



AFFIRMATIONS

**Moving beyond accommodation to affirmation & advocacy
with and for persons with disabilities**

Council for World Mission

The logo on the cover page depicts “Affirmation & Advocacy” in the shape of the letter “A”. The Chinese calligraphy 人 (pronounced as “ren”), meaning “human”, forms the roof of the logo. The whole shape when put together resembles the Chinese character for 众 (pronounced as “zhong”), meaning “multitudes”.

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Introduction

This document of “Affirmations” is the collaborative work of a small committee and participants of a conference on persons with disabilities sponsored by the Council for World Mission (CWM) in July 2014. The conference was held under the theme “Building an Inclusive Community: Moving beyond Accommodation to Affirmation and Advocacy with and for Persons with Disabilities.”

The “Affirmations” are intended to be a guide to the member churches of CWM undergirded by the value of mutual accountability. CWM seeks to encourage and challenge the protection of the value of each individual created by God and in so doing affirm the contribution and worth of each person in all that the church does.

The sad reality is that persons with disabilities remain in societies the silent and marginalized many. This injustice must end. For this to happen we must begin with reframing theological reflections, attitudes, values and norms regarding issues of accessibility and disabilities.

It is hopeful that this document will allow for new conversations enabling self-critique and scrutiny of all that the church is and does and in so doing reframing a space for all to have access and opportunity to be the best God intended.

Rev. Randolph Turner
Program Secretary
Justice and Witness, CWM

Disability in Society – an overview

Of the world’s population, some fifteen per cent are persons with disabilities of various kinds and varying degrees of severity. Across societies and cultures and histories, persons with disabilities have been marginalized and discriminated against, rejected and even abandoned. Life’s opportunities and benefits are secured for the fittest while most persons with disabilities worldwide struggle to live against pressures of emotional, physical and economic deprivation and perhaps more devastating, psychological and spiritual oppression. Yet many persons with disabilities and their families exercise courage and resilience and have positive, uplifting stories to share. Conditions vary but the complex issues raised by disability significantly affect the lived reality of more than one billion people today.

Theological Basis for Action

1. *Made in the image of God*

God has created every one of us good in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). To be a person is to have received a divine dignity. Each of us carries within us the image of God and, in community, share in that image. There is an innate value in being a person. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect.

2. *Sin*

A person’s condition of disability is not connected to the sin of that individual or of his/her parents. Jesus rejects the notion of any such connection in the face of any prevailing norms which suggested otherwise (John 9:3). It is rather the prejudice and victimization which often results in discrimination, rejection and abandonment of persons with disability that is sin. Everything that threatens or damages God’s creation is evil.

3. Salvation

For our salvation, God sent His Son Jesus Christ who, in his person and his deeds, has demonstrated God's love of all humanity and His creation, and has opened up the possibility of redemption and freedom of all. By means of the incarnation – that God became man – God becomes accessible to humanity and has initiated a union between himself and the entire people of God. Christ was sent into the world in order to seek out and save those who are lost. Salvation overcomes sin. Healing overcomes sin as it is the reconciling with community those who have been previously ostracized, (1 John 4:9 -11).

4. Strength is fulfilled in weakness and community

The Messiah is described by the prophet Isaiah as a man of suffering, familiar with pain. God shows His strength in what we consider weak and vulnerable, in the fact that Christ himself takes on situations that many people with disabilities can identify with. The risen ascended Christ is the wounded Lamb worthy to release the seals, (Revelation 5:12). The kingdom of God challenges us with a scale of values that is different from that of the world, which relies on strength and might as a precondition for success. But weakness and vulnerability testify to God's innate power and to the mystery of faith.

5. Justice

The Prophet Amos calls for justice to flow freely (Amos 5:24). People with disabilities have had their stories of injustice silenced for ages. The culture of silence is no longer acceptable. Our God, who takes a preferential option for the poor and oppressed – include those with disability – calls the church to be an instrument of justice. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes the need to protect the rights of persons with disabilities to ensure their access to fundamental freedoms and promote respect for their inherent dignity. God's church can do no less.

6. Sending and the Work of the Spirit

Jesus sends out his disciples just as the Father sent him to testify to the love of God and call to reconciliation. The disciples are sent into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, God builds the church, in which each of us is integrated as a living stone in a spiritual temple (1 Peter 2:4-5). Each limb of the church, the body of Christ, has received gifts from the spirit to the edification of all of us (1 Corinthians 12:7). If we fail to make use of a single person's gifts, the Church is bereft of whatever is God's purpose for that person.

Challenges to Churches

1. Inclusion

It is on such a theological basis that the churches need to approach issues pertaining to human disabilities. Everywhere we find persons with disabilities who are victimized and excluded. They do not feel welcome, no one asks for their gifts, they are shunned and discriminated against. Justice and love call for inclusion.

2. Accessibility

Someone can live with a physical, mental or intellectual impairment. It is the environment that gives rise to the disability; for example, in accessible premises and facilities, or inadequate information and communication devices ultimately display disparaging attitudes and lack of respect.

3. Participation

Communal worship is an important aspect of church life. When people of God assemble for a service before the face of God they are shaped and their faith is expressed. Does everyone feel that they are part of the celebrating fellowship? Do we celebrate our church services in such a way that

everyone present is able to experience wholeness? Wherever liturgical expressions or other activities exclude some, strategies to counter these needed to be developed.

4. Self-critical scrutiny

Churches need to scrutinize their life and operations. We need to ask ourselves what changes are required if a church is to be a place where a person with disability can meet the love of God? A place where a person can mature in their commitment and together with the community of God's people, answer the call to demonstrate faith in their own lives. We need to develop an understanding of humanity that finds room for the experiences of the persons with disabilities and what it means to be a person and a Christian.

The movement to call churches to fully embrace persons with disabilities to become part of their lives is, in point of fact, a call to repentance, to a new way of life. We need to work at uncovering the resources of the Christian faith, discovering the riches that are to be found in Christian fellowship where everyone is needed. We are all called to become members of the body of Christ, a community of mutual dependence.

5. Prayer and Action

The changes that the churches need to accomplish can be realized through prayer and work. The churches need to pray for guidance and help from God in finding forms of expression for the faith in which everyone can take part, so that the people of God may become one and that the world shall believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. In community, the church must advocate for the advancement of the cause of justice for all.

Advocacy in Mission

The churches and their organizations like CWM face a challenge to their faith. They are challenged to how their faith is applied to the human condition in a world in which so many are disadvantaged. It is in rising to this challenge that churches and their organizations engage the circumstances by which fellow humans are devalued and strive to make necessary change.

Affirmations

The Conference on persons with disabilities in July 2014 commends CWM, as a partnership of churches in mission, to urge its constituent churches to strive to:

- Discover the riches found in Christian fellowship in which everyone has a place.
- Recognize the gifts of all, especially those considered most vulnerable.
- Ensure the removal of stigmatism and encourage the promotion of theologies and ideologies that are liberating.
- Increase participation of all and to recognize mutual dependence.
- Ensure a greater awareness and understanding of disability issues.
- Remove obstacles and provide facilities and accommodations for persons with disabilities to express their spirituality.
- Provide a variety of liturgical expressions that increase accessibility in worship for all.
- Provide physical facilities and activities that are accessible to all.
- Provide greater opportunities for persons with disabilities to take leading roles in churches and fellowship.

- Promote communities in which persons with disabilities are:
 - i. Respected and
 - ii. Have access to their rights.

- Urge their respective governments to:
 - i. Ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and
 - ii. Promulgate legislation for the protection of all human rights.

- Challenge injustice in society in which increasing numbers of individuals become persons with disabilities because of ineffective health services, economic disempowerment, environmental degradation and catastrophe, violence, civil unrest, war, etc.

- Maintain commitment to share resources between the churches, strengthening the network in faithful missional engagement at home and abroad.

- Educate and nurture all children and young people through the structures and mechanisms of the church into a knowledge of the innate dignity of all humanity, that all persons are equal before God and are valued in God's creation.

- Promote disability education among ministers and lay persons in training in the theological colleges and other educational institutions in which they exercise influence.

The Conference commends CWM to take deliberate actions to ensure the inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities at:

- i. All levels of CWM governance structures,
- ii. CWM staff complement, through revision of its employment procedures and practices, and
- iii. All programmes and activities.

It further commends the efforts of CWM to network with ecumenical bodies' para-church organizations, NGOs and other organizations including other faith traditions for the most effective engagement of disability issues and encourages deeper collaborations going forward.

CWM is charged to develop effective and efficient strategies for the monitoring and evaluation of progress towards these goals.

Churches Acting Together:

Mutual accountability through CWM

In initiating this process, CWM has accepted the mantle of leading this important work of engaging constituent churches in deliberate efforts to advance the cause of persons with disabilities. It appreciates that different churches in the range of locations are at varying places in their journey of engaging the complex issues. It undertakes to assist in resourcing churches in their effort to develop and implement appropriate guidelines, strategies and action plans which will engage churches at all levels of their operations, with emphasis on change at the congregational level.

Member churches are to be urged to commit in the spirit of mutual accountability, to establishing effective and efficient internal monitoring mechanisms at all levels and support of periodic evaluation and review through CWM structures and mechanisms.



Our Vision

“Fullness of life Through Christ, for all Creation”

Our Mission

“Called to partnership in Christ to mutually challenge, encourage, and equip member churches to share in God’s mission”