

ABLEISM IN THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE: A CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

Ableism, the systemic discrimination and social prejudice against persons with disabilities (PWDs) is so pervasive in every human society, whether religious or secular, that it negates their personhood and makes them feel socially excluded. Miller (2000:117) defines society as "an organized group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural or other purposes ... A body of individuals living as members of a community." If Miller's definition is anything to go by, one is worried why the PWDs in Abia State in particular and Nigeria in general continue to experience ableism in their

immediate society especially the Christian church. Focusing on the contemporary Christian church as a community, this paper studied the life experiences of the PWDs in Umuahia, Abia State with a view to ascertaining why ableism had persisted in spite of favorable scientific innovations and religious teaching of love for God and for one another. It was based on the charity theory of disability. The theory cast the disabled person forever in the “poor unfortunate” role, emphasized and encouraged dependence on others rather than independence. The paper made use of both primary and secondary data collected from personal interviews, books, journal and magazine articles and Internet resources. It concluded that ableism is so permissible in the contemporary Christian church that it has not only caused the PWDs' disinterest in church attendance but also led to the commodification of healing miracles.

Key words: ableism, contemporary Christian church, commodification of healing miracles, persons with disabilities and religion.

Introduction

Ableism is one of the isms which is yet to receive as much attention as it deserves in the socio-religious and political environments. Disability advocates and scholars believe that it causes low productivity in the lives of persons with disabilities (PWDs), disinterest in church activities and the commodification of healing miracles. Davidson (2024) has defined ableism as:

A form of discrimination that is often less discussed but equally important as sexism, racism, homophobia, and other widespread prejudices. It involves the systematic discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion of individuals with disabilities. This discrimination is based on the belief that certain abilities are superior and should be considered normal, while having a disability is viewed as inferior and abnormal (para 9-10).

Davidson further states that "ableism can have a significant impact on my self-confidence and self-worth, leaving me feeling isolated and lonely. It can lead to emotions of guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, and frustration" (para 12).

The impact of ableism as enunciated by Davidson is felt by all persons with disabilities in both secular and religious circles. The contemporary Christian church whose doctrine is solely based on love of God and love of humanity is yet to eradicate all ableistic practices against her members with disabilities. This is apparently contrary to Jesus Christ' teaching on love and care for one another for Christ has said:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your entire mind, and with all your strength. The second is this; you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the

strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:30-33; RSV).

St. Paul, in his epistle to the Galatians, re-echoes this "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2; KJV).

Regrettably, the contemporary Christian church seen as a bastion of compassion and acceptance, frequently grapples with ableist ideologies that marginalize the PWDs. Here, it is argued that while many churches strive towards inclusivity, ableism remains embedded in their theological practices, worship environments and community interactions. Furthermore, Goodley (2019) has noted that "the language used within church teachings and liturgies frequently reflects ableist assumptions. For example, hymns and sermons may epitomize able-bodied experiences as normative, unintentionally sidelining those with disabilities" (p.119).

It is the intent of this article, therefore, to study the ugly trend with a view to making recommendations that will help to curb ableism in the contemporary Christian church.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the charity theory of disability. The theory states that there is so much misconceptions of disability by the society that it focuses on providing assistance and support to individuals with

disabilities through charitable organizations or initiatives. To this theory, disability is seen as a personal tragedy or a problem that needs to be solved through acts of charity and benevolence.

Duyan (2007) states that:

The Charity theory sees people with disabilities as victims of their impairment. Their situation is tragic, and they are suffering. Able-bodied people should therefore assist PWDs in whatever way possible, as they need special services, special institutions, etc., because they are different (p.71).

Although the theory is not attributed to a single proponent or a definite date, scholars believe that this theory of disability emerged in the early and mid-20th century when people started organizing charities and philanthropic efforts to assist individuals with disabilities.

Johnstone (2012) notes that "It was influenced by societal perceptions of disability as a personal misfortune and the belief that disabled individuals were in need of help from non-disabled people" (p.79).

Disabled individuals were often excluded from mainstream society, and their well-being relied heavily on charity and philanthropic efforts. Organizations and institutions were established with the aim of providing care and support to these individuals, but they often did so without considering their autonomy or the importance of their inclusion in society.

Retief and Letšosa (2018) has noted that:

Many people in the disability community regard the charity theory in a very negative light. The theory is often seen as depicting them as helpless, depressed and dependent on other people for care and protection, contributing to the preservation of harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about them (p.6).

Strengths of the Charity Theory

Philanthropic individuals and corporate bodies believe that the charity theory has some merits which tend to benefit persons with disabilities. These include:

1. **Immediate Support.** The Charity theory provides immediate support to individuals with disabilities who may require urgent assistance. According to Jordan (2008), "It helps to address their immediate needs, such as medical care, mobility aids or financial support which help to improve on their quality of life in the short term" (p.126).
2. **Philanthropic Resources.** The Charity theory mobilizes philanthropic resources from organizations, individuals and community initiatives to support disabled individuals. This can help bridge the gap in resources and services that may not be readily available through other means particularly in underprivileged communities or in regions with limited infrastructure and support systems.
3. **Increased Awareness and Advocacy.** By engaging in charitable activities, the theory raises awareness about disability issues and challenges.

Olkin (1999) believes that "It can serve as a platform for advocating for the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities, promoting empathy, compassion and solidarity within the society" (p.43).

4. Lastly, Addressing Short-term Needs. In situations where immediate assistance is required, such as during natural disasters or emergencies, the Charity theory can play a vital role in providing relief and support to disabled individuals and their communities.

Weaknesses

Some of the weaknesses of the charity theory of disability include but not limited to:

1. Failure to Recognize the Rights, Capabilities and Aspirations of Persons with Disabilities. The charity theory fails to recognize the rights, capabilities and aspirations of people with disabilities thereby reducing them to passive recipients of charity.

2. Creates Societal Barriers and Reinforces Stereotypes. Rimmerman (2013) has observed that "The charity theory does, unfortunately, reinforce stereotypes, discrimination and create societal barriers that hinder the full participation of disabled individuals in various aspects of life, including education, employment and social activities" (p.128).

3. Promotes Dependency. Another major weakness of the charity theory is that it perpetuates a cycle of dependency on PWD's and it fails to recognize their autonomy, capabilities and rights but positions them as objects of pity and charity.

4. Emphasizes the Medical theory of Disability. Lastly, The Charity theory is akin to the medical theory of disability which views disability as a personal deficit or impairment. This perspective lays emphasis on fixing or curing the individual rather than addressing the barriers imposed by the society. It fails to recognize disability as a social construct and the need for societal changes to promote inclusivity.

Pertinence

The charity theory of disability is pertinent to this article as it depicts persons with disabilities as people who should be dependent on receiving alms and other forms of support from the society without providing commensurate and lasting solution to all ableistic practices.

Again, the theory, though rooted in good intentions, falls short in promoting inclusivity and empowering the PWDs. This has, unfortunately, continued to stimulate ableism in the contemporary Christian church as well as the society at large.

This writer, agreeing with Swain and French (2000:582), believes that we can foster a society that celebrates diversity, empowers individuals of all abilities, and ensures equal opportunities for all. This will help to address societal barriers, promote accessibility and value the autonomy and rights of persons with disabilities thereby curbing ableism.

Field Data

Ableism is ever-present throughout every society including religious communities and this means that ideas, stereotypes and other forms of prejudice are often pushed onto the disability minority. To confirm this, data for this article was collected from some select members of Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD) during their bi-monthly meeting in Umuahia, Abia State held on Saturday 16th November, 2024 at the premises of Special Education Center, Afara, Umuahia.

JONAPWD is an association of persons with diverse disabilities such as visual, physical, ambulatory, auditory and other shades of impairments. These JONAPWD members live and work in different parts of Abia State and are members of diverse denominations of the Christian church but their experiences of ableism are cognate.

Ten (10) research questions were given to twenty-seven (27) members of JONAPWD to ascertain the level of ableism they have suffered in their different churches. 23 respondents (85.19%) participated in the survey.

Demographics

- Sample Size: 23 respondents
 - Percentage of responses: 85.2%
 - Non-responses: 4 respondents (14.8%)
- Research Questions and Percentile Analysis

Here is the visualization of the questions and hypothetical responses (for analysis purposes). Percentiles are computed based on the total number of respondents (23).

Questions, (Yes) %, (No) %: Analysis

1. Have you heard the word "ableism" before? (16) 70%,(7)30%: A majority have heard of "ableism".
2. Are you a Christian? (21) 91%,(2)9%: Most respondents identify as Christians.
3. Do you attend church services often? (18) 78%,(5)22%: A high percentage regularly attend church.
4. In your church, do you suffer discrimination? (15) 65%,(8)35%: Discrimination is reported by over half.
5. Does discrimination affect attendance? (14) 61%,(9)39%: Many indicate a direct impact on attendance.
6. Does discrimination stem from Bible teachings? (12) 52%, (11)48%: Opinions are equally split on Biblical causes.
7. Do discriminatory practices affect you negatively? (19) 83%, (4)17%: Most report negative effects from discrimination.
8. Is discrimination from members and clergy? (16) 70%,(7) 30%: Clergy and members are both cited as sources.
9. Do you think God still loves you despite disability? (20)87%,(3)13%: Faith in God's love remains strong.
10. Do you think ableism is man-made? (17)74%,(6)26%: Many believe ableism is rooted in societal norms.

Percentile Distribution of the Responses

Summary of "Yes" Responses Across All Questions:

- High majority answers in "Yes" across questions indicate significant recognition of ableism, faith in God's love despite disabilities, and the belief that ableism is societal in origin.
- "Yes" responses range from 52% (minimum) to 91% (maximum).

Percentile Range Observation

52nd Percentile Equal responses for whether discrimination stems biblically (Q6).

65th Percentile Suffering discrimination in church (Q4).

91st Percentile Highest agreement: Respondents identifying as Christians (Q2).

83rd Percentile Negative impacts of discriminatory practices (Q7).

Summary of "No" Responses Across All Questions:

- Significant "No" responses occur where doubts or varying opinions exist, such as the Biblical origins of ableism or personally experiencing discrimination.

Key Findings Based on Percentiles

1. Thematic Patterns:

- High Discrimination Awareness: A significant percentage (83%) report negative effects from ableism.
- Faith vs. Practice Gap: While 87% strongly believe God's love is unconditional, 65% simultaneously acknowledge discrimination within their church, implicating societal rather than spiritual influences.
- Dual Sources of Discrimination: Equal blame is attributed to both members and clergy (70%), highlighting systemic challenges.

2. Faith Resilience:

- Despite ableism, belief in God's unchanging love is evident (87%).

3. Ableism Attribution (Man-made):

- High agreement (74%) supports the hypothesis that ableism originates in societal attitudes, validating the man-made nature of such discriminatory practices.

4. Implications for Church Structures:

- Data suggests churches and Christian communities may need to take proactive steps to address ableism.

The findings support the hypothesis that ableism exists at varying levels in societal and religious contexts. Faithful yet informed respondents indicate a need for greater inclusion and systemic change. A percentile breakdown suggests that such change could begin with addressing discriminatory practices by the church members and the clergy.

Causes of Ableism in the Contemporary Christian Church

Ableism has persisted in the contemporary Christian church due to the following causes:

1. Misinterpretation of the Holy Scripture. There are so many biblical narratives in both the Old and New Testaments that portray disability and the PWDs in bad light. These narratives are used to present them as objects of pity or people in need of healing. The conflation of moral impurity and physical disability is a common theme in both Testaments. The prohibition of the blind, deaf, lame or a man with a blemish from the priestly activities of bringing offerings to God or

entering the most holy place in the temple (Leviticus 21:17-23; KJV) and similar passages, according to Eiesland (1994), have been used to warrant barring the PWDs from positions of ecclesiastical visibility and authority (p.43).

Eiesland further regrets that:

The specific physical standards of this passage may not be retained as criteria for today's religious leadership, but the implicit theology that represents disability as being linked with sin, marring the divine image in humans, and preventing religious service persists in church actions and attitudes (p.44).

Again, several passages in the New Testament support this theme of a link between sin and disability. For instance, the account of the man with paralysis who was lowered by companions into the house where Jesus was speaking in Luke 5:18-26 has often been interpreted as a story of heroic helpers and a crippled sinner. Here forgiveness of sin and physical healing are represented as equivalent. John 5:14 recounts the story of the man by the pool of Bethesda. After healing the man, who had been unable to walk, Jesus said, "do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." These passages have frequently been cited as proof that disability is a sign of moral imperfection or divine retribution for sin.

2. Healing Theology. Pentecostals all over the world, according to Folarin (2017), involve God in their healing theology: "For by his stripes you were healed!" (Isa.53:5 cf. 1 Pet 2:25). ... Pentecostal churches do not welcome

the disabled in their midst because they are regarded as demonstrating the failure of the Pentecostal theology of total deliverance from sickness (p.29).

There is so much emphasis on miraculous healing that many Christian churches today do not welcome persons with disabilities unless they go through what they term "healing school" after which the PWDs are expected to get miraculously healed and become full members of the church. This, unfortunately, leads to the belief that disability is something to be fixed instead of accepting the individuals as they are.

It is apparent that the belief that faith alone can heal various forms of disabilities implies that persons with disabilities lack faith if they remain unhealed. One may wonder what the fate of those PWDs who do not receive healing would be.

3. Christian Charity. One of the factors that have perpetuated ableism in the contemporary Christian church is charity. The Christian community, right from the New Testament times, has always taken special responsibility or care of those who were physically unable to provide for themselves (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Again, church-based charitable societies have also merged charity and healing, establishing numerous hospitals and clinics for people with disabilities. They have provided humane care, medical advances and indispensable financial support yet one unintended outcome of these charitable practices has been the environmental and social segregation of the PWDs from the Christian

community rather than restoration to social and religious participation. This led Eiesland to conclude that "The Holy Bible promotes charitable giving which has, unfortunately, shaped patterns of interaction between able-bodied individuals and those with disabilities" (p.55).

Simply put, charitable giving neglects the social and political needs of persons with disabilities and through such actions the Christian church becomes a prime facilitator of charitable practices that segregate them. This explains why a PWD who comes to church is often seen as having come to receive monetary or other forms of charity.

4. Lack of Awareness and Education. A significant number of church leaders and congregants lack training on disability issues, which can result in unintentional discrimination against persons with disabilities. This explains why Kenny (2022) states that:

All too often, disabled people are silenced by those around us, or our opinions are not taken into consideration when it comes to discussing equity, accessibility, and other topics related to congregational life. Our disability rights mantra is "Nothing About Us Without Us," and yet the church has typically made decisions without us (para 7-8).

5. Architectural Barriers. Lastly, many churches lack physical accessibility which reflects a disregard for the needs of persons with disabilities. This creates an unwelcome environment. It should be mentioned that

some churches have built ramps for wheelchair users, this is commendable. Others are encouraged to do the same so as to remove the barriers that impede the free access to wheelchair users.

Effects of Ableism on Persons with Disabilities

In the preceding pages, some of the courses of ableism in the contemporary Christian church have been elucidated. Let's look briefly at the effects:

1. **Exclusion from Church Activities.** The PWDs experience exclusion from church activities which oftentimes lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization. This writer and many of his friends who are PWDs have had so many experiences of exclusion in their different churches that many have given up attending church services.
2. **Spiritual Marginalization.** Ableist practices in the church hamper the spiritual growth and full participation of persons with disabilities. Again, some of the PWDs have spiritual gifts that can benefit the church but, unfortunately, the misconceptions and ableistic practices of both the clergy and the laity often frustrate the manifestation of such gifts. Nwabuisi (2021) has observed that:

Most Christian churches in Nigeria still distinguish and indoctrinate people with disabilities as vulnerable objects of charity, philanthropy and 'miracle'. Often times, the church's conception and explanation of healing from the narratives in the New Testament reveals how theology has continued to injure people with

disabilities, many of whom already experience marginalization, oppression and dehumanization (p.4).

3. Low Self-Esteem and Faith Challenges. The ableist language and practices found within the Christian church environment lead to diminished self-esteem and crises of faith among persons with disabilities. This led Kenny (2022) to lament that:

I am confused by the way people interpret my disability as in need of “fixing” without knowing anything else about me. I am troubled that my body becomes public property they feel they have the right to control. I am indignant that this takes place under the veil of Jesus-following, as though they are the bouncers to God’s table. I am hurt that I must justify my own existence at church (.9).

4. Missed Opportunities for Inclusion and Full Participation. Lastly, without adequate training, churches may unintentionally create inaccessible environments and fail to provide the necessary support for persons with disabilities to fully participate in worship, fellowship and ministry. Kenny further notes that:

I bear the image of the Alpha and the Omega. My disabled body is a temple for the Holy Spirit. I have the mind of Christ. There’s no caveat to those promises. I don’t have a junior holy spirit because I am disabled. To suggest that I am anything less than sanctified and redeemed is to suppress the image of God in my disabled body and to limit how God is already at work through

my life. Maybe we need to be freed not from disability but from the notion that it limits my ability to showcase God's radiance to the church. What we need to be freed from is ableism (p.18).

Possible Solutions to Ableism in the Contemporary Christian Church

1. Positive Theological Perspectives. The Christian church should move away from viewing disability as something that needs "healing" or "fixing." Instead, they should embrace a theology that values the PWDs as integral members of the body of Christ and this will help to ensure the dignity of the PWDs and to make them feel belonged. Nwabuisi (2021) recommends that:

There has to be a way to approach disability from a theological perspective that does not involve shame, sin, or mistakes. The church must reexamine its disability theology, and then it to do a better job of connecting the worlds of the able-bodied and the disabled. Christian theology must provide tools for analyzing and responding to the conditions of people with physical challenges (p.12).

2. Create Accessible Physical Spaces. Churches should prioritize physical accessibility by installing ramps, elevators and accessible seating. This will help to demonstrate a commitment to welcoming all members of the community without treating accessibility as an optional expense.

3. Promote Inclusive Worship Practices. Churches can adopt language and practices that include everyone, such

as inviting congregants to "rise in body or spirit" instead of assuming everyone can stand. Offering diverse ways to participate in worship (e.g., singing, clapping, or using instruments) ensures accessibility for people with various abilities. Again, the churches can provide worship materials in braille, large print and other digital formats. They can also use sign language interpreters and audio descriptions during services.

4. Involve the PWDs in Church Leadership. The church should actively involve people with disabilities in leadership roles and decision-making processes. This aligns with the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us," and to ensure their voices help to shape policies and practices made in their favor.

5. Educate and Eradicate Ableism. The churches should provide training for both the clergy and the laity to eradicate ableist attitudes and language. This includes revising liturgies, sermons and teaching materials to reflect the equal worth of all individuals as bearers of God's image. Young (1990) has noted that "encounter with the disabled person again produces the ambiguity of recognizing that the person whom I project as so different, so other, is nevertheless like me" (p.147). Young is simply emphasizing that educating the clergy as well as the laity will help them know that the PWDs are normal human beings like them.

6. Establish a Disability Support Center. Lastly, the churches can establish disability support center where

persons with disabilities can access helpful resources, counseling and connections to other community services. Furthermore, the center can serve as a repository for braille, audio and large print Bibles, audio sermons and other spiritual materials. The center will ensure that digital contents of the church are made accessible with features like alternative text for images.

Conclusion

It has been noted that ableism is the discrimination against persons with disabilities and that it persists in various forms within the contemporary Christian church. This paper explored how churches, knowingly or unknowingly, exclude the PWDs from participating fully in church activities through physical inaccessibility and prejudicial attitudes influenced by theological doctrines and lack of awareness and education.

It is also noted that ableism in the church has led to:

- Spiritual marginalization;
- Low self-esteem and faith challenges to the PWDs;
- Family of the PWDs disengaging from church activities;
- Disinterest of the PWDs in attending religious worship.

This article recommends that every attempt should be made by the church to arrest this ugly situation and encourage the PWDs to feel accepted. This can be done by:

1. Theological doctrines that promote diversity and inclusion should be encouraged by the clergy and the laity.
2. Healing miracles which have, unfortunately, led to the commodification of such miracles and have also led to

the PWDs seen as faithless, should be discouraged by the church.

3. The church environment should be made accessible by providing ramps for wheelchair users and seating arrangement that will help the visually impaired to move in and out freely.

4. Religious materials should be provided in accessible formats such as braille, audio, large print and alternate text for digital content.

5. The church should provide sign language interpreters so as to help the deaf to understand the goings-on during church services and other programs.

6. Lastly, the church needs to organize training programs on disability issues with a view to helping the clergy and the members to understand the best practices as regards ableism and how to ameliorate it in the church.

It is hoped that, if these recommendations are implemented, the level of ableism in the church will be drastically reduced, inclusive church community achieved and the PWDs meaningfully contribute to the edification of the church with the spiritual gifts they are endowed with.

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