

Disability and Poverty Among Persons with Disabilities: The Role of the Church

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ABSTRACT

People with disabilities (PWDs) are usually left out of mainstream education and socio-economic activities. These include those with sensory, physical, and cognitive disabilities. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and Kenya's Persons with Disabilities Act (2004) address issues affecting PWDs to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, promote respect for their dignity as well as facilitate the full participation in all sectors of society. Despite these efforts, PWDs continue to be marked by experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and inequality. Religion and Theological interpretations of disability have significantly shaped how society relates to PWDs, reinforcing marginalization and exclusion in the social, economic, political, educational, and religious life of the society. This presentation is derived from a study on promoting awareness and participation of PWDs in education and other community-based programs in Siaya County. This action research study investigated the relationship between poverty and disability from the perspective of PWDs. Data was collected using focus group discussions and interviews. The main finding was that PWDs are living in poverty, which they attribute to being disabled. The Church, perceived to have a role to play in community welfare, did not seem to have a structured way of identifying or providing for PWDs who are incidentally members of their churches. In matters of education, it was found that there are many children with disabilities out of school that members of the clergy were aware of but seemed to have no way of engaging stakeholders to support them. Misinterpretation of religious teachings seemed to have a bearing on how PWDs were perceived. It is recommended that the Church should take an active role in identifying and engaging relevant stakeholders in providing services, including education, for PWDs.

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1. Introduction

The Christian community has a history of shrinking attitudes toward people with disabilities (PWDs). Some denominations consider it to be a result of sin, while others take it as a biological issue and has nothing to do with sin. Rather, Christianity is

diverse; hence, it has diverse views on disability. This study focuses on the relationship between poverty and disability and the role of the Church, hence curbing the marginalization of PWDSs. The study is not only intended to provide a general snapshot of the status of disability in the Christian community but also to be used to identify specific areas in which clergy and churches can improve and champion the recognition of PWDSs.

1.1. Background of the Study

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), there are 650 million (11%) PWDSs worldwide. The Kenya Demographic Health Survey (KDHS) estimates that about 10% of the country's population has a Disability. With a population estimated at 49 million, a 2019 economic survey they were noted that approximately 4.9 million persons in Kenya have a disability. This group of people would be the most uneducated and unemployed and have the most transport, housing, and family problems. From a Christian perspective, they are the most unreached people in the world. Unfortunately, due to inaccessible buildings, negative attitudes, ignorance, and some incorrect teaching, PWDSs are not generally included in the life of the Church. For instance, how many PWDSs have you seen in Church? PWDSs need God just as much as anyone else. Therefore, the Church needs to actively reach out to and be inclusive of PWDSs by being accessible in attitude, buildings, and correct Biblical teaching.

The rights of PWDSs are well protected in existing international, regional, and national human rights instruments. They include the formulation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and Kenya's Persons with Disabilities Act (2004). The purposes of the Convention and the Act are to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. They are further meant to facilitate the full participation of PWDSs in all sectors of society.

Despite these efforts, the rights of PWDS in Kenya are not always upheld. The lives of PWDS continue to be marked by experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and inequality. For instance, employment practices tend to favor people without disabilities. This inhibits the ability of PWDS to become productive members of society (Centre for Disability Rights, 2007).

One of the major root causes for the discriminatory acts against PWDS in Kenya is religion-related. Theological interpretations of disability have significantly shaped how society relates to PWDSs. The Bible is intermingled with texts that have been interpreted in oppressive ways, and together, these continue to reinforce the marginalization and exclusion of PWDSs in the social, economic, political, and religious life of the society.

1.2. Traditional Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Disability

Eiesland (1994:73-74) identifies three theological themes that have created obstacles for PWDSs. The first is conflating disability with sin. The belief that disability indicates punishment for wrongdoing and mars the divine image in humans has often barred those with disabilities from positions of leadership or stigmatized them for their presumed lack of faith. The second theme views disability as virtuous suffering. Disability has been identified as suffering that must be endured in order to purify the

righteous, a teaching that encourages passive acceptance of social barriers for the sake of obedience to God. The third theme perceives PWDs as cases of charity. Although charitable activity for PWDs is, at times, a means of creating justice, it subverts justice when it segregates PWDs from society and keeps PWDs out of the public eye rather than empowering them for full social, economic, and political participation. Eiesland (1994) has referred to the outcome of all these themes as a “disabling theology.”

1.3. Biblical Perspectives on Disability and Emerging Theological Themes

In the Bible, disability is viewed as a disease (The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible: 1962; Encyclopedia Judaica: 1972). The most common diseases mentioned in the Bible are blindness, deafness, dumbness, leprosy, and paralysis. Visual impairment is the most common form of physical disability in antiquity. Aside from people like Isaac (Gen. 27:1), Jacob (Gen. 48:10), Eli (1 Sam 3:2 and 4:15), and Ahijah the Shilomite (1 Kings 14:4), whose eyesight failed in old age, natural causes of disability are not mentioned in the Bible. The general view of the Old Testament writers is that God brings disability as punishment for transgressions for sin or as an expression of God’s wrath for people’s disobedience. It is seen as a curse resulting from unbelief and ignorance (Jewish Encyclopedia, 1920; The Talmud of Jerusalem, 1956; and Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972).

The Bible portrays disability as a curse and as a result of disobedience, unbelief, and ignorance. In Leviticus 26:14-16, one of the punishments for Israel’s disobedience is expressed in the following way: “I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life.” Samson also sinned against the Lord through his eyes, as it is written: “I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife” (Judges 14:2). He was therefore punished through his eyes: “Then the Philistines seized him, gorged out his eyes” (Judges 16:21). Prov. 30:17 warns that the eyes, which are disrespectful to parents, will be plucked out by birds of prey.

The blindness of Elymas, the magician who obstructed the work of Paul in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12), is specifically attributed to divine punishment. The ancient nations regarded visual impairment as the lowest degradation that could be inflicted upon humans and, by extension, on a nation. The Deuteronomist suggests that visual impairment is a curse for disobeying the commandments of God. Israel was threatened for breaking the covenant.

The Lord will inflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of the mind. At midday, you will grope about like a blind man in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything that you do, day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you (Deut. 28:28-29).

Similarly, in 2 Chron. 26:16-23 we read the story of King Uzziah, who was struck by leprosy “because of his unfaithfulness to God, “because the Lord had afflicted him” (Vs. 20). Uzziah lived in a separate house and was excluded from the temple of the Lord because PWDs were not allowed into the temple. They were considered unclean. Further examples that portray disability as a curse can be found in Zephaniah 1:17 and Zechariah 11:17. In Zephaniah, God promises to bring distress on the people because they have sinned against Him: “They will walk like blind men.” God strikes his

servant's assailants with blinding flashes (Gen. 19:11; 2 Kings 6:18-20 Acts 13:10-12) or with permanent blindness (Zech. 12:4; Ps 69:23) in order to protect his servants (see also Psalms 6:7 and 69:3).

The New Testament also supports the link between sin and disability. This link is well illustrated in John 9:1-3. The disciples anticipated a connection between disability and sin with the question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This question implies that disability was the punishment meant for some unspecified sin. When Jesus healed the physically impaired man who lay by the pool of Bethesda, He said to him: "See, you are well again. Stop sinning, or something worse will happen to you" (Jn. 5:14). This clearly indicates that Jesus thought there was a connection between the man's disability and some sin. In the portico lay a multitude of PWDS, and this comment also applied to them (Jn. 5:3).

Similarly, when Jesus healed the paralytic man lowered through the roof (Mk. 2:1-12), Jesus said to him: "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Vs. 5), and then continued with the physical healing of the man. This comment implies that getting the sin out of the way was necessary before the disability could be healed. According to Grant (1997:77), the healing stories of Jesus "have also served as proof of the moral imperfection of PWDSs.

The conflation between sin and disability confirms the religious model of disability, which views disability as a punishment inflicted upon an individual or family by God as a result of sin. Consequently, disability stigmatizes not only the individual but the whole family. The implication is the exclusion of PWDS from the social, economic, political, and spiritual spheres of society.

The metaphoric use of disability in the Bible further reinforces the view linking disability with disobedience to God. Israel's disobedience is compared with disability. In Isaiah 43:8 the children of Israel are asked to lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. In Isaiah 42:18-20, Israel is compared to the blind and the deaf:

Hear, you deaf; look you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but have paid no attention: your ears are open, but you hear nothing.

The legacy of blindness as a punishment from God or a metaphor for sin and disbelief continues in the New Testament. In general, the gospels show Jesus as sensitive and caring to PWDS. They are the main focus of the healing ministry of Jesus (Mk 8:22-26; 10:46-52). At the same time, however, the negative images of disability in the Gospels are also significant. In the Gospel of John, sight and light are the symbols of truth while darkness and blindness are symbols of sin and unbelief. In John 9:41, Jesus responds to the continued questioning of the Pharisees with regard to the healing of a visually impaired person as follows: "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin."

Physical disability and the perfection of the body is other themes found in the Bible. In the very centre of this theology is the teaching found in the book of Leviticus, which sets forth the requirements for ministry. Physical imperfection is seen as an impediment to the priestly office exercise for Aaron's descendants. In addition, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to Aaron, saying, none of your offspring throughout their generation who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight, or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. (Leviticus 21:16-23).

The word “blemish” originally meant a “black spot.” It later came to denote anything abnormal or deviating from a given standard, whether physical, moral, or ritualistic. The word “blemish” came to be used to describe the various abnormalities that disqualify one from priesthood (The Jewish Encyclopaedia, 1920). PWDSs are also viewed as unworthy in society. In 2 Sam 19:24-28, King David’s servant, Ziba, bars Mephibosheth, who was physically impaired, from accompanying David on a trip. He was not worthy to be with the King because of his disability. Mephibosheth himself feels unworthy. In vs. 26, Mephibosheth says: “My Lord the King, since I your servant am lame.”

1.4. Emancipatory Biblical and Theological Views on Disability

The inclusivity of PWDSs is seen in God’s plan for the restoration of the Israelites. The theme of the restoration of PWDS is also seen in the story of Mephibosheth (2 Sam.9). Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, King David’s great friend. He had become lame on both feet as a result of being dropped by a fleeing nursemaid when he was young. The world looked at Mephibosheth as a useless, good-for-nothing man; being lame, he could not go out and be a warrior. Neither could he go back to the fields to till for his own household. His servant Ziba, who was reluctant to present him to David when he wanted to show his friend’s son kindness, displays this attitude.

To King David, all the disadvantages of being lame appeared insignificant. When he is summoned to the King, even Mephibosheth wonders why the king should want to see “a lame dog like me.” When he finally reached the King’s palace, David said to him: “For I will surely show you kindness for the sake of Jonathan, your father. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to Saul, your grandfather, and you will always eat at my table” (Vs 7). The Bible records: “And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the King’s table, and he was crippled on both feet” (2 Sam 9:13). King David’s act is seen as a reflection of Jesus Christ’s compassion and serves as an example of complete restoration of a person with a disability to normal life.

According to Rayan (1991:28) David did three things to restore Mephibosheth and show the world his rightful place:

1. The restoration of self-esteem — all the time Mephibosheth had experienced an attitude of rejection, but now David shows him kindness.
2. The restoration of his identity — after having lived at the mercy of a generous man, Machir, Mephibosheth now has been restored to his rightful inheritance. Not only were his material possessions restored to him, but also his title. He was restored to the status of a prince.
3. The restoration to society — He, who was rejected by his own grandfather’s servant, has now the opportunity to be among the king’s family.

The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) further defines the place of PWDS in the life of the Kingdom of God. A householder prepared a huge banquet to which he invited his special friends, who were affluent and well-to-do. They gave all kinds of excuses why they could not come. The householder, angered, asks his servants to go out into the highways and byways to bring in the poor and the maimed. In vs. 21 he says: "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." Earlier, Jesus had said this to the Pharisees, who had invited him to celebrate Sabbath in his house:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives, or rich neighbors, if you do they also invite you back, and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed (Vs. 12-14).

According to Rayan (1991:29), the parable of the Great Banquet shows that Jesus Christ, in word and action, sets PWDS within the circle of unity of the Christian Church. The kingdom of God is not complete without them. This is portrayed in Matt. 21:12-14. After the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem: "The blind and the lame came to Him at the temple, and he healed them" (Matt. 21:14). In Mark 16:15 we read: "Go you into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." This includes handicapped persons. This implies the restoration of PWDS of their rightful inheritance in Jesus Christ and their rightful place in the Church as part of the "Body of Christ."

1.5. Biblical and Theological Interpretation of Disability and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Kenya

The foregoing traditional and contemporary Biblical and theological views on disability have a bearing on how society responds to the presence of PWDS in Kenya, and in particular, how they impinge on their rights. Society continues to use antiquated religious beliefs to explain the presence of PWDS in Kenya. The consequences of the interpretation of disability to denote sin, disobedience, ignorance, and unbelief have contributed to some Christians adopting a discriminatory attitude toward PWDS.

In self-appraisal, the World Council of Churches (WCC, 1982), the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC, 1991), and the NCCK (1993) contend that most of their member churches have yet to fully integrate PWDSs into their Church and community life. Many churches have socio-economic development programs, such as schools and medical facilities, though very few churches have specific programs for PWDSs. AACC (1991) observes that most African churches have only nascent development projects for PWDSs while others do not. This peripheralization by churches of PWDSs has been noted by scholars (Bartley, 1977; Wilkes, 1980; Bach, 1991; Muller-Fahrenheit, 1991 and Kabue, 1993), who have suggested that churches have participated in discriminating against PWDSs and have not fully integrated them into the mainstream of the Church and society at large. Njoroge (2001:7) does not see PWDS as a problem; rather, it is the attitude of the Church that is the issue. She argues:

The problem is not that we have people who are deaf, mute and blind (and with other disabilities) among us, rather the churches and church related institutions are usually deaf, mute and blind towards our concerns and needs.

Masakhwe (1999, p.7) makes a scathing attack on the Church in Kenya. He acknowledges that the Church has been a key model in supporting PWDSs but also notes that the Church has also glossed over serious issues that affect PWDSs, and hence becomes part of the very problem afflicting PWDS. The Church has been very vocal on issues of human rights, but it has not embraced disability and the concerns of PWDSs in its human rights crusade and agenda with the same vigour, even if disability issues are human rights issues as well.

Although it has been suggested that churches discriminate against PWDS, it is also important to recognize that the Church was the first institution, both globally and in Kenya to start providing welfare services to PWDS. Churches pioneered special schools for children with disabilities. For instance, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) began the Kambui School for the Deaf in 1963. The first school for the visually impaired was established in 1946 by the Salvation Army, while the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) began St. Luke's School for the Deaf in Embu. The Catholic Church has also started a number of special schools in the country, such as St. Lucy's School for the Blind at Egoji. The Methodist Church has a school for the deaf in Meru. In addition, the Catholic Church in Kenya has addressed the issue of the rights of PWDS. They have called on Christians to re-examine their attitude towards PWDS and promote their well-being. The Church has taken it upon itself to work with the Mentally Handicapped Association of Kenya to address the violation of the rights of people with mental disabilities in Kenya.

One of the missions of the Church is to facilitate the integration of disability issues into the whole spectrum of the life of the Church and society while at the same time giving adequate attention to those special and unique areas necessary to the equalization of opportunities. One of these areas includes advocacy for human rights concerns regarding disability. This means working with the churches towards participation and inclusiveness of PWDs in the spiritual, social, and development life in Church and society and advocating for the general improvement of services for PWDs. The Church must become an advocate for and with them.

Unfortunately, discriminatory practices against PWDS in the Church and society contradict these teachings. Churches are generally expected to advocate for the human rights of society's marginalized and oppressed members. By their very nature, churches are expected to work towards the attainment of equal opportunities for all people in the pursuit of creating an equitable and participatory community.

Churches need to identify with the problems faced by PWDS and endeavor to create enabling environments in which PWDS can participate equally with persons without disabilities in the social, economic, cultural, religious, and political life of society. Swain and Cameron (2003) observe that PWDS want the same chances and opportunities in life as people without disability. They want to gain an education and employment, live in affordable, accessible housing, have relationships, and be able to make their own decisions about the issues that affect their lives.

We find additional confirmation in other Scriptures. The Israelites were admonished to show kindness to those who were deaf and blind (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18). Those who minister to the weak and helpless are blessed (Psalm 41:1). Jesus welcomed people with all manner of disabilities into the kingdom of God, even though they would have been excluded from service under the Old Testament.

Matthew 4:23; 15:30 instructed how to treat PWDSs: Then Jesus said to his host, when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back, and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14). Countless healings in the Old and New Testaments prove God's compassionate nature even though not all illnesses, diseases, or disabilities were removed. In Luke 19:1 we have another example of how the Bible accommodates PWDSs. In this chapter, Jesus is said to have dinner with Zacchaeus, who has a height impairment. In addition to this, 1 Corinthians 12 advocates for an inclusive ecclesiology in which the Church and its programmes should consider PWDSs. Paul, in the New Testament, sets forth a theology of disability by noting that the weaker members of the body of Christ are vital to the functioning of the whole (Brookes, 2003:15). Paul, well acquainted with fragility, not only heeds Jesus' words that —power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9) but also challenges Corinthians' arrogance by placing the foolishness of God against their human wisdom and the weakness of God to shame their human strength (1 Cor 1:20-2:4). For Paul, the weakest members have a variety of gifts to share and God has chosen foolish things of the world to shame the wise (Kunz, 2011: 22). Christ provided an example of servanthood that took ministry beyond miracles. PWDSs are painfully aware that their condition and circumstances are often distasteful to others and that their lifestyle and behaviour are sometimes interpreted as being weird, abnormal, or bizarre (Reiders, 2008:5). They are also painfully aware that, as a result, people around them are often uncomfortable. Christ's example of humility, empathy, and servanthood teaches us that the compassion of the Body must be greater than its need for comfort. Jesus took the dirt-encrusted feet of His disciples in His holy hands and washed them (Collins and Ault, 2010, p. 30). The best analogy in the Bible for reaching out and touching the lives of PWDSs is washing feet. —You call me Teacher 'and Lord, 'and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set an example that you should do as I did for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:13-17). So, the Bible clearly shows that Jesus walked alongside all types of people during his ministry on earth, showing no partiality. He saw and regarded all people as bearers of the image of God and desired to share His Kingdom with everyone, especially those whom society deemed unworthy. Jesus reads from Isaiah and declares his own ministry to the poor, the weak, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). The cumulative effect of these biblical texts points to the participation of the marginalized in the kingdom of God. This implies that from the biblical perspective, people from all backgrounds and all walks of life should be invited and included in the essential functions of the church community.

The Christian community has a long history of negative attitudes toward PWDSs. Eiesland (2009:240) reiterated that the Church has too long provided ideological funding and charitable practices to PWDSs, which result in marginalization. Eiesland (2009:243) further asserted that —Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us. Healing has been the

churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine, in which the goal was the normalization of the bodies of PWDSs.

This implies that the Christian community has a flawed focus on healing PWDSs instead of accepting their condition. The Church has to understand that PWDSs are another brand of the image of God and have to be recognized in their own condition. Wolfensberger (1998:15-16) stated that PWDSs are marginalized when society views them as an object of charity or as someone who is sick and need to be healed. He further pointed out that the Christian community devalues people with disability by viewing them as the —other|| or —alien. This implies that the Christian community sees disability as a temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly rewards. The Christian community has encouraged PWDSs to acquiesce to social barriers as a sign of obedience to God and to internalize second-class status inside and outside the Church. Another surprisingly common, marginalizing thought the Christian community has with regard to PWDSs is its supposed connection with sin. Satterlee (2010:34) stated that throughout its history, the Christian community has interpreted scriptural passages, images, and stories that include PWDSs in ways that subtly or explicitly reinforce the assertion that physical and developmental disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin. Maybe God’s punishment has visited upon the sinner. This hermeneutical approach assumes that getting rid of their disabilities is the chief concern of PWDSs and the ideal for all people. As noted above, historically, many churches believed that disabilities were caused by sin in an individual’s own life or their parent’s lives. Today, many authors will strongly argue against that theory. It is interesting to note, however, that these same authors who strongly believe disabilities are not caused by sin will argue that disabilities were in fact, caused by the fall of man. For instance, Satterlee (2010:36), who previously argued against the notion that disability is caused by sin, says, —I hold that disabilities are a consequence of the fallen state of creation. Hull (2003, p. 11) also comments that although PWDSs may not have necessarily sinned or brought their condition upon themselves,—their existence is a continual reminder of the imperfect human condition into which humanity has fallen and from which we hope to be redeemed. Kabue (2006:115) provides us with a grim outlook on what the mindset of connecting disability with sin can do to the Church and PWDSs. He posited that the continued interpretation and belief among some churches that there is a relationship between disability or sickness and sin has led to the development of an attitude of pity and sympathy toward those who are disabled or sick. To those who hold this view, the presence of PWDSs in the Church is a sign that the Church is unable to combat the devil, which is the source of those infirmities. The response to this is endless prayers for those who are disabled or sick, and when these prayers do not yield the expected result, the victim is blamed for having no faith. The consequence is that, more often than not, PWDSs feel alienated, marginalized, embarrassed, and in some cases, offended by the treatment meted out to them by the Christian community. Satterlee (2010:37) stated that —rather than turning to a handy list of do’s and don’ts, congregations must dare to engage PWDSs. Pierson (2010:182) supports Satterlee as he writes, —Over the years of urging churches to include PWDSs. I have come to believe that it is not the mechanics or the process that makes it happen. It is the attitude of the people that makes it happen. Webb-Mitchell (2010:257) pointed out that members of the Christian community need to be educated

to understand the God-given gifts of PWDSs, and the necessity of adapting to the presence of PWDSs.

Similarly, Meininger (2008) argued that we must be able to abandon our traditions and rituals for the sake of inclusion. We must liberate ourselves from our domestication and accommodate PWDSs in our churches. Yong (2010:89) shares three principles of an inclusive congregation: (1) the Church consists of the weak, not the strong which puts PWDSs at the center instead of the margins of what it means to be the people of God; (2) each PWDS, no matter how severe, contributes something essential to and for the body of Christ; (3) PWDSs become the paradigm for what it means to live in the power of God and to manifest the divine glory.

2. Method

This was action research using a qualitative approach. The study investigated the relationship between poverty and disability from the perspective of PWDSs. Data was collected using focus group discussions and interview schedules. The target population consisted of clergies, local administrators, and clergy members. Data was presented using a narrative approach, and analysis was done thematically according to the study's objective.

3. Results and Discussions

It was noted that the clergy interact with PWDSs in two areas: in Church during services and during awareness in meetings. It was noted that the clergy are aware of the rights of PWDSs. It was also noted that PWDSs encounter numerous challenges, denying them opportunities to enjoy their rights. PWDSs are not involved in anything by their families and the communities. They indicated that PWDSs are a result of bad doing by the community. They face mocking by community members, Neglect and discrimination, Isolation of PWDSs, they lack skills education, they lack information.

During the interview, it became clear that the clergies do not have a comprehensive understanding of the nature, causes and categories of disability. One the clergy asserted:

In my Church we have We have eye, Mental disabilities, another disability of the leg, and other one of the hands, another one, I don't whether to say ii is a disability. You find somebody with six fingers, He has a finger that is as big as the others. It is a small one. (Clergy 1)

The word Disability, means you are lacking something, then it's not inability, it's very confusing. One thing that I know you can be disabled in one thing while you are so much great in another. (Clergy 2)

On the aspect of disability being a curse, one of the clergies noted,

Yes, as a priest you may find somebody not thinking properly, you bind the demons they leave this person becomes ok. You may find was just ok. Then behavior changes you don't know what is happening. I have met with people who have been said it is like witchcraft. I remember, there is a year here, somebody was eating grass and they said that he was among the group that stole cows, all the other died

and he remained. We took him, prayed for him and he's ok up to day he is a boda boda here in town (Clergy 3)

This assertion confirms the biblical quotations where disability is depicted as a curse.

Another Clergy noted,

you can find someone does not walk. It like witchcraft. I say its spiritual because a curse can also cause disability, problem with the family. They are born and when it reaches a certain time--- we have seen it in the media, you find a family of 8 people have a disability, we take it to be a curse. In a family is infected with jiggers, in a home, all of them. Neighbors don't have, but that family is infested with jiggers. We see it as spiritual also. Just beyond the normal (Clergy 2)

The clergy also were found to have little or no interaction with PWDSs. When asked to describe their interaction and experiences with PWDSs, one of the clergy noted,

My personal experience with PWDSS is one, they are people who don't want much assistance, that is one. Number two in other words they are people who don't want to be sympathized with. Before I used to work with Christian children fund before I joined the ministry and we had a programme with PWDSs, before the act was put in place, so we were giving them some economic empowerment, loaning activities and all. So one time it was late and there was a woman who was a cripple, so I thought I would give her a lift, as an accountant after giving her money, I thought it would be safe for her, so I wanted to give her a lift. I stopped my vehicle, I wanted to assist her. She refused. She quarreled me. Before I could not understand, But I learn that they don't want to be sympathized with. That my line of duty. You don't sympathize with them. In fact, if you sympathize with them, they feel shy, less than human being. (Clergy 3)

One time as a priest I was in Kilifi and a disabled man said that he hates pastors like us who tell them come and be healed, throw away the stick and now he is going to be healed that is an abuse of the highest order. He knows that he is disabled he is not having a leg or --- but his life will continue He is against pastors like us how who preach to them that come and be healed. So they are very cruel, they are defending their existence. (Clergy 4)

The study also established that the clergies are aware that the Disability Act demands that they put in place all measures to care for the PWDSs.

After the act in 2000 after Kibaki got an accident and there was an act on disability, we were told and compelled by the act to care for these PWDSS in terms of public situations Like in public situations, public toilets, the entrances which are accessible. So as leaders, we are to accommodate their situations, but disability is not inability. (Clergy 2).

The PWDSs were also reported to be devoted to GOD. One of the Clergies reported:

In the Church I would say that they love God, they know that they need support, they need help and that help comes from God. So they are pious, they have

hope in God. Because this is the only way out. In fact, one time we distributed them with wheel chairs, bikes and other things to enable them. Those who are not able to hear, we have given them hearing aids. So our is to make them feel not isolated. Again people with disabilities are gifted, they have brains. So they can make things of substance. (Clergy 6)

This indicated that some clergies actually do take care of the PWDSs. Another clergy noted:

We give them hope, we visit them. Some people are not even aware, they hide them in the rooms. But we educate them and encourage them that they can be taken to schools, so we even mobilize them. And lobby for money so that we can take them to school Some we take to Nyangoma and other schools. (Clergy 6)

It was clearly reported and observed that PWDSs have serious service access challenges. These included the accessibility to church buildings and other structures in the Church. They have challenges while traveling. One of the clergies asserted:

Some people with disabilities, when they come to the office, they are being carried on bicycles and when they reach, at the time of climbing down, it is a lot of problem and if you go to assist, they don't want it and that is why I request that if possible, these people should be assisted with wheel chairs. (Clergy 4)

It was also noted that the PWDSs do not enjoy their rights. Although the clergies are familiar with the rights of PWDSs, they did nothing or little to promote their rights. One of the clergies stated

PWDSs are not involved by their families and the communities in anything. PWDSs are a result of bad doing by community. It is a curse. They face mocking by community members. They are neglected and discriminated. There is also the Isolation of PWDSs. They lack skills and education. They lack information. They lack trained teachers to handle PWDs in schools, e.g Uranya d Karemo division. (Clergy 6)

It was found that the clergy are aware of the rights of PWDSs, one of them noted:

Right to life, Right to buildings. it is considered but this should be improved while building, playing grounds should also be considered to be PWDSs friendly, most offices do not have rumps, but they should be made available in most buildings. (Clergy 7)

However, the Clergies did not understand their roles in particular. One of them noted;

"May be to link them with organizations of funds who are, the role that we have is just sensitizing the community and care takers, because we have a school of autism. it is very difficult for these people to take these children to school There should have facility where this people can stay, it is upon this parent to take this child to school and bring him back and has other children to take care of. So it's very difficult and this distance also, that is a big challenge that we are having with these people. Most of these children are just at home, they cannot be taken to taken to school." (Clergy 5)

I can say our role is very vital there. Some people with disabilities, when they come to the Church, they are being carried on bicycles and when they reach, at the time of climbing down, it is a lot of problem and if you go to assist, they don't want it and that is why I request that if possible, these people should be assisted with wheel chairs. (Clergy 5)

There was again a mother... Let me tell you the parents are stigmatized. I don't know whether they don't want people to know that they have children with disabilities. One is not talking up to today. I told her lets go, she told me I am thinking. Even the father told me I am thinking. I went again, I am thinking. I went again I got now the lady (disabled) is pregnant. In the long run, she got married and got married, but came back. She is now at home even up to now. But the child is in class five I think. The mother did not even bother. So if the stigma can get out of the parents and caregivers, I think it will give us easy time. (Clergy 8)

These assertions indicate that the clergies are not so sure of what they are supposed in most of the times and cases they are confronted with the PWDSs.

Now let's say that it about this one am talking about, if you take her to Nyangoma, that is a boarding school. Who will pay. I cannot part with my money to pay. They will be going for visiting eh to the school. After doing all this sensitization and they have totally refused eh. You know it is demoralizing when you fight for someone then later on you find they are not interested. It is like a bother to them. (Clergy 8)

From the discussions, it was noted that the clergies are aware, to some extent, of the rights of PWDSs. However, they are unsure of what actions they need to take to actualize these rights. Some of them reported:

The right to education The disabled children many people don't like taking them to school so it is their right to go to school That is what I mean. Ahh mmm, majority don't go to school and the parents cannot afford for their education. E.g. these people need special school, special school is a boarding school, right and they need special needs, so we realize that the local people with very little income cannot afford to pay for the students' needs. (Clergy 6)

Another one reported,

These people have a right to life, you find these people are just locked in. You are locked in the house you are left to die. So we have to sensitize these people to expose these children so that they can expose them. The live descent lives like other persons. (Clergy 9)

However, it was noted that the clergy do not understand the provisions in the constitution of Kenya and the disability act that the PWDSs are entitled to in terms of employment. For instance, they did not know the percentage of employment opportunities that should be reserved for PWDSs. Also, they were not aware of the procurement opportunities. The

It was also reported that the clergy depend on other organizations to assist the PWDSs. They do not have a sole responsibility for what they are supposed to do. One of the clergy stated:

As you have just said, right to shelter, right to education right to health care, they are all supposed to enjoy. Like in my Church there is an NGO who we talked with, because some cannot move, so they just find themselves in the homestead. So we are looking for some help if they can get the wheel chair, but through the American Embassy they will do that through the health ministry so we are waiting. With shelter, the first lady has built houses for some of them and this was my own initiative. With clothing I talk to my girls to bring clothes they don't wear and every year they bring the clothes and then we distribute to them. (Clergy 3)

During the group discussions, it was also noted that the clergies are aware of the sufferings that the PWDSs go through. However, they are not vocal to take up measures to assist them.

Most of the parents lock these children, they need special treatment like Special clothes special foods, so most parents cannot afford to do that. (Clergy 7)

About the awareness of community-based programs for PWDSs and how they are assisted to participate in them, the clergies responded;

They should be allowed to register with NCPWDSs, Meeting in groups once a month to talk to them, they should know the benefits of being in registered group- this is where they can get help from different organizations, e.g in north alego there is group called nyithi Kiye, PWDSs are involved on jua kali sector, Polytechnics assist them to get skills, Creation of awareness sourcing funds to PWDSs in case of need. (Clergy 4)

It was also realized that the Church, on some occasions, becomes opportunistic such that they may use any case of disability for their benefit. One of the clergies said:

I want to say something, the issue of PWDSs has not been given enough emphasis in this country because like in churches we have them. It depends on the financial capability off a church. Eng. we have this blind lady, she wanted to make a house and could not. The Church helped her. But the complaint that people take advantage of them, the take them photos they go and benefit themselves. I think this country needs some policies will really emphasize and will really help this people. Like our Church with no financial capability, pastors will become like their voice to show them love and we teach the Church to love them. God has brought them for a reason. And with us they are looking upon us. That is our limitation. But beyond that we don't know how things are may be there should a policy every blind person to be trained on how to use the stick ... (Clergy 2)

When asked about the reaction of people without disability towards them, one PWDS narrated his experience:

“As a wheel chair user due to polio, I have encountered an attitude of outright rejection whereby I am normally the object of pained and evasive glances. I have also experienced sanctimonious and pious tirades as well as judgmental attitudes on the issue of impurity by being asked to repent from some sin”

It was also noted that there is a high level of poverty among PWDSs. One of the Clergy quoted,

What I can say is that what we are talking about is the poverty level in these areas where these people are staying. We have very high poverty levels in these areas. Because there are certain things even those who are not vulnerable cannot afford. Because the way we are seeing, they have a right to education, the way this distance is, taking this child to school is somehow a problem, the poverty level is affecting all these and is a big challenge (Clergy 4)

Another noted the challenge of communication,

Me I will say communication; communication barrier may be. You can find that we are taking information to the ground, through may be the village elder, but here is a person who is deaf, who cannot hear what you are saying. The person who has heard will not also communicate that this is what has brought so and so here, so you will be left there. (Clergy 4)

Another noted:

The community has ill motives. Like the lady madam was showing you the picture, she is not married, she is still staying in their own home, But the family does not want her to acquire land because she is supposed to be married somewhere else, because they want to grab this land. Recently I was with the family telling them this lady has a right to own land. So we have to sensitize the community, because they are discriminating. (Clergy 5)

4. Conclusion and recommendations

4.1 Conclusion of the findings

PWDSs are essential to the wholeness of the Christian community. In a culture that worships physical perfection, devalues human life, and takes pride in disposability, the Church must protect the helpless, vulnerable, and disenfranchised, including people with disabilities. They are people created in God’s image, possessing dignity, value, and purpose.

The study concludes as follows: Firstly, there is no coordinated Christian policy on disability concerns in the Church. Secondly, few churches and their general premises are constructed in a friendly manner. Thirdly, many churches do not integrate with their ordinary congregations, for example, in providing sign language interpreters for the deaf, provision of liturgical books such as prayer books and hymn books in Braille for the blind, plus the general sensitization of their congregations for such integration. Fourthly, the parents of the disabled children feel that they are not

cared for, especially from the Church's pastoral care perspective. Fifthly, the PWDSs themselves feel left out, rejected and uncared for by the Christian community,

The study revealed the challenges that are connected with caring for PWDSs and that they are not completely neglected. However, there is still much to be done, especially if the Church has to follow the example of Jesus Christ (the Founder of the Church), who set the best example in his caring for them and his teachings, which were unique and extraordinary, especially his emphasis on disability vis-à-vis eschatology (Luke 14:12-24). The emphasis stressed in this study concerns the integration of PWDSs in Church and neighborhood activities.

Second, it was borne out that most of the church leaders and Christians in general have the attitude and belief that people become disabled because of God's punishment, curse, misfortune, and not being loved by God. Most pastors and Christians indicated that they disagreed with the statement.

The objective(s) was to prove that PWDSs develop beliefs and attitudes that the Church does not care or welcome them to be part of God's family (the Christian community), even those who could be integrated. For example, that is why the deaf churches started; the deaf people felt that the ordinary congregations did not understand, love, or treat them with respect.

4.2 Recommendations

The responsibility of the Christian community at large as representatives of the kingdom of God is to include those with disabilities in church functions and worship. Other churches need to reserve easily accessible pews or aisle seats for people with disability, and this will give them liberty. It sends the message that the Church wants to worship with people with disability. Ushers trained to show kindness to worshipers with disabilities and their caregivers demonstrate the seriousness of the Church's concern. Disciplining and equipping people with disabilities to use their gifts to build up the body of Christ should also be a responsibility of the Church's commission.

Policy Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for churches to modify the architectural facilities of their churches and church buildings so that PWDSs, especially wheelchair users, may feel more comfortable.
- Churches should encourage the adoption of special facilities such as sign language Interpretation for the deaf and Braille materials such as prayer books and hymnbooks for the blind. Only 10% of the respondents pastors indicated they had these facilities in their churches.
- Qualified disabled people should be invited to facilitate spiritual and professional functions such as preaching, teaching, conducting disability awareness seminars, and others relevant to them.
- There should be disability awareness courses in theological colleges. The interviewed pastors can confirm this; only a few indicated that they had received some orientation training on ministering or caring for PWDSs.
- Agencies or organizations dealing with disabilities should facilitate disability awareness seminars for pastors, lay leaders, and Christians. Disabled people and their families to be sensitized to disability issues. It was noted that 76% of the pastors/church leaders who were interviewed indicated that they had never attended such seminars.

- Churches should sponsor pastors. Christians, disabled people, and their families attend various disability awareness seminars like those conducted by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK).
- PWDSs who qualify should be encouraged and sponsored to attend theological colleges. They should be accorded the highest academic or professional training up to master's and doctoral degrees. Discrimination or prejudice should be avoided when it comes to processing their recruitment. For example, from those who were interviewed, only 10% of the pastors indicated that they had recommended them to such institutions, while 10% of PWDSs indicated that they had applied (but some expressed their sentiments that they could not be accepted because of their respective disabilities),

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