' committed by the person or his ancestors and again that disability is not contagious. To stop all discrimination and segregation, the scriptural perspective of disability should be employed.

The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' and the head cannot say to the head, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think less honorable we treat with special honor (1 Corinthians 12:21–22).

In addition, the Bible teaches that each member of the body of Christ is related to the other member in such a way that if one part suffers, every part suffers with it, if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Corinthians 12:12–14). This implies that people with disabilities are integral part of the body of Christ and belong to our society.

Religion here calls for respect, equality, justice and inclusion in relation people with disabilities. Jesus taught His disciples how to treat people with disabilities with honour. When he advised them that

when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brother or relatives, or your neighbors, if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give banquet, invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

Moreover, concern for people with disabilities was one of the prominent notes of Jesus' earthly ministry. When asked by John's disciples, 'Are you He who is to come or do we look for another?' Jesus responded with words recalling the prophecies of Isaiah,

Go back and report to John what you hear and see, the blind recovers their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.

On the human rights of persons with disability, the UN, through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirms the rights of all people, without discrimination of any kind, to enjoy the same rights. The rights of persons with disability follow from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This entails that a person with disability has equal rights with every other individual.

The link between religion and the inclusion of people with disabilities in education

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disability indicates that, at times, the typical ways that religious communities communicate and teach are inaccessible to people with disabilities. If a person has a hearing impairment, attending a Sunday school class that only uses discussion and lectures to teach may have nothing to offer. For a person who cannot read, a community that only offers small group opportunities that are studies or book clubs may feel that the community is excluding them. To break down these barriers of communication, a leader can find ways to accommodate people with many different physical and intellectual disabilities who need different adaptations and modifications. In this section, the religious leader will learn how to plan ahead for inclusion, review for effectiveness and make adaptations to written materials or lesson plans

To achieve inclusion, the new challenge concerns educating people with disabilities alongside typical members. Both curriculum and programming exist that serve people of differing abilities in many different faiths. Still underdeveloped, however, are religious education resources and materials for adults and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD). In comparison to the resources that exist for including children with disabilities in religious education, little exists for an adult in a congregation who is able to be included in education with typical members.

In Christianity, the case for the inclusion of people with disabilities is often made by pointing to the example of Jesus. The New Testament contains numerous stories in which Jesus encounters people with disabilities and talks to them, challenging Jewish conventions around impurity. Christians are invited to be compassionate with the most vulnerable members of the community. However, the biblical stories in which people with disabilities are cured by Jesus can also give rise to the idea that disability is something that always needs a cure.

According to Schuelka (2013), believing that disability can be miraculously cured or alleviated changes the relationship between the religious and the person with a disability, as pity established the person with a disability as a vehicle for another person's act of kindness and a responsibility of charity.

To counter these dehumanising ideas, Christian theologians have emphasised the dignity of people with disabilities, as people with disabilities are part of the Body of Christ and created in the image of God. Within Catholic social teaching, persons with disabilities are recognised as 'fully human subjects with rights and duties'.

A religious model for promoting inclusive education for persons with disabilities in Africa

The United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) report, March 2023, indicates that inclusive education is a commitment under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Children in special schools frequently do not have access to a curriculum that is as broad and as in-depth as students in general schools, and segregation in school often translates into segregation in life. Encouragingly, this report demonstrates that not only Lesotho, but all countries in Eastern and Southern Africa are taking steps to make education systems and learning more inclusive for children with disabilities. But there is still a long way to go to see inclusive education on a sustainable and large scale. In Eastern and Southern Africa, only five out of 21 countries have allocated a percentage of the total education budget for special or inclusive education, and the funding is limited. Disability-inclusive approaches are missing in most curricula and

assessment methods, and in classrooms with high student-teacher ratios, teachers lack the capacity to support children with disabilities.

A study by Ilechukwu et al. (2015) in a study published in the *Journal of Philosophy on Culture and Religion* (2015) suggested that religion should, through its educational institutions, introduce inclusive education, and through its position and role, influence the government to do the same in their schools. Inclusive education can be interpreted as the philosophy and practice for educating students with disabilities in general education settings (Bryant et al., 2008). Ogbue (1987) quoted by Nwankwo and Nnatu (2018) sees it as the process of educating all students regardless of their physical or mental handicaps along with their non-peers with disability. The practice anchors on the notion that every child should be equally valued as a member of the school culture.

Christian theology has introduced the 'limits model'. The limits model recognises that all people are limited in some way and that limits are therefore part of the human experience. This means that we should not try to overcome limits to achieve perfection but that we should consider our prejudices about limits and be critical about seeing some limits as 'normal' and others as 'abnormal'.

Creamer's limits model (2009) asserts that all human beings are limited and dependent to some degree, whether intellectual, spiritual, physical or emotional. Thus, limits should not be viewed as exceptional to the human experience. Instead, the limits model contends we must engage in critical reflection about embodiment as well as the nature of God by challenging our notions of what it means to be 'normal' and valuing limits for what they reveal about ourselves and about God. The limits model is drawn from aspects of disability studies, theology, feminism, anthropology and biblical scripture to develop three claims of the Christian tradition with which to engage disability. That is, limits are (1) unsurprising characteristics of humanity, (2) an intrinsic aspect of human existence, and (3) good and not evil.