

Receiving children with disabilities into churches in South Africa

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Abstract

The meaningful integration of children with disabilities (CWD) into churches in South Africa is a pressing issue. This article summarises insights from a *Practical Theology Action Research study* focused on understanding the social and religious barriers faced here by CWD and their families. The perspectives of three stakeholder groups were sought to consider how churches can become communities of belonging and justice for CWD.

Empirical data collection included focus group discussions with families who care for CWD, disability activists and pastors of local churches. The data analysis culminated in a consultative workshop with participants from all three stakeholder groups as a disability awareness and solutions training model for pastors. There needs to be an ongoing dialogue between pastors, families who care for CWD and disability activists to mobilise church movements that will bring about transformative ecclesial practices, receiving CWD as gifts and signs of God's Kingdom.

Keywords

*children with disabilities (CWD), disability activists,
Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), prosperity doctrine,
Theological Action Research*

Children with disabilities are on the periphery of the church

This article summarises findings from a *Practical Theology Action Research* study (Manuel, 2024) focused on understanding the social and religious barriers faced by children with disabilities (CWD) and their families. As child theologians, we wondered why so few CWD are received with open welcome in congregations. As a Pentecostal scholar, the primary researcher further investigated how disability is perceived and treated by Pentecostalism. Pentecostal theologians, with disabilities, Clifton and Wells (2020:348) highlight the paucity of scholarship by Pentecostal theologians on disability. This is important in Africa, where it is estimated that 15% of Christians are Pentecostals (Antombikums 2024:2). This study reveals the harm of prosperity doctrines within neo-Pentecostalism, which idolises the “good life” and excludes those with disabilities (Kgatle 2024; Retief 2016; Yong 2010).

The hope is that this article will result in critical conversations that catalyse churches to move towards becoming inclusive communities of belonging and justice for CWD. Since the 1990s, a global shift toward a rights-based approach to disability mainstreaming has prompted growing ecclesial intent toward inclusion. This is reflected in numerous church position statements (Boehm & Carter, 2019). However, the implementation of these commitments within church communities remains limited (Palm 2023; Richie 2015). In 2023, the World Council of Churches *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network* (EDAN) convened a conference to develop guidelines for disability inclusion in African churches (EDAN, 2023). One notable outcome in South Africa is within the Anglican Church, which has established a Disability Commission (The Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2024). Despite such efforts, most South African churches lag in both articulating and enacting disability inclusion.

A significant number of South African families who care for CWD remain excluded from the local church (McMahon-Panther and Bornman 2025). The families who participated in this research report feelings of displacement and a lack of support from local congregations, which often do not have established plans for integrating CWD. Exclusion from churches often leads to the wider social isolation of the family unit (van

der Mark et. al. 2019). Individuals with disabilities are a large, unreached people group by churches (Palm 2023:9; Anderson 2013).

Churches that address the isolation of these families may become pivotal actors in restoring families who care for CWD into a positive community. Pastoral leaders have a platform to broadcast positive messages about disability and can act as entry points to a community (Kersbergen, 2022:17). Disability activists advocate for the full and meaningful participation of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of society (Charlton, 2000). Dube (2005:9) coins a “policy evaporation” in South Africa to describe the phenomenon in which the implementation of disability policies has minimal impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Tamminga et al. (2020:93) stress the value of belonging as they point out that *inclusion* as regards to policy and human rights is a buzzword, yet with a vague follow-through or implementation. In this regard, South African disability activists, McMahon-Panther and Bornman (2025:81) report:

Despite the recognition of social inclusion as a human right, persons with disabilities continually encounter barriers that prevent them from participating meaningfully in all areas of community life (Carroll et al. 2018; Donohue & Bornman 2014). This includes their participation in spiritual and religious activities (Hodge & Reynolds 2019).

Collins and Ault caution that “inclusive practices may be implemented in the church, but an inclusive community may not be present” (2010:128). This underscores that belonging is not achieved through access or formal measures alone, but through deeper experiences of connection, mutuality, and shared life (Swinton, 2012). Recognising this distinction is a crucial starting point for developing meaningful strategies of inclusion for CWD. In authentic communities, charity models of inclusion are replaced with an embrace of CWD as contributors and gifts to the community.

Theological reflection: Inclusion of CWD as Kingdom practice

In another study (Manuel 2025), a child theology is applied as a type of disability theology. Child theology represents a paradigm shift in theological reflection by placing the child at the centre of understanding

God's kingdom, echoing Jesus' act of setting a child among his followers (Mt 18:2). In doing so, Christ affirms that the kingdom of God is revealed through those often considered marginal or limited. Child theology stands as a natural ally to Disability Theology: Both resist exclusionary norms based on ability or cognition and instead reframe vulnerability, interdependence, and embodied difference as sites of divine revelation. Together, they disrupt hierarchical notions of worth and invite a more inclusive, relational, and justice-oriented vision of faith. To receive these children as gifts is to welcome the Father and the Son (Mt 18:5). Receiving (dis/abled) children in the name of Jesus is receiving Jesus and His Kingdom (Mk 10:13–16; Mt 18:5).

Communities that are inclusive and rooted in belonging bear witness to the rich diversity of God's image (Okola and Kilonzo (eds.) 2024: 25), which is core to respecting the dignity of life. They reflect a shift away from valuing worldly measures such as wealth, achievement, or intellect. Instead of seeing the child (with dis/ability) as someone to be fixed or excluded as incomplete, the Church is called to change and become like the child (Mt 18:3). The child is a signpost of an upside-down Kingdom – where small is big and least is greatest. This concept is further illustrated by the body of Christ imagery, where those members who appear weakest are indispensable and to be treated with special honour (1 Cor 12:22–26).

Data collection

Ethical clearance was obtained from the *Stellenbosch University Ethics Screening Committee*. A qualitative, empirical design was employed, with immersion into 2 years of ministry at a faith-based ministry for families who have CWD. According to Given (2008:645), prolonged engagement involves spending extended time with participants in their everyday contexts to deepen understanding of their behaviour, values, and social relationships. Additionally, focus group interviews served as the primary method of data collection (n=11). The study followed a purposive sampling strategy, supported by targeted recruitment processes.

Four focus groups were conducted with disability activists (n=12) from organisations serving CWD. Studies indicate a notable disconnect between religion and disability studies in South Africa (Claassens et. al. 2024). In response, this study intentionally engaged disability experts who serve

CWD within disability organisations: Occupational therapists, social workers, a Universal Design architect, a parent-activist and disability inclusion facilitators participated. Four participants have disabilities. These discussions surfaced the impact of inclusion and exclusion, as well as recommendations for inclusive practices within local congregations.

A further four focus groups were conducted with families of CWD (n=12). These families, all members of local congregations, shared their lived experiences of church attendance in South Africa. The sample included two mothers (one with autism), one foster mother, one father, one grandmother, one non-disabled teenage sibling (ages 15), three children with disabilities (autism/ cerebral palsy, visual impairment and Down syndrome/autism) and three teenagers, aged 19, with disabilities (autism, non-speaking autism and cerebral palsy). For confidentiality, families were interviewed individually, with children participating alongside familiar family members who could support their communication needs.

Finally, three focus groups were conducted with pastors of local churches (n=25), recognising their role in shaping congregational vision and resource allocation. Focus Group 1 (n=8) was hosted by an Evangelical network in the Western Cape and included predominantly coloured congregations, with some representation from informal settlements and rural areas. Focus Group 2 (n=9), from a Pentecostal network in the Western Cape, reflected racially diverse urban congregations, some engaged in church plants and outreach to under-resourced communities. Focus Group 3 (n=8), from the same Pentecostal denomination in the Eastern Cape, was conducted online via Zoom. These represented both urban and township contexts with varied racial compositions. A pre-survey was administered to assess pastors' exposure to disability. The pre-survey findings indicated that most had limited prior engagement with disability-related knowledge.

Thematic narrative analysis, supported by a peer-review team of expert co-investigators

As part of the triangulation of converting raw data into observations, issues and methodologies, there was a disability expert peer-review team of two verifiers. This included a special education professor and a disability activist with cerebral palsy, who is a nurse-missionary and parents a child with cerebral palsy. Following full immersion in the data set, a narrative

thematic analysis was employed for its flexibility in analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2022:1; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Debriefing meetings with reviewers were held following the transcription of recorded focus group interviews. The peer reviewers coded data sets independently, before multiple sessions to view and discuss the three sets of codes. This process negated researcher bias.

Key learnings

Themes from three stakeholder focus groups were compared to construct patterns of meaning from the narratives. These themes informed the design of a consultative workshop for pastors to encourage dialogue, collaboration and asset-based solutions. Three of these themes will be discussed in this article: (1) A lack of disability awareness is a barrier to inclusion, but the local church should play a vital role in restoring relational trust and strengthening inclusion, (2) CWD and their families enrich the perspective of the church about life and faith, and (3) Disability activists, CWD and their families, and pastors bring diverse – and at times contrasting – perspectives to the conversation about the church’s role in supporting inclusive belonging and justice.

A lack of disability awareness is a barrier to inclusion, but the local church should play a vital role in restoring relational trust and strengthening inclusion

The focus groups portrayed that society is not used to interacting with CWD, who are often separated from the community. An occupational therapist explains:

But I think, just because of the way we are socialised, and the way societies dealt with disabilities over the years and kind of, you must be somewhere else, and you must be separate. And that’s kind of how people are raised and what they think is normal. DPO_I4

A social worker states that this reality keeps their clients (CWD and their family) isolated:

A lot of our clients are just in the home, excluded, and just don't participate in anything else ... The immediate family and nobody outside of the family is available. They're not connected to any other program. Not attending church ... no one is reaching out to them ... They're at the point where they don't even go out, and reach out to those other resources outside, or the churches. Because, you know, they've been so excluded most of their life that they just go on on their own. SDDO_FG3

An architect in a faith-based disability inclusion organisation discussed how architects in training at a university were puzzled about her presentation on Universal Design, as they were not seeing disability in society:

You know, this stereotype is amongst architects, "but why design to include people with disabilities, because we don't see them." But the reason for that is that the environment does not accommodate them. That's why we don't see them at the mall, or at the movies, or whatever it might be. If we change that and design the environment to be inclusive, we will see a fully integrated society.

FBDO_FG1

There are too few inclusive spaces for the family that cares for CWD, including in the church. A teen with cerebral palsy who grew up in church gave an example of her difficulty accessing the children's ministry and how this limited her participation:

To be honest, when I was younger, I didn't go to church a lot. It was physically difficult. And you saw the stairs. When I was younger, I couldn't climb up the stairs. So, people used to carry me up in a wheelchair. I feel that if places are more physically friendly or accessible, the children would come more often. Family 2

Universal design is an approach to creating products, environments, and services that are usable and accessible to all people – regardless of ability – without the need for adaptation or specialised design. It prioritises inclusivity by considering the full range of human diversity from the outset. However, implementation is often limited because many non-disabled individuals are not socialised with individuals with disabilities and are

therefore unaware of their prevalence and the barriers they face. A teenager with cerebral palsy shares how church members treated CWD as a rarity:

I've had a lot of people stare – a lot of kids. And I didn't deal well with that ... you're looking at me like I'm the first, or the only person with disability that you have ever met in your life. There are plenty of us. So, I think, in a way, they would benefit ... because they see you and interact with you regularly ... I think it just changes a person's mindset; it teaches them that, even though this person has a disability, they are active and used by God. Family 2

Disability visibility challenges limiting stereotypes and reveals a fuller truth: people with disabilities are not only present in the life of the church, but are actively called, gifted, and used by God. A visually impaired child remarks on the lack of disability visibility:

I don't know any other blind children who go to church. Family 4

She later expressed a wish for Braille Bibles in church. Yong (2011:341) has observed similar neglect of universal design thinking in the churches:

Some ecclesiarchs might argue: If we had blind or deaf people in our church, we would provide the necessary services, or if we had people in wheelchairs in our congregation, we would build ramps or elevators. In contrast, it may just as well be said: Because of the inaccessibility of your buildings and your events, you have already sent a signal to people with disabilities that they are a burden who needs to be accommodated rather than a potentially integral part of the church community.

This reinforces preexisting evidence that the prevalence of disability is not visible in church (Bunch, 2008:38). A prevalence of 15% (World Bank Group 2023) makes disability an important consideration for the Church (Walsh 2016; Bunch 2008). With approximately 85% of South Africans identifying as Christian (StatsSA 2022:24), and an estimated 8 out of 10 of the population regularly attending church, it is reasonable to infer that a significant proportion of persons with disabilities - including CWD - want to belong in Christian communities. This suggests that churches are a critical and influential space for engaging issues of disability and social transformation.

CWD are however, not commonly seen in churches. The CWD in South Africa experiences “double invisibilities”. Hidden realities include social stigma, low visibility, and the lack of support that families face. Invisible disabilities refer to conditions that are not outwardly apparent and often lead to underreporting and unique challenges (ACPF 2011; Van der Mark et. al. 2019; Sadiki and Kibirige, 2023; UNICEF 2021). Both concepts highlight the need for greater awareness and proactive engagement from faith communities. An aspect of exclusion relates to the secrecy around disability. Families who care for CWD are (self) isolated from many community resources.

Pastors need to understand disability and address religious-cultural stigmas (Yong 2010; Kgatle 2024). A responsive church that reaches out to these families can become key to rebuilding relationship trust and community connection. To locate these families, collaboration with disability activists in their communities is recommended. In partnership, these families can be identified and cared for, as each agency (Church and disability activist) becomes a referral agent to the other (Kersbergen 2022).

Research showed that a first step is for churches to realise that families have experienced relational trauma and therefore may lack the trust to disclose information about their CWD. A parent shares:

The thing that I know we have here in church – The families are hiding it ... Because nobody trusts anybody anymore. Because: I’ve been hurt at the school, I’ve been neglected by the social workers, I’ve been treated badly at the hospital – Wherever you go ... We’ve got quite a few people that are autistic ... they hide it. Family 2

Social workers at a Centre with CWDs reveal the wider community’s lack of understanding of disability, resulting in CWD who grow up to become frustrated, angry, and depressed adults:

Because all people need this sense of belonging, but especially individuals with disabilities. They are mostly excluded from the rest of society ... A lot of them end up having depression, anxiety issues, and anger issues, because they are being excluded. Because they’re not part of society. People don’t understand them ... They need a society where they feel included, and “we belong.” SDDO_FG3.

Similar accounts of emotional anguish are heard from church members who have caused harm because of judging disability-affected families. A parent discusses how she transferred her anger towards discrimination in church to God, staying out of church for a period:

I was very angry. I was actually mad with God ... I would say, you know, "If my son and I are created in your own image, then why are we facing so many challenges?" So, you'll choose not to go to church. And yeah, I stayed at home for several years. I didn't go to church because I was mad. FBDO_ FG1

Several studies confirm the findings that CWDs and their families are wounded in their faith communities (Banja, 2013; Carter, 2020; Arnold, 2022).

Pastors disclosed they are ill-equipped to respond to individuals impacted by disability:

But I also find there's a point where you can't help these families. I mean, the one person was saying she's tired of Christian clichés and prayers, you know. Why doesn't God answer her prayer? And I could not relate to or understand what she was going through, and I could not offer any kindness, because she was at the end of her tether. And so, I think from what I know about her, I think she'll get stronger in God. But there's also a point where you cannot provide the pastoral care that they need, because it's just beyond you. PLFG2

Recommendation: Pastors must be equipped to minister to CWD and their families who rely on the local church for spiritual support. Therefore, disability studies and sound disability theologies must be integrated into theological education. This presents as a large gap. While EDAN has done extensive work to mainstream disability awareness into theological education, a full integration of disability studies has not yet gained traction (Ishola-Esan 2017). Basic training in disability studies, human rights, and disability theology removes mystery and myth around disability (Ishola-Esan 2017).

CWD and their families enrich the perspective of the church about life and faith

Historically, the global Church has applied a harmful theology to disability. The research participants stated that their churches viewed disability as abnormal and tragic. Yet, CWD hold a different perspective on their impairment and their identity. This beautiful caption demonstrates the theological anthropology of a teen with cerebral palsy:

Of course, I can't really say that God decided to make me this way, but God makes everyone differently. And regardless of my disability or not, I'm still made in God's image ... To be honest, my faith is one of the things that has kept me, uhm, I'm not gonna say in high spirits, but I went through a lot of situations where if it wasn't for people in my life reminding me that, "Oh, God loves you. God has a plan for you." It's that belief ... My favourite verse in the Bible is Jeremiah 29:11. Family 2

The launch of EDAN's (2024) "Life in Church" announces a shift in ecumenical disability advocacy. Profound reflection on Scripture, from a disability hermeneutic, positions individuals with disability as contributors of unique theological anthropologies (2024: 1):

For a long time, theologians with disabilities have challenged mainstream representations of God, interpretations of scripture, and what it means to live a dignified life before God. They have argued that theological reflection on disability should not be limited to questions of rights and access alone but must include the theological anthropology of our Christian churches.

The notion that the image of God is visible only in able-bodied persons is theologically challenged by disability theologians:

The Christian faith affirms the value of life independently of its state or condition ... God created human beings in his image; he did not create only some human beings in his image. Nor did God divide humanity into distinct categories. In God, there is diversity, but no division. (Okola and Kilonzo 2024: 25)

A Pentecostal pastor narrated his journey of pastoring a young lady with a disability for several years. This individual did not experience a miraculous healing of her impairment. This relationship impacted his perspective on a faith-filled, thriving life – with an impairment:

I must confess that there are prayers that I prayed when I met with her that I may have thought were prayers of faith. That's when I sit now and think about that, and I sort of laugh at myself. Where you were praying that her condition would change, and obviously, her condition has not necessarily changed. She is a happy person now. She is a fulfilled person now. She's a confident person now. Yet her condition did not change ... So, I'm trying to say that faith changed her life. That I have witnessed with my very own eyes. PLFG3

The research showed that we need more CWD and their families in our churches to transform disability paradigms of pity into paradigms of solidarity with one another, as fellow disciples of Christ.

The lived experiences of CWD present a significant challenge to prosperity doctrines. A parent of a non-speaking teen with autism reflects:

I wonder how pastors feel about disabilities. Because, you know, when you read the parables – stories in the Bible and Jesus healing the blind – you know, it's all these miracles. And people are so quick to want to pray for a miracle. But have they stopped and asked them: 'Do you want us to pray for your sight? Do you want us to pray for your wheelchair? I think a lot of pastors' theology will be challenged a little bit if we really have conversations with them around this ... I mean, you simply can't have the 'name it and claim it' variety and be accepting of special needs in church. FFG1

Prosperity doctrines often promote the expectation of complete healing and freedom from suffering, implicitly linking this perception of wellness to faith. This creates a theological dilemma when (physical) healing does not occur, as it can lead to the harmful assumption that these children or their families lack sufficient faith (Kgatle 2024).

Emerging theological voices, especially those of Christians with disabilities, challenge prosperity narratives by affirming disability as part of human diversity and, for some, as integral to their God-given identity. Pentecostal

theologians, Retief (2016) and Yong (2011), both offer pneumatologically informed understandings of disability. They affirm the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of persons with disabilities – not despite their disability, but through it. Notably, both scholars have a sibling with a disability.

Recommendation: Churches would benefit from the wisdom that comes from doing theology alongside disability-affected families (Manuel 2025; Palm 2024). Members gain insight to support those directly impacted by disability, but further, to guide any member of a church community who is navigating their faith amid struggles. Pastors who form theological depth to address struggles are better able to journey with their members, in their times of joy and in their suffering. Disability should not be ignored but engaged with.

Disability activists, CWD and their families, and pastoral leaders bring diverse – and at times contrasting – perspectives to the conversation about the church’s role in supporting inclusive belonging and justice

Disability activists discussed churches in a positive light while describing the difficulties CWD and their families have in attending. Activists perceived the local church community as an “easy in” to a positive community, forming a base of friendship, spiritual nurturing, respite from stress, and access to help. Social workers stated that several clients (parents of CWD) declared themselves as Christians in their intake forms. A pastor reflects, however, on the lack of interest shown by faith communities:

It’s not easy, you know, as a pastor, to deal with the disabled in church. But I want to encourage people to love them. What I experience these days is a lot of people with disabilities, with challenges, or with disabilities will contact me to come and visit, because of the lack of interest from their very own congregations. PLFG1

How pastors view CWD in the church impacts the faith community’s position towards families affected by disability. Legislation, information and resources are in place for a more just and inclusive society (Okola and Kilonzo (eds.) 2024; Dube 2005). These resources are void without the role

modelling of leadership, such as pastors, who welcome individuals with disabilities with open welcome (Kersbergen 2022).

Pastors are typically on the periphery of the wider dialogue on disability mainstreaming. For all the participants, the focus group discussion on disability were novel, with a request that more of these conversations were necessary. As pastors discussed disability in the local church, polarising models were present: Some discussed disability as a social justice project, others as an opportunity to engage the community as a type of service evangelism, and only a few began to imagine churches as an inclusive community of belonging.

Pastors who discussed disability as a project compared it to a social justice ministry, such as outreach to the homeless or a ministry to addicts. Their thinking was that certain churches have a specific calling to address particular social needs – describing disability as one project amongst many. For these pastors, disability mainstreaming sounded overwhelming. Some pastors saw ministry to CWD and their families as an opportunity for the local church to engage with the community. This approach describes disability outreach as a form of service evangelism (Resane 2020). For these, disability initiatives benefit the church in terms of its visibility in a community.

There was a glimmer of seeing churches as an alternative community of belonging. This counter approach was for disability mainstreaming, whereby the local church is a community of belonging for all members, regardless of dis/ability. A pastor (P13-PLFG2) brought the matter to light of how current church models may present social challenges for CWD and their families. He exclaimed, “Maybe the church is too pretty!” He pondered whether the image the local church portrayed was for an able elite, thus keeping those impacted by disability from having a seat at “their table”:

I would like to say, “Come along, and we can make a plan” I’d like to say, “There’s a seat at our table.” But now, there isn’t a seat at our table. And we’ve got a decision to make. PLFG2

He came to realise that for families impacted by disability to feel truly welcome in his congregation, deeper attitudinal barriers, such as ableism,

would need to be confronted. For these pastors, disability inclusion presented as a deep challenge to change congregational practices that excluded CWDs. A pastor in the same focus group, who coordinates the children's ministry, made the statement that disability is not a thing the churches can choose not to enter:

I just think that disability is not like a thing that we get to choose not to enter. It is part of people, and we are in the business of people. Full stop. So, I think like there has to be a level of awareness and effort that we do put in ... We can't just pretend it doesn't exist, because we're not a church for that. Like, if that makes sense. And we'll be the first to say this is why we feel so challenged by it (this conversation): If we say that we're a church where you belong, then can you come to our church and feel like you belong? PLFG2

This corresponds with the view of disabled scholars, Clifton and Wells (2020: 347), that disability is a universal experience that requires attention: “disability should not be treated as a topic of marginal interest (affecting only 15% of the population), but one that gets to the heart of what it is to be human.” All humans are limited in some way, and disability is a common human experience (Creamer 2009).

An occupational therapist envisaged pastoral leaders who would set the tone for congregants to be welcoming:

If the leader is open to inclusion, they have a lot of power over how other people react ... So, the attitude of the leaders of the churches needs to be inclusive ... Opportunities need to be created by the leadership, I suppose, for people to interact in a neutral, non-threatening, non-judgmental environment. I think it would be quite hard for a family to be accepted and really feel welcome and belong if the leader is not open to it. I mean, other members of the congregation could bring them, or whatever, but I think for it really to be optimised, then it needs to come from the top. DPO_14

Disability activists seek to enable PWD. Their view is for the local church to connect with families who care for CWD first, before seeking their intervention:

I think a more practical way would be to, you know, connect with that family. And you know, talk to them. Engage with them: “How can we assist you better? And what’s the reason why your whole family is not attending?” SDDO_FG3

For a church moving towards inclusion, it is advised to consult with families who care for CWD as experts in their lives. Arnold (2022) advises that how we engage in this consultation is important, recalling that families impacted by disability may have been disregarded in previous attempts to be truthful about their needs:

Tell them that you really value their input and that together you can make a difference. You might have to apologise if your church hasn’t sought their input before or has ignored their previous suggestions. Ask them what barriers they have experienced – there will probably be some you haven’t thought of – and agree to work on removing them together (Arnold 2022:22).

Families impacted by disability discussed their desire to participate as equals. A teen with cerebral palsy, who grew up in a church, equated being needed to experiencing belonging in church:

That’s actually been the number one thing – even in any relationship, actually. Am I just someone that you’re carrying on your back? Or is there a time when I’m actually carrying you on my back? Not physically ... A lot of my friends carry me on their backs, when they’re helping me up and down the stairs ... And if you’re not giving or if you don’t feel like you’re giving, and people don’t remind you that you’re giving. It’s bad. It’s a one-sided relationship ... You do need to be needed, in order to be accepted ... You need to be needed in order to belong somewhere, because you can’t just be a flea riding on someone’s back. Family 2

The desire that CWD have to play an active role in serving is heard in each interview. CWD themselves expressed their own sense of their unique gifts such as compassion, and encouragement:

The number one thing that I’ve seen from a lot of disabled people is their compassion ... Because life is generally difficult for them. I’m not saying people who are not disabled don’t have that, but they have

that deeper understanding of – even if you are a normal person, you don't feel accepted – they know that feeling of not being accepted. And that compassion is a tool that a lot of special needs people can use. Family 2 – teen with cerebral palsy

Well, I love comforting other kids. Like, sometimes – not comforting them – encouraging them. Like also with kids with special needs, or some kids just need a bit of help, you know what I mean? Like more than others. I'm a very encouraging person. Family of 4 children with visual impairment

CWD and their families believe that they can hold immense value for the church's life:

And people can benefit from us – learning from us. There's so much we've learned through our journey, working with people with different disabilities. So, we can be a blessing, because disabled people can be a tremendous blessing. So, it does work both ways. So, it can really benefit the community as well to have us part of it ... And it just breaks down that stigma, and then people in all communities can benefit. Family 1 (mother)

Recommendation: Okola and Kilonza, make an important point about recognising the agency of individuals with disabilities: “it should no longer be valid for Christians to speak about persons with disabilities as if we weren't already present in the church to speak up for ourselves” (2024:23). We need to shift from holding assumed incompetence concerning CWD. Limiting the opportunity that children have to participate and lead as equals is a barrier to their belonging in a local church. Disability should be mainstreamed, and CWD and their families given equal opportunity to participate and to contribute.

The empirical research and theological reflection led to piloting a pastoral training model – a consultative workshop for pastors of local churches (Manuel 2024). Information gleaned from the focus group interviews confirmed that a combined dialogue with pastors and disability activists had the potential to increase awareness and stimulate motivation and action for receiving CWD and their families into local churches.

Theological action research intervention – A consultative workshop for pastors

Theological Action Research presents as a “living” cycle, monitoring the impact of the praxis, then adjusting praxis as a fluid system to meet the needs of people (from a biblical paradigm). The cycle spirals as the interventions are evaluated to once again modify praxis, and praxis informs new theories of intervention. This Theological Action Research study collected data from three groups of “human actors” to dialogue on how churches can receive CWD. Graham (2013:156) describes the role people take in making meaning of and therefore, identifying the problems and solutions of which they are the role players or implementers of action. The workshop invited participants back from the previous focus groups to participate in combined discussions in small groups around a case study of a CWD. Individuals then workshopped next steps they would take to ensure these children and their families experience belonging in their churches.

Conclusion

This study uncovered gaps in the social and theological system of churches for CWDs and their families. The Church can no longer be comfortable with the absence of CWD and their families. A church that seeks their presence must locate where they are. The research unveils that the Church is currently not taking on this missional role. Churches must realise that journeying with CWD and their families will have a positive impact on the spiritual formation of the congregation. Churches, however, currently resemble society, talking inclusivity, but not embodying the values and practices of universal design. Pastors need to initiate the call for an inclusive vision of belonging and justice. Many pointers from this study indicated there needs to be both an orientation to disability studies and theologies in pastoral training and an ongoing dialogue between pastors, families who care for CWDs and disability activists to mobilise Church movements that will bring about transformative ecclesial practices.

Limitations

This study largely foregrounds that families impacted by disability are isolated by local churches. A vision for mainstreaming disability in churches is not yet present. The researchers are eager to introduce engaging models for a mainstream children's ministry; however, their research with CWD, their families, and other stakeholders has shown that the Church is not currently a welcoming environment for families who care for CWD. Unless pastors move towards these families, experimentation with inclusive children's ministries will be limited or viewed as a specialised ministry for select churches.

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