

To belong, you need to be missed

New approaches to a
theology of inclusion





CBM's Chief Executive Officer Dr. Rainer Brockhaus

Dear pastors and co-workers,

“Let us not become weary in doing good” is how the Apostle Paul encourages his readers in the Epistle to the Galatians, Chapter 6, Verse 9. With this in mind, Christian Blind Mission (CBM) as an international development organisation for persons with disabilities continues to put the human right to inclusion at the core of its work.

With our vision of an inclusive world, we are committed to asserting the rights of persons with disabilities – including in wealthy countries such as Germany. A self-determined life for each and every person is possible, and a major step has already been taken when we focus our thinking along these lines. For us as a Christian organisation, this also means carrying out our work on a theological basis.

This brochure presents concepts from the Bible and the world of theology which shape the way we act. We are illustrating these concepts using both reports from our global activities and the experience of people with disabilities within Germany's church landscape.

We are confident that, using this threefold approach of theology, development work and experience gained in Germany, we can provide our readers with major impetuses.

I trust that this brochure will inspire you and generate many good ideas.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Rainer Brockhaus
– Chief Executive Officer –

PS: This brochure was first published in German in 2021 and is now available in translation.

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“To belong, you need to be missed”

With this statement by John Swinton¹, we are focussing on a great objective. But that is precisely our intention, to move towards a greater sense of togetherness by understanding what is meant by inclusion.

This brochure is directed at persons with positions of responsibility and co-workers in churches and missions and to those engaged in the field of development cooperation.

As Christian Blind Mission (CBM), we are presenting biblical and theological concepts which shape our understanding of inclusion and disability and motivate us towards taking action in development cooperation. We combine these concepts with examples from CBM’s global work and reports of inclusion and exclusion within the Church in Germany.

Who we are

CBM is a Christian international development organisation, committed to improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities in the poorest communities of the world irrespective of race, gender or religious belief.

Based on its core values and over 100 years of professional expertise, CBM addresses poverty

¹ See John Swinton (2012): From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16:2, 172-190: 184.



↑ Founding father Pastor Ernst Jakob Christoffel at work

both as a cause and as a consequence of disability and works in partnership with local and national civil society organisations to create an inclusive society for all.

CBM has had a consultative status with the United Nations (UN) since 2002 and has been recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a specialised agency. Strategic partnerships and alliances help increase our impact and reach more persons with disabilities.²

Christian Blind Mission

Founded by Pastor Ernst Jakob Christoffel in 1908 as “Christliche Blindenmission im Orient”, our organisation deliberately incorporates the word “mission” in its name. It sees itself as an integral part of “missio dei”, God’s own mission to the world. This determines CBM’s mandate to pass on the love of God to others.

In terms of its origin, CBM is an organisation engaged in Christian social welfare work. Right from the very beginning, it has not regarded its mandate as preaching the Christian faith but as expressing the Christian faith in practical social welfare. CBM thus remains true to its roots laid down by its founder. He coined CBM’s guiding principle: “The deed of love is the sermon everyone understands.”

The cycle of poverty and disability

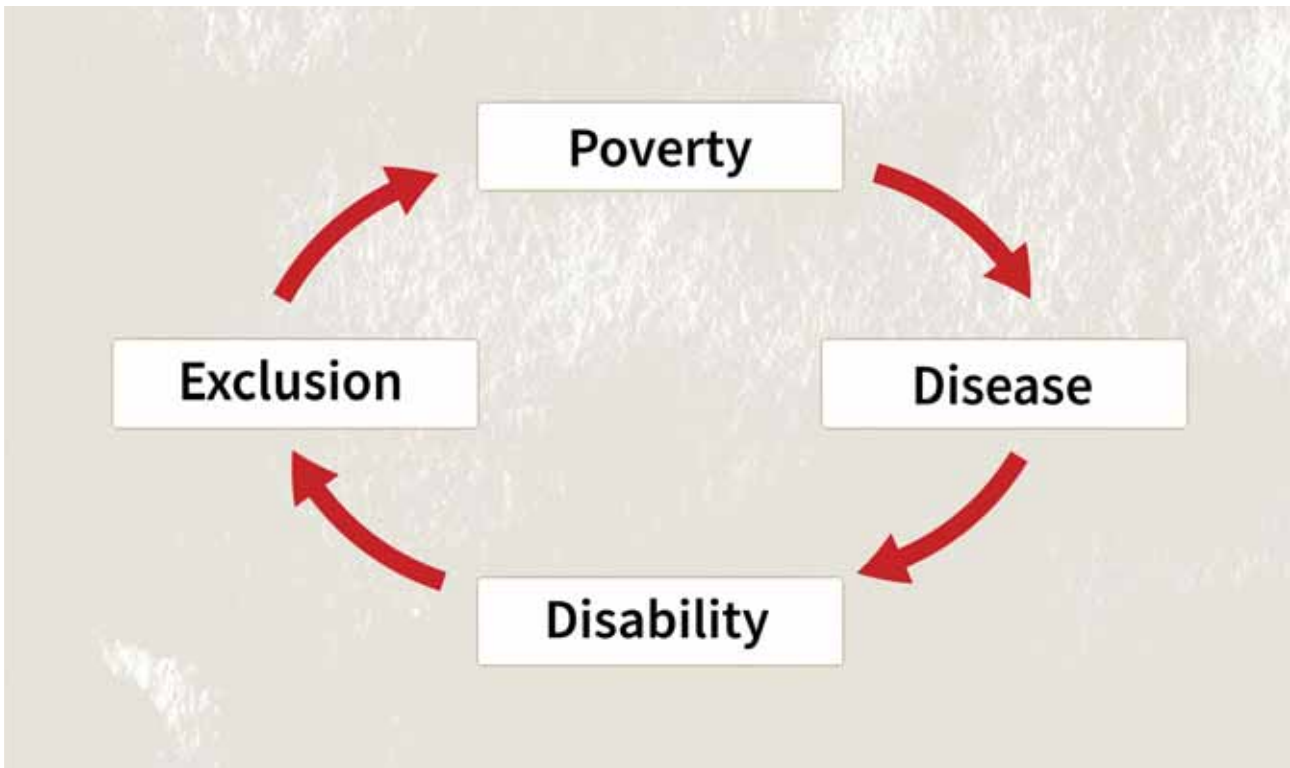
Disability contributes to and deepens poverty on an individual, family and community level due to discrimination and institutional and attitudinal barriers. So, a person with a disability and their family are less likely to have access to rehabilitation, education, skills training and employment opportunities – opportunities which could otherwise reduce poverty. Extreme poverty causes disability through many factors including a lack of access to adequate nutrition, preventative and curative health care, access to clean water and sanitation, and unsafe working conditions.

Children with disabilities are particularly affected. They grow up with fewer opportunities for a good school education, for well-paid work and for equal participation in society. The situation is as follows:

- Worldwide, one billion people have a disability.
- More than 80% of all persons with disabilities live in so-called developing countries.
- Only about half the children with disabilities in so-called developing countries complete primary school education.

It is CBM’s objective to permanently break this fatal cycle of poverty and disability.

² See www.cbm.org/about-cbm/partnerships-and-alliances/



↑ The cycle shown above indicates that poverty is one of the main causes of disabilities.

Impairment and disability

Today, a distinction is made between impairment and disability. An impairment is a person's permanent physical, psychological, or mental limitation or reduced ability. A disability, on the other hand, is the combination of impairment with the physical, social, cultural or attitudinal barriers which deny an impaired person full participation. In other words, an impaired person is not necessarily disabled, but can be affected by disability due to barriers of all types.³

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁴, adopted in 2006, it is the responsibility of States to ensure and promote the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind based on disability and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. The full participation or inclusion of persons with impairment in society, also in the Church, is thus a chartered human rights principle.⁵ CBM works in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is therefore not

only a Christian development organisation but also a human rights-based development organisation.

³ The educationalist Alfred Sander states that disability is involved if a person with impairment or reduced capability is insufficiently integrated into his or her complex human environment system, as quoted by Anita Müller-Friese: *Verstehst du auch, was du liest? Sonderpädagogische Impulse für eine adressatenorientierte Bibeldidaktik*, in: Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012, 222.

⁴ See the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

⁵ For a very detailed discussion of the term "disability", see CBM's Disability Inclusion Development Toolkit www.cbm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/CBM-DID-TOOLKIT-accessible.pdf



Foto: CBM

The Triune God as an expression of diversity

1.1

In the Christian faith, God is attested in three persons who, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are different yet one.

God is “diversity and unity at one and the same time”.⁶ Thus, in the Christian image of God, we see a relationship model which has an impact on how human beings live together as a community of different identities.

The fact that different identities form a unity in God and interact both with and for each other can encourage us towards the active inclusion of each individual person.

All human beings with their qualities, talents and limitations should welcome each other. Bearing this in mind, inclusion is at the centre of Christian thought and action.

⁶ See Wolfhard Schweiker: Inklusion. Aktuelle Herausforderung für Theologie und Kirche. Deutsches Pfarrerblatt, Ausgabe 6/2011.



A school for everyone

1.2

Cameroon: The Promhandicam School supported by CBM boosts the inclusion of children with disabilities in society. The school playground is bustling with life as children run around, yell and play with their friends. Djemba with his two friends is one of them. The fact that Djemba is a schoolboy with limited vision is nothing out-of-the-ordinary for the school. His two friends, on the other hand, have no impairments. They join him on the way to school, support him while crossing roads and accompany him to his class. Inclusion is at the heart of the school's activities, which is the commitment of the headmaster Abolo Jean Marie: "Promhandicam offers inclusive classes where children with and without disabilities learn and play together. We want to include children with disabilities so that they enjoy full participation in society."

It was not easy for Djemba's family to find a suitable school. Djemba's father heard about Promhandicam through a friend and helped his son change schools. Previously, Djemba used to attend a public school where the teachers had pegged him as lazy as he was unable to follow what was written on the blackboard.



Fotos (2): CBM

↑ Djemba (right) is not the only student with vision impairment at the Promhandicam School.

At Promhandicam, Djemba learns Braille. His class teacher, Metomo Jules, emphasises that integration and peer support is a key element of the learning experience at Promhandicam. "God stepped in to bring Djemba to Promhandicam", says Djemba's father. He is thankful that, due to the good education received at Promhandicam, his son has much better prospects for the future.

Marginalisation due to impairment

1.3

Open-mindedness

Germany: “Thank you for being my friend, even though I have a disability.” This statement broke my heart. After a wonderful afternoon spent preparing for the Christmas Eve midnight service, Lucie and I walked to the tram stop together. Those were her words after a few steps. My initial reaction was shock, and I asked what she meant. She then told me about her experience in connection with being marginalised on account of her impairment. But she also went on to say how very much she felt at ease in our church since she was accepted just as she is.

These words continued to prompt me to think for some time. Why did Lucie thank me? She is one of the most fantastic people I know. Should I not also have thanked her? After all, each one of us has his or her particular kinks. We would be completely lost without each other. Whenever I go to the

“Church Pirates” group or the Christmas Eve midnight service preparation group (both inclusive), it is this diversity which makes me feel more relaxed and that is what makes things easier for me.

It is precisely this combination of different people who have various qualities which makes up our Church. I can still vividly remember a day which had just left me unhappy. Somehow, the entire week had gone wrong, and I did not really feel like going to church. But when I arrived there, Lucie came up to me with a broad smile on her face and said that I was looking good again.

Her entire personality put a smile on my face that day, even though I had not thought that possible. When she afterwards did not know the meaning of a word, I was able to help her and explain what was meant. But that was nothing compared to that she had made my day.

Cora Janßen on her experience in inclusion groups in the Martin Luther Church, Darmstadt

Being Christian means being inclusive

“We are friends”, said a young woman who needs support in her everyday life, when I accompanied her on an excursion with the youth group.

For me, being a Christian means living in a fellowship, accepting each individual just as he or she is, with all strengths and weaknesses.

Everyone helps each other and enables each other to enjoy participation. Each individual, just as he or she is, is accepted and valued.

Lea Fuchs, Martin Luther Church, Darmstadt



Foto: Leonardo Patrizi

↑ Friendship also means lighting a candle together.

Human beings in the image of God

2.1

God creates women and men “in the image of Himself” (Genesis 1.27). This accounts for each individual’s inherent dignity which cannot be lost. All people are equally valuable simply by virtue of being human beings. The image of the Triune God is particularly expressed in the relationality of human beings, their capability to enter relationships with each other, which has its origin in the Trinity itself. Human beings experience being in the image of God in their encounters with each other.

From the point of view of being in the image of God, it is both desirable and good that everyone is different and complementary to others, for example as persons with or without impairment. Inclusion affirms human diversity because it is aware that each human being has been made in the image of God. One person always complements the other. By himself or herself, no single person is the entire image of God.

Being made in the image of God therefore has nothing to do with specific strengths or skills. The German educationalist Lars Mohr explores the question of what is meant by the cultural mandate to “rule over the earth” (Genesis 1.26-28) for someone with extremely severe impairments. He concludes that “dominium terrae”⁷ does not mean an unrelated domination by the individual but implies interpersonal solidarity and attention. We all participate in this cultural mandate, both as givers and takers, depending on our possibilities.⁸ Even people with extremely severe impairments could have a great impact.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul picks up this concept of us all being in the image of God when he sees the earthly representation of Christ in the fellowship of the very differently talented and

limited members of the Church, namely the body of Christ. Jesus’ parable about the entrusted talents (Matthew 25.14-30) also clearly illustrates that not only does every person have different potential and therefore different levels of achievements, but also that each individual’s life has to be valued equally. If someone gives what he or she can, he or she will prove himself just as any other.⁹

In the light of each individual’s integral dignity, Christians have always seen their obligation to turn to their neighbours in compassion. A new concept is now added: by virtue of this dignity, fellow humans with impairment or other needs have a right to such assistance which does not make them recipients of charity but lets them become fellow human beings at equal levels.

As Christians, we should therefore no longer classify people as givers only or as recipients of compassion only. Each individual is entitled to give and receive something on different occasions. In consequence, we should, at all times, strengthen and defend the dignity and rights of each person, including those with impairments.

⁷ Translation: Dominion over the Earth

⁸ See Lars Mohr: Schwerstbehindert herrschen. Sonderpädagogische Anstöße zu einer inklusiven Auslegung des „dominium terrae“, in: Wolfgang Grünstäudl und Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012, 215.

⁹ In this parable, the master reproaches the third servant who deliberately fails to invest his talent. What would the master have said to the first or second servant if they had been the ones who had hindered the third servant in contributing his talent?



↑ Juan Carlos from Nicaragua has not only gained employment but also opted for further training.

The gift of employment

2.2

Nicaragua: Juan Carlos is deeply concentrated at his desk because he needs to finish writing a letter urgently. As secretary, his field of work includes replying to queries from the public. For over a year now, this 22-year-old has been working for Charly. Charly is the official representative for people with disabilities in Santo Domingo, a district town in Nicaragua, and also chairman of an organisation for visually impaired persons. Juan Carlos would never have imagined that he would work in an office one day and have a regular income.

He has been using a wheelchair since his childhood. Abandoned by his parents, he lived on the streets since the age of 12. His life finally changed when a friend recommended him to contact CBM's partner ASOPIECAD. Since then, Juan Carlos has regularly attended a self-help group for people with disabilities.

"I have met people who encourage me not to give up", he says. And with success since Juan Carlos has not only gained employment as secretary but has also embarked on further training. "My dream is to become an IT engineer."

The self-help group strengthens Juan Carlos and boosts his faith: "I firmly believe that the Lord will support me on my way through life." Having been encouraged himself, Juan Carlos wants to give something back to society. "I would like to help young people who live on the streets. I know how difficult it is and that alcohol and drugs are no way-out. I want to give them a better perspective."

In his free time, Juan Carlos enjoys swimming and watching football. But he also spends time with friends from the Catholic church group and his girlfriend. He dreams of starting a family with her.

Human beings as creatures with limitations

3.1

Human beings are limited and finite creatures. Nevertheless, they live under God's explicit "very good" (Genesis 1.31).

The talents and limitations of women and men, their strengths and weaknesses are an expression of divinely ordained diversity. The German theologian Ulrich Bach has insisted that disease and impairment are part of creation and that even a life of disease and impairment corresponds to the will of God.¹⁰

Thus, women and men with impairment can refer to themselves as God's good creation. In Exodus 4.11, this is what Moses hears at the burning thornbush: "The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'"

Each individual person obviously has to accept his or her talents and limitations as a given fact¹¹, something to be faced up to. In this context, impairment can perhaps also be seen as a talent without wanting to negate or glorify the associated, potentially painful, restrictions since an impairment might also involve considerable suffering.

The story of Moses' vocation reveals an interesting detail. Moses would like to evade God's vocation by referring to what is apparently a speech impediment. God does not let this argument stand and seconds Moses' brother as spokesman. In modern terms, Moses is provided with a personal assistance that enables him to do his job.

That is why we cannot see God's actual creative will exclusively in the health and autonomy of an individual since this would leave no scope, not only for

limitations and restrictions but also for mutual complement and enrichment.

The German theologian Heike Springhart speaks about the necessity of a "realistic anthropology"¹². Against the false ideal of an invulnerable humankind capable of anything, it is a question of understanding the vulnerability¹³ of humans "as a precondition not only of trust, love, communication and affectability but also of the finiteness and fragility of human life"¹⁴. A distinction has to be made between ontological vulnerability as a "conditio humana"¹⁵ common to all humans and situational vulnerability, caused by specific conditions and factors which make a person more or less vulnerable. Thinking of both in combination with each other enables inclusion because this realistically recognises the vulnerability of all people and, at the same time, endows particularly vulnerable persons with dignity and assistance to which they are entitled.

¹⁰ See Ulrich Bach: *Heilende Gemeinde? Versuch, einen Trend zu korrigieren*, 1988, 9.

¹¹ See Ulf Liedke: *Beziehungsreiches Leben. Studien zu einer inklusiven Anthropologie für Menschen mit und ohne Behinderung (APLH 59)*, 2009, 619.

¹² See Heike Springhart: *Inklusion und Vulnerabilität – systematisch-theologische Überlegungen*, in: Michaela Geiger und Matthias Stracke-Bartholmai: *Inklusion denken. Theologisch, biblisch, ökumenisch, praktisch*, 2018, 33.

¹³ Vulnerability includes human limitations.

¹⁴ See Heike Springhart: *Inklusion und Vulnerabilität – systematisch-theologische Überlegungen*, in: Michaela Geiger und Matthias Stracke-Bartholmai: *Inklusion denken. Theologisch, biblisch, ökumenisch, praktisch*, 2018, 40.

¹⁵ Whatever is mutual to all women and men because they are human beings. *Ibid.*



Preparation for life

3.2

Ethiopia: A vivacious young teacher, Brehanesh enjoys being around children. She has had a hearing impairment since birth and teaches children using sign language. As a child, she herself attended the EECMY school for persons with hearing impairment, founded in 1981, in Hosanna.

Attending this school opened communicative and interactive possibilities and thus also vocational opportunities for Brehanesh. "I was always jealous of others being able to communicate. Now, I became capable of doing so too."

It was also to enable others to become prepared for life that Brehanesh courageously fought her way to be employed as teacher. That is why, following schooling at EECMY, she attended a mainstream school where nobody was proficient with sign language. She learned simply based on what her teachers wrote on the blackboard and found her own way of communicating with her classmates, "all in written form", as she says. "But I made some of my best friends there who helped me a lot."

Despite all her difficulties, Brehanesh succeeded in graduating from school and then attended college so that she could teach at EECMY. "It is great to be

back here again!" What motivates this young woman is to teach children how to interact with other people and to prepare them for life. It is still a long road towards inclusion. Her students already have it easier than Brehanesh did when she was young. Who knows whether and when she will one day teach children with and without hearing impairment together in school? There is still much to be done before inclusion becomes a reality.



↑ Brehanesh, a person with hearing impairment, teaches children using sign language.

A very special time

3.3

Germany: My mobile rang as usual. A young woman was calling. As a student of religious education, she was applying for an internship at our senior citizens residence. We quickly arranged an appointment to get to know each other.

The voice of the young woman, Ms. G., became hesitant: “Er, I have to tell you something else ... well, I am blind.” “So what?” was my immediate reply. Admittedly, I became assailed by a number of misgivings. Was it right to promise Ms. G. an internship even though I had not yet had much experience with persons with visual impairments? Was I too fast in promising her this internship? I did not know how Ms. G. would be able to conduct services and become involved in liturgical activities or how we would work together in the office.

I resolved that, if a young person wishes to enter the service of the Church, the fact of an impairment must not be an obstacle! I was to be proved right in my decision!

In the office, Ms. G. worked with assistive devices, for example a screen reader on her laptop, which converts the text into speech. This enabled her to write liturgical texts and sermons, send e-mails and undertake research on the internet. While I printed my texts, Ms. G.’s texts were printed out on her braille printer. “Shall we swap pages?” we often joked.

Together, we arranged services and carried out liturgical activities. Ms. G.’s involvement included accompanying the residents to their very last breath. She entered into pastoral conversations and blessed the dying. I was often amazed when I experienced her intensive perception of circumstances as she would say: “Mr. X was now briefly awake again. She probably had her eyes open. Right?” With the support of an assistant, Ms. G. organised game afternoons and helped a member of the residence’s

staff in activation and memory training sessions for the residents. Despite the work which was not always easy, not a day went by without some moments of hearty laughter. “Pastor, Ms. G. always knows the texts off by heart”, is what we often heard people say. Ms. G. then replied that she reads with her fingers and that her printouts behind the altar are not visible. With a wink, she would say: “Admittedly, I am sometimes tempted to claim that I really do everything from memory.”

I am unbelievably thankful for this instructive and productive time of working together, during which I learnt so much. Ms. G. worked with only very minor allowances, without any functional restrictions and very beneficially indeed.

*Pastor Ulrike Oehler
Evangelisches Stift Freiburg
(Senior Citizens Center Freiburg)*



Foto: istockphoto

↑ Cognitive games as memory training

Salvation in Christ

4.1

In Christ, God takes on a human form and lives a life in vulnerability. His life contradicts the conventional notions of God but in his despair on the Cross he also contradicts the conventional notions of a successful human life.

God becomes both a helpless child and a man broken on the Cross and bears the marks of this experience even after the resurrection. In her principal work, the American theologian Nancy Eiesland speaks about the “disabled God”.¹⁶

The low point of the Cross is where humankind becomes reconciled with God. Because each human is reconciled with God in Christ, disability or non-disability, efficiency or restriction in performance are not the constants that define human existence.

In experiencing salvation, all humans are equal. Because we have been reconciled with God and each one of us needs this reconciliation, nobody has an advantage over anyone else. Everyone is included beneath the Cross of Jesus. “Within this context, inclusion gains the significance of re-inclusion through God’s reconciling action.”¹⁷

In his book “Exclusion and Embrace”, the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf puts the Cross of Christ

and God’s self-donation at the centre of his reflections on inclusion.¹⁸ Following on from the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann¹⁹, Volf emphasizes that God’s solidarity with victims is demonstrated at the Cross of Christ.

In doing so, Volf points out that “solidarity may not be severed from self-donation. All sufferers can find comfort in the solidarity of the Crucified; but only those who struggle against evil by following the example of the Crucified will discover him at their side. To claim the comfort of the Crucified while rejecting his way is to advocate not only cheap grace but a deceitful ideology.”²⁰

¹⁶ See Nancy L. Eiesland: *The Disabled God: Toward a Libertory Theology of Disability*, 1994.

¹⁷ See Ulf Liedke: *Anerkannte Vielfalt. Inklusion als Thema der Theologie und der kirchlichen Praxis*. Studententext aus der Evangelischen Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit, 2013, 16.

¹⁸ See Miroslav Volf: *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Abingdon Press 2019.

¹⁹ See Jürgen Moltmann: *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, 1992.

²⁰ See Miroslav Volf: *Exclusion and Embrace*, 2012, 13.



The wish to belong

4.2

Nepal: Deu Kumari lives in the western lowlands of Kohalpur in Banke District with her husband and their three children. The family belongs to the Tharu, a disadvantaged minority in Nepal. Deu Kumari not only has to face challenges caused by poverty but, for a long time, was also confronted with social discrimination.

As a child, she was diagnosed with polio in both legs and, due to inadequate health care, remained untreated (only in 2014 Nepal was declared polio-free). In rural areas, people with impairments are often regarded as “useless” and “accursed”, which entails direct social, occupational, and ultimately social exclusion. Deu Kumari also encountered many instances of such experiences: “People used to talk behind our backs. They even came to my husband and talked badly about me. They said that I did nothing and merely stayed at home. They even encouraged him to abandon me as I was no use and only a burden to him.” Deu Kumari’s husband refused to be influenced by such talk, likewise a neighbour who put her in contact with the Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA).

Thanks to CBM’s support, Deu Kumari received a hand-driven tricycle and was trained as a seamstress. Her impairment remains but her social integration has increased. She ultimately opened her own sewing business in Kohalpur where she also trains young girls.



Fotos (2): CBM

↑ Deu Kumari with her tricycle

Church services for all senses – the traces of inclusion

4.3

Germany: In my opinion, inclusion and ecumenism go hand-in-hand. That is why I initiated inclusive church services, the first one in 2016 – a joint project from the very beginning with the involvement of the Herne Church District, the Holy Cross Church's congregation with hearing loss, the Emscher Valley Deanery and the Wittekindshof and Lebenshilfe (organisations for persons with impairments). What is special about these church services is that they are planned and conducted by persons with and without impairments quite along the lines of the priesthood of all believers. Plain language and tactile elements are the features of these services.

Many senses have already been involved, on one occasion even the sense of taste. With this in mind, the agape meal was celebrated with all those present and bread was broken and eaten together. During the service with the topic "Entrance into Jerusalem", self-made palm fronds made of crepe paper were distributed to all the visitors. When the "Hosanna" cry went up, the entire congregation waved their palm fronds in the air, a lasting impression for both the eyes and the ears of those present. In addition, each year, the choir of the congregation of the deaf sings in sign language. Visitors are very impressed by this performance and describe it as a highlight.

These unique services are always prepared over a period of twelve months, and many very dedicated people invest considerable love and participation. In addition to the use of plain language, Deacon Martin Ruhmann translates the contents of the services into sign language. Wolfgang Flunkert, the church district's choirmaster, sets new musical accents in each service.

The first service left such deep impact that it was the wish of all those involved to offer such events on a regular basis.

Since then, there has been a Bible study group for people with intellectual impairments. In this group, we deal with different topics from the Bible as well as questions of faith. The focus is on making the underlying message perceptible. In this way, our uniqueness as God's creatures can be experienced by making a handprint in salt dough or using a swing cloth to demonstrate being carried through difficult times by God and our fellow humans. As chairman of the synod's inclusion committee in the Herne Church District, I am delighted that a format for such church services has been found which is both appealing and exciting in terms of content.

Gilbert Krüger, synod's inclusion representative in the Herne Church District, written by Johanna Geiger, member of the Inclusive Ecumenical Service Team in Herne



Foto: Lokibaho



Sign language interpreter in a church service – a good idea for the future.

Salvation and healing

5.1

When persons with impairments belong to a church, another barrier might be added to the existing barriers they face: they encounter a “disabling theology” within the Church. This is how Nancy Eiesland²¹ refers to theological barriers which hinder persons with disabilities from living their faith as a matter of course like all other Christians and using it as a source of strength.

Eiesland thinks, for example, of these concepts: that impairment is a consequence of sin; that only the role of the “virtuous sufferer” is assigned to a person with an impairment; or of well-meant charity which unintentionally degrades the person with an impairment to become an object.²²

Whatever barrier may prevail, it causes Christians to distance themselves from their brothers and sisters with impairments. This “disabling theology” thus makes it hard for Christians with impairments to become church members on par with others and to adopt an equal role in their church with their dignity and God-given potential.

This is counteracted by an “accessible theology”, as defined by the German theologian Anne Krauss²³ and particularly encountered in the writings of Ulrich Bach: “God’s salvation can become full salvation even without the curing of a person.”²⁴ For Bach, it is important that the constant from which we live is salvation in Christ and not any existing or non-existent impairment: “For God, for His grace and for His mandates, impairment is no dysfunction.”²⁵

In his article “To heal or to cure – is that the question?”, the author Bill McAllister shows that, in John 9.1-3, Jesus cancels the widely presumed connection between sin and impairment.²⁶ According to Jesus, neither the blind man nor his family were responsible for the impairment. McAllister examines the Greek terms used in the

New Testament for Jesus’ healing miracles and comes to the conclusion that “healing is more than just recovery”. He continues: “We can go on to say: Although healing can include recovery, that is not always the case. Whether a person recovers or not, he or she should in any case be healed. (...) People with disabilities can have peace with God, whether they have recovered or not. They can have peace with their families and vice versa. They can have peace with their social environment and vice versa. This message relates to all of us to the same extent – whether we are disabled or not.”²⁷

Along similar lines, the German theologian Claudia Janssen says: “Healing and salvation can be experienced without recovery.”²⁸

It is thus a question of substituting a disabling theology by an accessible, indeed empowering theology in order to enable fellowship at equal levels between Christians with and without impairment.

²¹ See Nancy L. Eiesland: *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberator Theology of Disability*, 1994.

²² Ibid.

²³ See Anne Krauss: *Barrierefreie Theologie. Das Werk Ulrich Bachs vorgestellt und weitergedacht*, 2014.

²⁴ „Gottes Heil kann auch ohne des Menschen Heilung des Menschen volles Heil sein.“ See Ulrich Bach, quoted by Anne Krauss: *Barrierefreie Theologie*, 91.

²⁵ See Ulrich Bach, *ibid.*, 85.

²⁶ See Bill McAllister: *Heilen oder gesundmachen – ist das die Frage?*, Okuli - Magazin für die Gemeindegemeinschaft, 2014, 23-28.

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ See Claudia Janssen: „Er kümmerte sich um alle Krankheiten und alles Leiden im Volk“ (Mt 4,23). *Heilung im Matthäusevangelium*, in: Michaela Geiger and Matthias Stracke-Bartholmai: *Inklusion denken. Theologisch, biblisch, ökumenisch, praktisch*, 2018, 139.



Social worker of a CBM partner: Luc Yomby Kilfie

5.2

Cameroon: In his early 30s, Luc is employed as a parish worker in the CBM-supported Central Cameroon Cluster Programme (CCC). He lost his eyesight at the age of 16 when a ball hit him with full force during a school break, causing him to become totally visually impaired. This was followed by a six-month treatment involving considerable pain and without any improvement in vision. Luc's life changed in a way that he could never have imagined.

"I stopped going to school. That was very hard to accept. I could not even go out of the house or play with others. I felt frustrated and furious and would have liked to die since what should I do without any eyesight?", were his initial thoughts. It was not easy for his family either, as his mother relates: "We wept, prayed, went to various hospitals and churches, but nothing changed."

Luc hoped for a miracle and went in search of such a miracle to many churches. This hope became fulfilled, but differently than he had thought.

"Instead of opening the eyes of my body, God opened my spiritual eyes in order to see that He

has plans for my life even with my blindness and that He loves me, nevertheless. I gained hope and no longer wished to die. I became an active member of my church and joined the choir. I still play percussion in the choir."

Luc experienced another change when he was visited by two women who were employed as voluntary parish workers. They counselled the family and pointed out possibilities for Luc. He then finished school and initially went to a private radio station in Yaoundé, where he still broadcasts a weekly radio programme which focuses on supporting and representing the interests of people with disabilities.

In the meantime, Luc is also employed as a social helper. His responsibilities include day-to-day work in the community, informing the community members about the different forms of impairment and what is offered by CCC. He draws up the necessary referral documentation for those who need medical surgery or rehabilitation.

Nobody has sinned

5.3

Germany: My pregnancy went smoothly and without a hitch. With the exception of brief periods of nausea, I encountered no problems. The check-ups were always in order and no medicinal treatment was prescribed. Everything indicated that I would have a healthy baby. The birth went almost like a dream and soon I was able to hold my second longed-for daughter in my arms. She was examined and everything was just right until the second day after the birth. In a passing offhand statement, the doctor told me that my baby was probably blind.

My intact world became ruptured, no it was completely turned upside down (incidentally, my daughter still manages to do so today). Questions: Why? How come? For what reason? What now? In addition to coming to terms with the situation myself, I also had to console the Grandmas and Grandpas – and that put a great strain on me.

Yes, I also experienced encouragement and help, support in prayer and somehow from the very beginning this inexplicable consolation: God, you wanted this child, and you will accompany her through life. Yet it was the people who were close to me who caused me to doubt. The worst statement came from an elderly relative, not directly but I came to hear it and it hit me with full force: “There is a question of guilt, and one of parents has committed a grave sin.” Obviously, this person did not know the story in John 9.1-3:

As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned”, said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”



Foto: V Vornicov

↑ Finding peace together

But the sting was there. I was furious and disappointed. How could Christians continue to think so today? There was still a voice which quietly whispered: Perhaps there is a grain of truth in it after all. No, there isn't! So, I no longer ask the question “Why?” In her early years, my daughter answered this question herself. She used to ask: “Why did God make me blind?” “I don't know”, I would reply. After a brief reflection, she said: “In that case, He has something special in mind with me.” Yes, that is true. She is someone special: I just sometimes wish that things in her life would be easier. But I know one thing for certain: the fact that she was born blind has nothing to do with either of us having committed a sin.

Ulrike Dietze, mother of a blind daughter

The church: unity and diversity

6.1

In his teachings about the Church as the body of Christ, the Apostle Paul describes it as an inclusive fellowship (1 Corinthians 12). All members have been included into this body through the Holy Spirit in the act of baptism. It is to the grace of God and not to any merits of their own that they owe their sense of belonging. Everyone is different and, due to different talents and limitations, has different tasks. But nobody must be left out, nobody is superfluous, the body cannot do without anyone. “The Church is not whole without the weakest”, writes Ulrich Bach.³⁰

As a reconciled community, the Christian Church can advocate inclusion. Whoever believes in the Triune, relational God, whoever understands himself or herself and his or her fellow humans as being made in the image of God, whoever knows herself or himself to have been included into God’s salvation due to what happened on the Cross, can no longer want to exclude others and does not want to see others excluded any more. In this way, Christians will also campaign for social conditions in which all people will be granted full participation and inclusion. “We are not a full community without one another. Responding to and fully including persons with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church’s defining characteristic.”³¹

The Church increasingly sees itself measured against the yardstick of how much diversity it permits. Thus, the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) affirms: “It is normal to be different.”³² Matthias Bahr adds: “To be different is not only normal but is desirable.”³³

In this respect, the Church is challenged in several ways. On the one hand, it has to focus more on becoming a church of participation and allowing for

the talents of all Christians. This would show that persons with impairments want to shape their local church and can also contribute to doing so. The other challenge lies in the simple fact that inclusion cannot be enough for the Christian Church. “The law can legislate for inclusion, but it cannot help people to belong,”³⁴ says John Swinton, Professor in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He advocates an approach from the concept of inclusion to the experience of belonging: “It is not enough that human beings are included within communities, they need to belong.”³⁵ For Swinton, the acid test of whether someone really belongs is quite simple: “To belong, you need to be missed.” From Bonhoeffer’s “Life Together”, Swinton recognises that, when the weak and the vulnerable are excluded from the Christian community, this is no longer a community. It may appear to be a community, but it is no longer one, to the detriment of everyone. Swinton continues: “In other words, no one can belong unless we all belong.”³⁶

³⁰ See Ulrich Bach: *Ohne die Schwächsten ist die Kirche nicht ganz. Bausteine einer Theologie nach Hadamar*, 2006.

³¹ See Ecumenical Council of Churches (ECC): *A Church of All and for All – An interim statement*, Geneva 2003, Art. 87.

³² See: *Es ist normal, verschieden zu sein. Inklusion leben in Kirchen und Gesellschaft. Eine Orientierungshilfe des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014.

³³ See Matthias Bahr: *Störende Ansprache: Disability, das Evangelium und der Religionsunterricht*, in: Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012, 249.

³⁴ See John Swinton (2012): *From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness*, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16:2, 172-190: 182.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.



“They called me nobody”

6.2

Rwanda: Judith (photo centre) did not know how to pay for the food for her family – or for the treatment of her son with a disability, Jean-Claude. And as for repairing the broken door and the leaking roof? Unthinkable! But then she heard about a savings group which had been set up by Nudor, a CBM partner organisation, specifically for people with disabilities and their families. Without hesitating, she joined the group where she also met Jeanne (photo left). The group became a ray of hope for both women.

Once a week, the currently 26 members meet up in a mud hut out in the country. They all want to improve their living conditions. To do so, they need a loan, which they would never be given by a bank. “Many bank clerks do not know what people with disabilities can achieve if they are given a chance,” states Emile Cadet Vuningabo, a member of Nudor’s staff. The group therefore helps itself with micro-loans. Every week, the group’s members pay in as much as they can. The money is kept in a wooden chest which is protected against theft by means of three padlocks.

Whoever has paid in for four weeks, can apply for a loan which has to be paid back as soon as possible. This amount can be up to three times higher than the amount saved. The only condition is that the business idea has to be approved by the group.

That did not pose a problem for Jean (59). The family father who lost his eyesight following an accident requested funds to purchase several banana plants. He produces banana beer and uses the revenue to provide for his family.

And what about Jeanne and Judith? Thanks to a loan, they were also able to secure their existence, Jeanne by planting and selling tomatoes and Judith as a beans dealer. “I have so many tomatoes that I can use the loan to even hire harvest helpers”, says Jeanne happily. She would also like to buy a goat. Will she be successful in doing so? Jeanne smiles because she knows one thing for certain: “I am no longer a nobody but a woman with an impairment.”

A strong team

6.3

Germany: Every week, about 20 children and teenagers meet up in the “Church Pirates” group, an inclusive group in the Martin Luther Church in Darmstadt, Germany.³⁷ “I am different, you are different, he is different than she is”, sing the Church Pirates cheerfully at the beginning of their meeting under the roof of the parish centre. “So what, that puts colour into life.” This song says it all. Differences are no problem in the inclusive children’s and teenagers’ group of the Martin Luther Church. On the contrary. “They enrich us”, says Birgit Heckelmann, the church youth worker in the Martin Luther, St. Michael’s and St. Thomas’ Churches of the Martin’s District in Darmstadt. She is particularly involved in the participation of everyone since children, teenagers and adults are made in the image of God, as stated in the concept of her work among children and teenagers. Birgit Heckelmann also represents the Martin Luther Church in the “inclusive Martin’s District” steering group, a network initiated by the City of Darmstadt and the Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband, a joint welfare association.

The “Church Pirates” make themselves comfortable on cushions in a circle, with their name tags in front of them, a cross in the middle and a candle on a self-designed rug decorated with pirates’ sables and colourful handprints. The group starts off with an information swapping session. Over the last five years, an atmosphere of trust has evolved as has courage to talk about personal details in the group. Everyone then meets in the courtyard of the “Martinsstift” Parish Centre which was refurbished in 2014 to become barrier-free. “We always pick out games which enable us to do something together”, explains Birgit Heckelmann. “None where only one person can win.”

Lukas enjoys outdoor games. The 23-year-old with Down syndrome was one of the founders of the “Church Pirates”. But he also loves to eat ice-cream with the others, to play soccer or to do handicrafts,

he says. 23-year-old team member Marlene also likes being with the “Church Pirates” because, as she declares “there are so many lovely people here”. She is one of nine persons in the leadership team. Those attending the group are aged between 10 and 31. Amos enjoys being one of the “Church Pirates” because for him it is “a weekly meeting point to talk about things”. “Anyone can come, anyone is welcome”, says the 15-year-old. For team member Alex, a biologist and member of staff at a children’s day-care centre, being involved with the “Church Pirates” means “relaxing after work”. He likes the “fantastic activities and the great community feeling”. Cooking and eating together are also popular items on the agenda of the “Church Pirates”. “It is normal to be different.”

Rebecca Keller, public relations officer of the Darmstadt City Evangelical Deanery

³⁷ During the Covid-19 period, the programme had to be suspended.



Foto: anaimnd

↑ Being together puts more colour into your life.

Disrupted reading³⁸

7.1

On an interdisciplinary basis, disability studies examine the phenomenon of disability in terms of its development and effect as well as the resulting disability theology. Disability studies also cause biblical texts to be viewed in a different light.

On the one hand, it can easily be shown that the concept of inclusion is anchored in the biblical view of God and humankind and is reflected in many biblical instructions for a just, loving togetherness. Instances of a cross-boundary focus on excluded women and men are repeatedly encountered in the ministry of Jesus.

On the other hand, however, there is no doubt that the Bible emerged during eras which excluded persons with impairments. Hence, in the past, some biblical statements fostered exclusive thinking and made it hard to encourage the development of inclusive communities and still do so today.

Reference has already been made to the link between impairment and sin which brings the occurrence of an impairment into context with personal misconduct, a lack of faith or the effect of diabolical powers. This way of thinking is by no means outdated for many sections within worldwide Christianity. It expels persons with impairments from the Christian community and burdens them with a judgment of condemnation in addition to the burden of impairment. In this way, the sick and stricken person (...) virtually becomes “religiously stigmatised”.³⁹

As shown above, impairments belong to the realm of God’s good creation and are an expression of the vulnerability of human beings. They must not be interpreted as a consequence of any offence against God’s commandments.

Healing stories as constitutive for the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles can also have an exclusive effect. At least superficially but certainly in terms of

reception, they foster a medical model of disability.⁴⁰ In the accounts of miracles, it is the “poor person” who has the problem and becomes the object of healing. If he or she is helped, then everything is alright again. What is not addressed and thus not resolved are the disabling circumstances such as the social discrimination of persons with disabilities which appear between the lines (Mark 10.48).

Furthermore, people without impairment hardly realise just how very much people with impairment can have difficulties with biblical wording. The “blind guides” (Matthew 15.14) as a warning example, as though a blind person could not lead someone else, or words on spiritual blindness or lameness (Isaiah 42.19; Hebrews 12.13), can evoke the feeling of “not being right” among people with impairments.

In Luke 14, another example, two passages refer derogatorily to persons with impairment. These are persons who should be the recipients of beneficence in order to gain eternal reward (Luke 14.12-14) and it goes without saying that they are not among those who are initially invited to a banquet (Lk 14.15-23).

Of course, the focus of what Jesus says here differs from how people with impairments are to be treated. Nevertheless, persons with disabilities serve as a negative foil, and it is against this background that

³⁸ See Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012.

³⁹ See Oliver Merz: *Vielfalt in der Kirche? Der schwere Weg der Inklusion von Menschen mit Behinderung im Pfarrberuf*, 2017, 39.

⁴⁰ The medical model sees disability as the problem of an individual. It views a person without disability as the normal status. People with disabilities are exclusively seen as the sick. The social model, on the other hand, says: “People are not disabled; they become disabled.” The problem is not the individual, but the social barriers encountered by the individual in everyday practice. Hence, it is society which has to change.

so called “normal people” are to be persuaded to change their minds. Those affected often feel this to be hurtful.

Disability studies now open up a new perspective. They problematise the social environment but not the individual person. They perceive the medically ascertainable impairment but, as shown above, do not refer to a disability as yet. Impairment becomes a disability when society upholds the obstacles preventing an impaired person from enjoying full participation. Thus, disability studies disrupt the normal perspective, and do so quite deliberately.

When studying Biblical texts, disability studies invite the reader to become involved in “disrupted reading” – from the perspective of a person with

an impairment. As Monika Seifert, a German sociologist and educationalist, says: “I see only what I want to see”⁴¹, disability studies make one aware of the clichéd descriptions of affected people and their functionalisation in the texts and can be constructively used for one’s own understanding and advocacy for inclusion.

Along the same lines, the German theologian Matthias Bahr deals with the concept of “disruptive addressing” in religious education.⁴² He recommends wording each theological statement in such a way that it can be said in the presence of someone with impairment. In specific terms, how would we deal with the story of Bartimaeus if a blind student were present?

Exclusion



Integration



Inclusion



⁴¹ See Monika Seifert, quoted by Erik Weber, in: Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012, 201.

⁴² See Matthias Bahr: *Störende Ansprache: Disability, das Evangelium und der Religionsunterricht*, in: Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (ed.): *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, 2012, 236-253.

Your heaven makes me furious

7.2

Germany: No, it is not a thunderstorm or a bleak grey day which churns me up. What I am talking about is that heaven which is described in the Bible as the place where God lives. That is what makes me furious! To be more precise, it is what many of you say about this place! It is supposed to be a place where there is no more grief or pain or tears. You say this place will be better for me because there I will be able to see and will no longer be blind. There, I will be comforted at last and can experience everything that I regrettably missed out on here in this world.

This heaven makes me furious! Not one of you who say so has been blind themselves. I so often hear you imagine how dreadful it must be not to see anything. But what right do you have to say that my life is sad, worthless, and perhaps even less worth living just because you imagine it to be so? You make heaven seem like a cheap consolation prize which reduces my own life to a fraction of reality and masks out all other forms of reality.

Grief, pain, and challenges all belong both to my life and to your lives. But what I treasure about my life are deep friendships which I could never have formed had I not been blind; challenges which have made me courageous and strong; deep, reflective thoughts which would never have occurred to me without my personal restriction.

Speaking of restrictions: you who like to pray for the “sick” and lay your hands on me without being asked to do so: Who gives you the right to decide for me that this is what I need and would like? Did Jesus not ask the question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Whoever ignores this question ignores the person in front of him or her and merely sees heaven as a fast help-your-self shop. And what happens when a well-meant prayer is not fulfilled?

Heaven is a mystery. It lets us hope in dreams and experience uncertainty. It remains the mysterious place of God! That heaven does not make me furious but evokes a deep yearning within me.

Ramona Gelber, teacher of Christian education





↑ Jean Marie (59) from Rwanda is visually impaired, however that does not mean he needs help to feed his calf. Inclusion opens up a large number of possibilities, for example the savings group of which he is a member.

Denied inclusion as an expression of sin and guilt

8.1

The Bible sees sin as a disruption in relationships. It has an effect wherever human beings who have been created as social beings go beyond their limits as creatures and fellow-creatures. Sin is referred to wherever human beings who owe their lives to the Creator disregard Him, ignore their fellow humans who they are supposed to complement and exploit the world for whose upkeep they have been created.

Exclusion, whether as the result of personal indifference or disabling structures within both the Church and society, can and must always be understood as sin against God and as guilt towards fellow human beings.⁴³ On this issue, Miroslav Volf states that just as the oppressed have to be liberated from the

suffering that oppression has created, so the oppressors have to be liberated from the injustice that their oppression has created.⁴⁴ In the light of the cross which is the “divine atonement for sin, for injustice and violence on earth”⁴⁵, inclusion can perhaps only become possible if one has been asked for forgiveness for exclusion beforehand.

⁴³ See Sünde, Schuld und Vergebung aus Sicht evangelischer Anthropologie. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, 2020, 29.

⁴⁴ See Miroslav Volf: Exclusion and Embrace, 2012, 12.

⁴⁵ See Jürgen Moltmann, quoted by Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 12.



Now more than ever

8.2

Nicaragua: It was in 1991 when Marlon was 14 years old that he accompanied his mother to the local market. They took a pick-up truck and, as is customary in Nicaragua, sat on the open truck bed at the rear. While Marlon was helping his mother climb down, it happened. A car driving at excessive speed caught Marlon and crushed his legs. Initially, the doctors wanted to amputate both of Marlon's legs, but his mother refused and so the doctors removed only his right leg and saved his left leg through an operation. "If something like that happens to anyone, he or she will lose faith in themselves. I thought that I was no longer of any use", remembers Marlon. Fortunately, his mother heard about a local project for community-based rehabilitation. Marlon's initial scepticism became transformed into new courage through his hard-fought successes. Ultimately, he was able to even walk again with the aid of crutches and was given an artificial limb.

Nevertheless, the barriers and discrimination he faced due to his physical impairment initially made life difficult for him: "I have got over that now. But I suffered a lot. People called me 'chewing gum leg' and 'cripple'. That really hurt!

I often felt weak and wept a lot."

After leaving school, Marlon wanted to study. At first, the rector of the university refused to accept him, saying that the room for the students was on the fifth floor and that, in the event of an earthquake, Marlon would not be able to escape. However, Marlon's attitude to life opened new doors to him, as he declared: "Now more than ever!" Today, Marlon works for CBM's partner ASOPIECAD as instructor and supervisor and says: "I am someone now!"



Fotos (2): CBM / argum / Einberger

↑ Today, Marlon from Nicaragua works as a social helper for CBM's partner ASOPIECAD.

Full-timers with disabilities

9.1

The yardstick for putting inclusion into practice within the Church is undoubtedly about how easy or how hard it is for a person with an impairment to be appointed as pastor or other full-timer in a local church. It may be assumed that people within the Church like to reach out to those who are (supposedly) not so strong. But can they imagine having someone with impairment as pastor? What kind of impression would be created if a pastor using a wheelchair led a group of mourners in the cemetery? And what would it sound like if a pastor with a speech impediment preached a sermon? And would church leaders be prepared to assume responsibility for a pastor with impairment?

Tensions can evolve between the growing attempt at inclusion within the Church and a firmly anchored ideal image of what a pastor or full-timer should be. With her inherent acuity, Nancy Eiesland remarks: "Church structures keep people with disabilities out; church officials affirm our spiritual callings but tell us there is no place for our bodies to minister."⁴⁶

How many talented and hopeful Christians have experienced obstacles being put in their way, thus harming both themselves and the local Christian church?



Foto: istockphoto

↑ God hears the prayers of all people.

Oliver Merz, a Swiss theologian who developed multiple sclerosis, was the first to examine this question academically in German-speaking countries. In his research, he comes to the following explicit conclusion: "In line with current empirical achievements in their churches, pastors can not only be a challenge for their church (e.g. jeopardising the quality of the work done by churches and church operations altogether), but also feature an added value (e.g. special-profile preaching and pastoral care, enhanced empathy and social competence, as well as a role model effect)."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Nancy L. Eiesland: *The Disabled God: Toward a Libertory Theology of Disability*, 1994.

⁴⁷ See Oliver Merz: *Vielfalt in der Kirche*, 2017, 113.

Not an easy path, but one which is worthwhile

9.2

Switzerland: I had always had a heart for the disadvantaged and the marginalised. This attitude was to be followed by a personal approach to this subject. At the age of 19, it was completely out of the blue that I felt an indeterminate painful tingling sensation. The initially gradual symptoms developed into more severe signs of paralysis which had a noticeably adverse effect on my every-day life. At that time, I was a very enthusiastic member of a volleyball team. I had also just taken on my first leadership responsibility in my local church's lively youth work. I initially had to come to terms with the idea that I, as a young athletic person, would limp or even be pushed around in a wheelchair from one examination to the next. My friends and family was amazed that my personality generally remained well-balanced. That had something to do with my recently discovered Christian faith. Of course, this severe illness shook my view of God which was still mixed here and there. One-sided healing theologies which were passed on to me tended to be unsettling rather than beneficial. From today's point of view, I see it as a gift that this major crisis did not cause me any long-term inner harm.

After a few weeks, I received the diagnosis "multiple sclerosis" (MS), a chronic neurological disease that affects the central nervous system, with zero prospects for recovery. As a result of my experience gained over the previous months, I reconsidered what I had planned to do with my life. A few years ago, my pastor at the time had suggested that I should train to be a pastor as a late entrant. The conviction slowly grew in me that he saw something in me which I had not recognised so far. The rest is history, colourful and by no means linear.

Towards the end of my studies in theology, both the university and church authorities wanted to

know whether, despite my chronic illness, I would be suitable and sustainable for a pastoral activity. First of all, this was to be attested from a medical point of view. Shortly afterwards, I was ordained and began my first appointment as curate. Since then, I have worked as a pastor for 20 years. At the same time, I have become more and more involved in research, teaching and counselling. Since being awarded a doctorate, I have been increasingly focussing on these activities.

The fact that I was personally affected stimulated, at an early point in time, my thirst for knowledge and hunger for research regarding the subject of impairment and vocation as a pastor. With one exception, I wrote all my final academic papers, including my doctorate, on this subject. At the advice of my PhD supervisor, my doctorate focused on the subject of inclusion. It is hardly surprising that I sense an inner obligation to commit myself, also in future, both in general terms and specifically for an inclusive Church and for the better participation of impaired people in pastoral and ecclesiastical-social activities.

Dr. Oliver Merz, theologian from Thun, Switzerland



Foto: CBM / Hayduk



In pastoral activities, there should be a better participation of women and men with disabilities.



Foto: CBM/Hayduk

In conclusion

10.1

As Christians, we are aware of the brokenness of all our actions. “The richness in relations of human life therefore always remains jeopardised due to injuries and severances. Hence a realistic commitment to inclusion does not reckon with a fully inclusive society but knows that inclusion will always remain fragmented.”⁴⁸

We thus understand efforts towards inclusion not as the law but as the gospel. On a closer look, in our opinion, it can be seen that the human right to inclusion is deeply anchored in the Christian understanding of God and humankind, in the witness of Christ and in the appearance of the Church. Both an inclusive world and an inclusive Church would be rich in blessings for us all.

We also believe that, wherever Christians are wholeheartedly committed to inclusion, the Gospel will start to radiate more brightly.

Our commitment should therefore arise from the attitude of mind: “It is important to award men and women more rights, but that is not enough. Inclusion does not take effect unless it becomes alive in supportive and empowering relationships. It needs others who warmly welcome and accompany men and women into new spaces and times.”⁴⁹

Since: to belong, you need to be missed!

⁴⁸ See Ulf Liedke: *Anerkannte Vielfalt*, 2013, 20.

⁴⁹ See Gerhard Wegner: *Inklusion braucht tragende Beziehungen – Kirchen als Inklusionsagenten in der Gesellschaft*, in: Pithan, Annabelle [et al.] (Hrsg.) „... dass alle eins seien“: im Spannungsfeld von Exklusion und Inklusion, 2013, 41.

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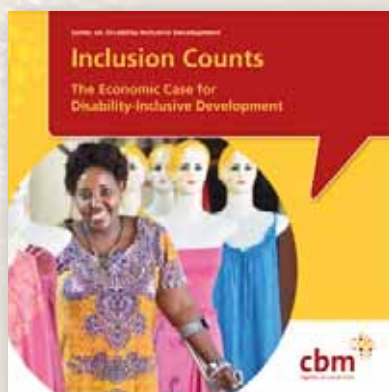
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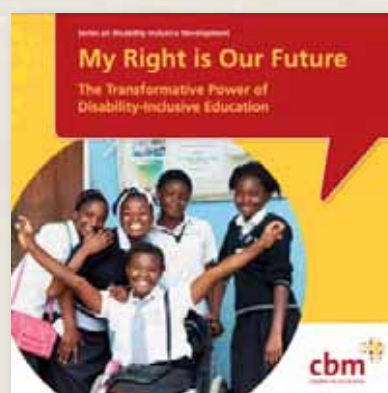
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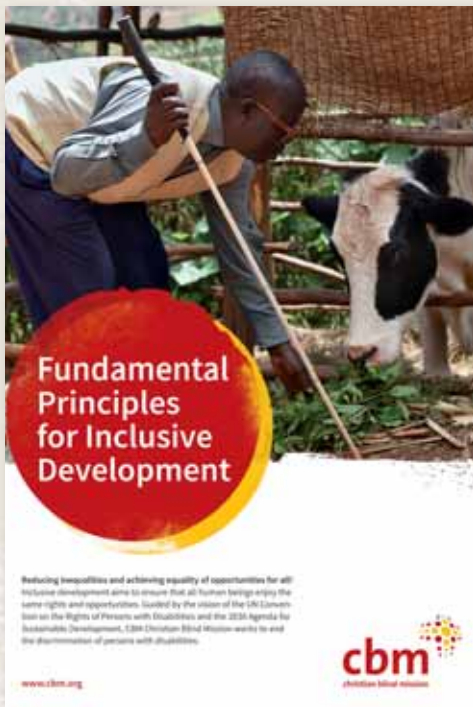


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↑ Yader Ramón Vallecillo, 26, has cerebral palsy. He studies system engineering at a private university in Nicaragua.



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CBM Christian Blind Mission is an international Christian development organisation committed to improving the lives of persons with disabilities in the poorest countries of the world. CBM currently supports 460 projects in 48 countries.



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