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**For action**

## **A Church of All and for All - An interim statement**

### **Introduction**

As the author of the letter to the Ephesians stressed: Christ came to tear down the walls (Eph 2:14). Whenever we consider the ways in which to respond to issues of disability, we do well to remember the walls that we have set up. All of these walls are so human, yet they contradict Christ's ministry of reconciliation; walls that shut people in or shut people out; walls that prevent people from meeting and talking to others. In days gone by, people with disabilities were actually kept behind walls, inside institutions. Now we are all a part of mainstream society. It is estimated that some 600 million people are persons with disabilities. Yet people, especially persons with disabilities, still find themselves isolated. Now there are walls of shame; walls of prejudice; walls of hatred; walls of competition; walls of fear; walls of ignorance; walls of theological prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. The Church is called to be an inclusive community, to tear down the walls. This interim statement is an invitation to journey towards making that more of a reality. It has been written by disabled people, parents and others who experience life alongside them in various ways.

Historically, disability has been interpreted as loss, as something that illustrates the human tragedy. The stories in the gospels about how Jesus healed persons with different diseases and disabilities are traditionally interpreted as acts of liberation, stories of how human beings receive possibilities to live a richer life. From that time, churches have often wrestled with how best to exercise an appropriate ministry for, to and with persons with disabilities.

The ecumenical movement also found itself faced with the necessity of addressing the issue. After the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968, the theme "The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Humankind" emerged as a means of relating issues of church and society. At the assembly and subsequently, the attempt to explore the church as a more inclusive community intensified. A concern to address the inclusion of handicapped people in the church emerged within the Faith and Order Commission, and gathered momentum at the Louvain meeting of the Commission in 1971. This first attempt to address the situation of persons with disabilities was a theological examination of service for the disabled in the light of the compassion of Christ.

In the period which followed, concern with persons with disabilities moved from theological reflection to practical questions of inclusiveness within churches and church communities. But often, this reflection and action in the churches treated "persons with handicaps" and "the differently-abled" and "persons with a disability" (all those terms were designed to reflect inclusiveness and each replaced the other) as objects rather than subjects of reflection. The appearance of EDAN (Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network), founded at the WCCs 1998 assembly, and its assimilation within the WCC structures within the JPC team has itself come to be a sign of hope in the process of conscientization of Christian churches and institutions, because now persons with disabilities are themselves the subjects or actors of reflection or action. EDAN works in the eight regions of the world and serves as a network of encounter and support as persons with disabilities seek to address the specific issues and challenges in their own contexts.

However, there has been a growing awareness in some churches that persons with disabilities invite the Church to explore anew the understanding of the Gospel and the nature of the Church. This awareness was evident in a first interim statement at the 1997 Central Committee of the WCC which sought to reflect theologically and engage the churches in acting to be more inclusive communities. This new Interim Statement, conducted with participation from the Faith and Order Commission, is thus a stage on a continuing journey. It is not comprehensive but offers pointers and insights on major theological themes. It is hoped that the statement will also enable the churches to interact with the disability discourse and help the churches address inclusion, active participation and full involvement in the spiritual and social life of the church in particular and society in general.

### **Persons with disabilities – commonalities and differences**

1. "*The disabled*" have struggled hard to become recognised as "*disabled people*". The fight was worthwhile for two reasons. First, throughout history, disabled people have been de-personalised and perceived as a problem to be dealt with. Second, they are often seen as a homogeneous group whose individual differences do not need to be respected. This section is about who we are, our common experience. Its purpose is to make the point that, in common with all groups in society, we too are very diverse and have different stories. We also want to explore a possible framework to help disabled people and the churches to find a common starting point from which to begin this exploration.

2. We have probably all experienced limitations; in how we move, feel, think, perceive. Due to our impairments and resultant disabilities, we have been marginalized by the attitudes, actions or barriers in society. In many societies, persons with disabilities have organised themselves into powerful lobby groups which advocate against such marginalization and for disability rights and independence, even from their familial carers. Yet one of the hardest challenges facing many carers<sup>1</sup> is to maintain the voice of the voiceless when those for

whom they care often have such profound and multiple disabilities that their silence is only understood in the depth of the loving relationship of care.

3. Modern society has brought with it many hazards that clearly make humankind collectively responsible for injuries caused by the likes of landmines and substance abuse, but the cause of some disabilities remains inexplicable.

4. Most disabled people are economically disenfranchised and experience some deprivation in their standard of living or employment opportunities. Carers also have to make considerable sacrifices, experiencing significant demands on their time and resources that limit their ability to pursue other activities and careers. Yet, to protest against the economic deprivation of disabled people and their carers in a global context is to grossly under-estimate the relativity of poverty between societies and countries. The disparity between the material situation of a disabled person in the economic North and that of a non-disabled person in the economic South (the former may be "better off" than the latter) should not be ignored. Those factors represent the existential bond and reality facing the overwhelming majority of persons with disabilities and their families today.

5. Disability can cause not only economic disenfranchisement but also poverty of relationships and opportunity. Persons with disabilities often become vulnerable to discriminatory social trends. A market economy encourages abortion and the allowing of babies to die. In many countries the systematic abortion of the foetus with certain malformations and those with Down's syndrome give a very negative message of society's view of disability. Such a market economy further leads to institutionalisation and reduced access to adequate medical care for the majority of the world's population. Disabled people become vulnerable to easy commercial fixes and religious groups which offer miraculous healing in the setting of superficial acceptance and friendship.

6. No social group is ever the same, and disabled people are no exception to the rule. We come from a variety of cultures, and are thus culturally conditioned in the same manner as every person. We have experienced different kinds and levels of medical care and differing social attitudes. We have come to an acceptance of our disabilities by diverse routes. Some of us have been disabled since birth, either by congenital conditions or by the trauma of birth itself, whilst others have been victims of accidents or have had disabilities develop later in life. Each one of us has struggled to accept our disability and has found that we have been accepted or hindered in this acceptance by the quality of medical care or education we have received, or by the attitudes of people who have had an influence in our lives and spiritual well-being. We have been supported by the bonds of different disability cultures such as the uniqueness of sign-language or a particular political understanding of our minority status. We wish to assert that our differences are part of the richness of disabled people as a group, and that we rejoice in them.

7. Those disabled people who share a Christian faith are united by their awareness of God's love and Jesus' compassion for sick and disabled people,

and find strength in the care of Christ. However, many have found that the Church's teaching on this truth has been too limited, and have looked for their own understanding. Each one's awareness of how long he/she might expect to live, and their own faith experience have affected how they accept their disabilities. They have relied upon certain theological tools to address their existential need to explain the mystery and paradox of love and suffering, coexisting and giving meaning to their lives.

8. We affirm that God loves all disabled people and extends to all the opportunity to respond to that love. We believe that every disabled person has the opportunity to find peace with God.

9. Genesis 32: 24—26

*<sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

10. In our wrestling with God, as disabled people we all ask the same basic questions, but the theological enquiry involved may be complex. Why me or my loved one? Is there a purpose to my disability? The answers to those questions can be influenced by the expected time-span of a disability, and by the time and circumstances of its onset. Acceptance or otherwise of a disabling impairment is influenced by knowledge of how long one can expect to live and what quality of life one can expect to experience.

11. We have wrestled with God intellectually and physically to achieve this peace, and whilst some of us have been privileged to write intellectually about it, others have shown it in their innate gift of grace which is shown in the love and affection to those who care for them so deeply. If so many disabled people have this ability to come to terms with God, the Church must surely find ways of accepting the gifts which we have to offer. It is not a case of meeting halfway but of full acceptance.

### **Hermeneutical issues**

12. How can we interpret from a theological perspective the fact that some people live with disabilities? What does that fact tell us about human life in God's world? We have learned from 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and theology that we are historical beings and our interpretations are always made from within history. Our interpretations of reality are always finite because we are finite beings. When we are developing a theological interpretation of the fact of human disabilities, we must acknowledge that history has changed and will change the way we interpret it. And by history, we may mean the story of an individual, or the developing perceptions of the community in which persons with disabilities live.

13. As has been noted above, disability has historically been interpreted as loss, an example of the tragedies that human beings can experience. The Gospel stories about how Jesus heals persons with different diseases and disabilities are traditionally interpreted as illustrating how human beings are liberated and empowered to live a richer life.

14. In this understanding, people with disabilities are seen as weak and needing care. As a result, they are viewed as objects for charity, those who receive what other persons give. Thus, people with disabilities can not meet other people in the churches on equal terms. They are regarded as somehow less than fully human.

15. The church has justified this view from different theological perspectives. For instance, disability has been interpreted as a punishment for sins, either committed by the persons with disabilities themselves or by their relatives in earlier generations. Or disability has been understood as a sign of lack of faith, that prevents God from performing a healing miracle. Or disability has been understood as a sign of demonic activity, in which case exorcism is needed to overcome the disability. Such interpretations have led to the oppression of people with disabilities in the churches. In that respect, the churches' attitudes have reflected attitudes in societies as a whole. Structures of oppression within societies and churches have mutually reinforced each other.

16. When new ways to understand disability have emerged in society, new theological ways to understand this issue have also emerged in the churches and in the ecumenical movement. But the churches have not taken a leading role here. Even though one can find inspiration for such an approach in the Bible, they have not been a prophetic voice against oppression. Rather, churches have generally followed the trends in society, often with distinct reluctance. Conservative structures in the churches, often related to the churches' own charitable institutions, have enforced old ways of interpreting disability. Theological ideas, like that linking disability and divine punishment for sins, remain evident in every part of the world, and disabled persons have been subjected to "pastoral counselling" to address the presumed causes of their "punishment".

17. When new understandings of disabilities emerge in society, traditional theological interpretations are challenged. In some churches, this has raised awareness that people with disabilities were not seen as equal. In many churches, traditional ways of treating people with disabilities were then perceived as oppressive and discriminatory, and actions towards people with disabilities moved from "charity" to recognition of their human rights. Changing attitudes have led to new questions and interpretations. Awareness has slowly grown that people with disability have experienced that which can enrich the churches themselves. In the search for unity and inclusion, some have acknowledged that people with disability must be included in the life and the witness of the churches. Often, this has been connected to the language about weakness found in the New Testament, especially in the two Epistles to the Corinthians.

18. But even this insight has been challenged. Is disability really something that shows the *weaknesses* in human life? Is that in itself a limiting and oppressive interpretation? Do we not have to take another, more radical step? Is disability really something that is limiting? Is the language of disability as a "loss" an adequate one at all, despite it being a stage of the journey undertaken by persons with disabilities themselves? Is a language of plurality not more adequate? To live with a disability is to live with *other* abilities and limitations that others do not have? All human beings live with limitations. Is not disability something that God has created in order to build a plural, and richer, world? Is not disability a gift from God rather than a limiting condition with which some persons have to live?

19. Such questions need to be taken seriously when we are searching for a new theological understanding of disability. This interim statement is an ongoing process. We will never reach the point where we find "the" theological understanding. We must acknowledge the fact that we will have a different way of raising the theological perspectives tomorrow than today. The main purpose of an interim statement is not to impose one understanding of disability, but to enable us to engage in an ongoing conversation. It is the process in itself that is valuable. It can be liberating both for the churches and people with disabilities.

20. Disability is an human condition and, as such, it is ambiguous. To be human is to live a life that is marked both by the God-given good of creation and the brokenness that is a part of human life. We experience both sides of human life with disabilities. To interpret disability from one of these perspectives is to deny the ambiguity of life and to create an artificial ontological split in the heart of our understanding of disability.

21. We have to let different and conflicting interpretations stand beside each other and let them challenge and correct each other. We should not try to create a syntheses that removes the conflict between the different interpretations. Rather, we should hold on to the tension between them as that which keeps the process going.

### **Imago Dei**

22. In the history of Christian theology, the notion that humanity is made in the image of God has tended to mean that it is the mind or soul which is in God's image, since the bodily (corporeal or physical) aspect of human nature can hardly represent the incorporeal, spiritual reality of the transcendent God. We should not underestimate the profound reaction against idolatry in early Christianity; no animal or human form should be taken to represent God who is invisible. However, the perceived kinship between our minds and God's Mind (or Logos), coupled with the assumed analogy between the incarnation of God's Logos in Christ and the embodiment of the (immortal) soul/mind in the human person, encouraged a predominantly *intellectual* interpretation of how human beings are made in the image of God.

23. This tendency may at times have permitted the positive acceptance of intelligent persons with physical disabilities: e.g., Didymus the Blind (4th century) was nick-named Didymus the See-er because he saw more profoundly than those with physical sight. It has also encouraged positive (if somewhat patronising) responses to persons with profound and multiple disabilities on the grounds that "you can see the soul peeping out through their eyes". But this understanding of human nature is both inherently elitist and dualist. It ultimately tends to exclude those whose mental or physical incapacities profoundly affect their entire personality and existence.

24. More recently, the notion that humanity is made in the image of God is taken to mean that *each* of us is made in the image of God and, therefore, each of us deserves to be equally respected. It conspires with modern human rights ideologies to encourage individuals to assert their right to a decent deal in society, and to recognition of each person's inherent dignity, no matter what his/her race, religion or impairment.

25. This tendency has had a positive impact in encouraging respect for those who are not white, male, able-bodied and intelligent. But it has also exacerbated the prejudice that we should all be perfect since we are made in God's image. Obvious failure to reach such notional perfection then becomes problematic. How can this person, who apparently has physical or mental defects, be made in God's image? The modernist rights approach may challenge the attitudes of some past traditional societies, but the success-oriented values of modern individualism encourage an interpretation of *imago Dei* which, we would argue, does not take account of core elements in Christian theology.

26. The phrase we are examining occurs in the Genesis narrative of the creation of Adam. So there are two important features that need to be taken seriously: firstly, Adam represents the whole human race. The very name Adam means man-humanity in the generic sense, for the creation of Eve from his rib represents sexual differentiation in the human race. Secondly, while Adam was indeed made in the image and likeness of God, this was marred by his disobedience, classically known as the Fall. Some early theologians suggested that he retained the image but lost the likeness. The point here is that glib theological talk about being made in God's image needs to be countered with a sensitivity to the *corporate* nature of that image, and the fact that *all* have fallen short of the glory (image) of God (Rom 3:23).

27. For the Christian community, this reflection on Genesis 1 is confirmed by the New Testament. A reading of Paul's Epistles soon shows that the dynamic of salvation depends upon the parallel between Adam and Christ. Adam is the "old man", Christ the "new man" (Rom 5:2, 2 Cor 5:17), and all of us (male and female) are in Adam and potentially in Christ (Romans 7, 1 Cor 15:22). Both are in some sense corporate figures. In Christ we are a new creation, but as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. In a sense, Christ alone is the true image of God; the image of God in Adam (the old humanity) was marred. So we are in God's image because we are in Christ.

28. If Christ is the true image of God, then radical questions have to be asked about the nature of the God who is imaged. At the heart of Christian theology is a critique of success, power, and perfection, and an honouring of weakness, brokenness and vulnerability.

29. Being in Christ is being in the Body of Christ. This is essentially a corporate image; a body is made up of many members, all of whom bring different contributions to the whole (1 Cor 12, Romans 12). Indeed, the weak limbs (members), and even those body parts we are ashamed of and cover up (see the Greek of 1 Cor 12:23), are indispensable and are to be especially honoured, their essential contribution recognised. Furthermore, this is a physical image, and the physical reality was that in His bodily existence, Christ was abused, disabled, and put to death. Some aspects of God's image in Christ can only be reflected in the Church as the Body of Christ by the full inclusion and honouring of those who have bodies that are likewise impaired.

30. We would therefore argue that:

Christian theology needs to interpret the *imago Dei* from a Christological and soteriological (the saving work of Christ for the world) stand-point, which takes us beyond the usual creationist and anthropological perspectives.

Christian theology needs to embrace a non-elitist, inclusive understanding of the Body of Christ as the paradigm for understanding the *imago Dei*.

Without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the Church falls short of the glory of God, and cannot claim to be in the image of God.

Without the insight of those who have experience of disability, some of the most profound and distinctive elements of Christian theology are easily corrupted or lost.

31. *"When any one of us, or a group of us, is excluded because of some lack of ability, we are prevented from using our God-given gifts to make Christ's body complete. Together, let us make the beautiful mosaic that God intends."* (Norma Mengel on mental illness)

32. The study of the Bible as the source of Christian theological reflection and as the revelation of the purpose of God, and the knowledge of the Creator, leads us to the certainty that we have accepted and been accepted by a God of Love. It is God who encourages us to live in the light of his Son with our errors, afflictions and disabilities. The prophet Isaiah points to the One who carries all our afflictions (Is 53:4-6). The God "who shows no partiality" (Gal 2:6), includes everyone in His bosom, male or female, whatever their physical or mental conditions.

## Disabilities and healing

33. However, the Scriptures speak not only of the God who identifies Himself with human affliction, but also the One who exercised a ministry of healing and wholeness. How does this relate to the continuing witness of persons with disabilities? We cannot deal with the relationship between healing and disability without asking the following questions: What does it mean to talk about the image of God in relation to persons with disability? If the image is described as "perfect body", or "perfect reason", how can persons with disability embrace such an image of God? What is the relationship between our theological language and practice with regards to the issue of disability? How much of the medical and social language which treats persons with disability as objects determines both academic theologies and general attitudes about and towards persons with disability as objects of pity, forgiveness and healing? How far do we have a wholistic understanding of healing which integrates the moral, spiritual and the physical? Furthermore, we want to raise questions about what it means to call the Church the body of Christ. Can persons who are visually impaired or who have a body with cerebral palsy be included? Although many Christians consciously deny any relationship between disability and sin (which also includes suffering), some of their attitudes seem to reflect such a link.

34. *"Wherefore, when we now attempt to speak of that image, we speak of a thing unknown; an image which we not only have never experienced all our lives, and experience still. Of this image, therefore, all we now possess are mere terms — the image of God!.... But there was, in Adam, an illumined reason, a true knowledge of God and a will the most upright to love both God, and his neighbour."* (Luther)

35. From a disability perspective of a hermeneutic of suspicion, it is obvious that persons with some form of disability cannot accept the image of God defined thus. For example, persons with some form of mental disability or some form of learning disability will be disqualified as human beings because they will not reflect the definition of the image of God as soul, as reason or as rationality. A hermeneutic of suspicion cannot accept the image of God or soul as reason or rationality. It is also obvious that these interpretations of the image of God or soul as rationality are inconsistent with other world-views, e.g. African.

36. Traditional definitions of healing, wholeness and holiness (based on a particular theological anthropology of God, the image of God, and the body of Christ which, in turn, is based on cultural images of beauty and perfection with regard to the image of God and the body of Christ) are extremely unhelpful, especially during the celebration of the Eucharist. Such theologies sometimes treat healing as metaphor in very exclusive and victimising ways to persons with disabilities.

37. In the case of disability, it is often assumed that healing is either to eradicate the problem as if it were a contagious virus, or that it promotes virtuous suffering,

or a means to induce greater faith in God. Such theological approaches to healing either emphasise "cure" or "acceptance" of a condition.

38. Other definitions of healing make a clear theological distinction between healing and curing. Healing refers to the removal of oppressive systems, whereas curing has to do with the physiological reconstruction of the physical body. For some theologians, Jesus' ministry was one of healing and not curing.

39. In this kind of theology, disability is a social construct, and healing is the removal of social barriers. From these perspectives, the healing stories in the gospels are primarily concerned with restoration of the persons to their communities, not the cure of their physiological conditions. For example, the man with leprosy in Mark 1:40-45 who asks Jesus to make him clean is mainly asking Jesus to restore him to his community. In like manner, in Mark 2:1-12, Jesus met the paralytic and forgave him his sins.

40. Forgiving sins here means removing the stigma imposed on him by a culture in which disabilities were associated with sin. Hence this man was ostracised as sinful and unworthy of his society's acceptance. In these healing stories Jesus is primarily removing societal barriers in order to create accessible and accepting communities.

41. The good news of the Gospel from this perspective is that it creates inclusive communities by challenging oppressive and dehumanising systems and structures. Africans, for example, might argue that theologians who pursue this line of exploration are engaging in theological reductionism of healing from a scientific viewpoint. A western scientific world-view might argue that the medical conditions described in the biblical narratives could not be physiologically cured by divine intervention. Some theologians would even argue that the dispensation of such types of healing ended with the advent of western scientific medicine.

42. It must be noted that Jesus did not make a distinction between social restoration and physical healing. Both always happened at any given time of healing. Consequently, the integral relationship of health, salvation and healing is an imperative for a holistic theological interpretation of disability. That requires a different theological discourse on the body of Christ and the image of God from the perspectives of persons with disability.

43. The biblical healing narratives are important bases for a theological hermeneutic of disability. However, one must try to engage in such an investigation without falling into another theological pitfall: what Nancy Lane calls "victim theology". Victim theologies tend to either blame persons for their lack of faith, which accounts for their disabilities not being healed; accuse persons of possessing demons, which must be exorcised; say that through the sufferings of persons with disability, God shows forth God's glory and power; or blame disability on either the sins of parents or of disabled people themselves.

44. Victim theologies "... place the burden for healing on the person who is disabled, causing further suffering and continued alienation from faith communities." (Lane)

45. For persons with disability, the relationship between healing and disability is both ambivalent and ambiguous. While for other theologians, there is an obvious definition of healing evident in the Bible, for persons with disability, healing is tentative, relative, ambivalent, ambiguous, and ongoing. Healing can bring joy and relief. It can also bring pain, frustration, and serious theological questions.

46. A straightjacket understanding of healing in general and the biblical healing narratives in particular makes discussion of healing in relation to disability very difficult. It is obvious that the main danger to avoid is to treat healing, especially healing with respect to disability, to justify our favourable notion of healing without any reference to the totality of the *raison d'être* of Christian theology. To discuss healing either from socio-economic emancipation or physical body reparation perspectives, or from psychological/spiritual perspectives is to engage in distracting and speculative arguments as to the kind of healing Jesus carried out and why.

47. A theological statement of healing with respect to disability needs to be made with reference to the *history of salvation*. Salvation history is here defined as the self-revelation of God then, now, and in the future through events and acts through which God transforms, empowers, renews, reconciles, and liberates God's creation and everything therein made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. Such a theology is evident in Holy Scripture.

48. It is against the background of salvation history that a definition of healing from the perspective of disability is attempted. But there is also a need to give a working definition of disability, based on which healing is also defined. In Gen 1:25b, God pronounced creation as good. It was good, for God has enacted salvation history in creation in which God will continue to transform, renew, reconcile, and liberate creation. God's creating and saving acts are concurrent. An illustration with the body will help to make this point clear. When we are well, there is within the body provision of antibodies to prevent illness as well as to produce more antibodies to fight viruses and bacteria that will make us sick.

49. Disability in this theological understanding is a negation of God's intention for his creation to be good. Disability in all its forms and causes is a negation of God's good intention. Similarly, all negative attitudes, systems and structures that exclude and prevent or contribute in any way to the exclusion of persons with disability do not actualise God's intended good of God's creation.<sup>50</sup> Healing then is an act, event, system, and structure which encourages, facilitates God's empowering, renewing, reconciling, and liberating processes in order to reverse the negation of God's intended good for God's creation. Therefore, the overall theological contribution of the healing narratives in the New Testament is to demonstrate or serve as signs of God's salvation history. God wills the acceptance and inclusion of each in a community of interdependence where

each supports and builds up the other, and where each lives life to the full according to their circumstances and to the glory of God.

### **Each human being a gift**

51. All life is a gift from God, and there is an integrity to this creation. We read in Genesis (1:31) that after creating all of heaven and earth and every form of life, God saw that "... indeed, it was very good." God did not say it was "perfect". With the breath of life, God has imbued each person with dignity and worth. We believe that humanity is "created in the image and likeness of God," (Gen 1:26) with each human bearing aspects of that divine nature yet no one of us reflecting God fully or completely. Being in God's image does not just mean bearing this likeness, but the possibility of becoming as God intends.

52. This includes all people, whatever their abilities or impairments. It means that every human being is innately gifted and has something to offer that others need. This may be simply one's presence, one's capacity to respond to attention, to exhibit some sign of appreciation, and love for other people. Each has something unique to contribute (1 Cor 12:12-27) and should thus be considered as a gift. We cannot speak about this "giftedness" without also speaking about each person's limitations. They are the basis of our need of each other and of God, irrespective of the labelling of our abilities. Living in this interdependence opens us to one another and to a deeper, more honest, self-knowledge, and so makes us each more fully human, more fully people of communion, more fully realising the *Imago Dei* we bear.

53. Besides the innate gifts of relationship that are inherent in each person, most people with disabilities have other gifts to contribute to the life of the community and church. These are as varied as the many different parts of the human body, but all are necessary to the whole. They include natural abilities in perception and movement; talents and skills developed through education and training in areas such as academic disciplines, religion, science, business, athletics, technology, medicine, and the arts. While many gifts are brought to fruition throughout an individual's lifetime, some may never be realised due to circumstances, including the presence of disability. We need one another for our gifts to be revealed. A person who has suffered rejection or has been devalued may not show or share many of her own gifts or his own contribution to humanity, unless he/she is shown full acceptance and unconditional love. In our relationships, it is our task to call out the gifts of each other so that each person's potential may be realised and God may be glorified.

54. Individuals with disabilities, as well as their families, friends and carers/care-givers, may also have gifts to share that have emerged precisely from the experience of living with disability. Individuals with disabilities know what it is to have one's life turned upside-down by the unexpected. We have found ourselves in that liminal space between what is known and what is yet unknown, able only to listen and wait. We have faced fear and death and know our own vulnerability. We have met God in that empty darkness, where we realised we were no longer

"in control" and learned to rely on God's presence and care. We have learned to accept graciously and to give graciously, to be appreciative of the present moment. We have learned to negotiate a new terrain, a new way of life that is unfamiliar. We have learned to be adaptable and innovative, to use our imaginations to solve new problems. We can be resilient. We know what it is to live with ambiguity and in the midst of paradox, that simplistic answers and certitudes do not sustain us. We have become skilful in areas we never expected to master. We have become accidental experts with skills and expertise to share with the wider community and church.

55. While people with disabilities are endowed *with* gifts, we are also called to *be* a gift, to give ourselves to God's service. God wants our whole being, for us to give all of ourselves, to hold nothing back. That includes the disability (the impairment). It is not something of which to be ashamed or to be kept hidden at all cost. For a disabled person, the impairment is one attribute of who he/she is, and is to be included as part of the "holy and acceptable" offering of the self. However, just as it would be wrong to deny the reality of disability as part of our lives, it is also wrong to attribute more honour and recognition to a person's contributions just because he or she also happens to have a disability.

### **Challenges to theology**

56. The part of this statement that dealt with a theological understanding said no to any reductionist tendencies in our way of interpreting stories about healing miracles in the Gospels. It challenged us to make our theological understanding so broad, so spacious, that it could take into account every aspect of human life in relation to Christ's saving grace. Jesus came that we should have life and have it abundantly, (John 1:10) and in Him all things will be united (Eph 1:10). This vision of unity in Jesus Christ challenges us to say no to every form of reductionism and to view life in its full richness and complexity. All theology is *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the road, and that is why this statement can only be an interim statement. In relation to disability, theology is challenged to talk about God, faith and life in a way open to a God's future; that can surprise us all, and unite and transcend every human existence. A theological understanding of disability has to interpret this issue in the context of the *unfinished* history of God's salvation.

57. People with disabilities, and particularly people with learning disabilities, disturb and confuse the accepted order in many societies. Disabled people disturb human notions of perfection, purpose, reward, success and status; they also disturb notions of a God who rewards virtue with health and prosperity. The responses to this disturbance can be pity as expressed by charitable works, or banishment (putting people away out of sight and mind), and/or fear. Whatever the basis of the response, disabled people are given no meaningful place in society.

58. The presence of disability in our lives directly challenges fundamental assumptions and stereotypes acquired over time. We often cloak the reality of

disability in a shroud of silence, or respond with demeaning pity, ridicule or hate. The way we respond to persons with disabilities is essential to the message of the Cross.

59. As Christians, we worship a God who became flesh and hung motionless and utterly incapacitated on the Cross. Ours is a God of vulnerability and woundedness. Yet often, we choose to forego or forget the crucifixion, preferring to turn directly to the resurrection. Christ rose from the dead with His wounds. We too discover Him in our wounds, and we discern His presence in our vulnerability and in our courage to live the lives we have been given.

60. For us Christians, the Cross of Jesus Christ is a symbol of life. When the Word became flesh (John 1:14), it was the broken flesh of humanity that was assumed. Even when Christ rose from the dead, He did so *with* the wounds that He suffered on the Cross (Luke 24:36-39). And, when St Paul confessed his own thorn in the flesh, he received the revelation that God's strength is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:7-8). Indeed, long before any of the Gospel miracles of healing, perhaps the earliest account of God's word being heard through disability is the example of Moses' speech impairment in Exodus (4:10-17). Here is an example of a person with a particular disability being chosen by God - not simply in spite of his disability, but *with* his disability - to be a leader among the people of Israel.

61. Finally, at the Last Supper and in our liturgies that recall that event, we repeat the words of Christ holding before us, for the life of the world, His own damaged and disabled body: *Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you.* (cf. Mt 26:26)

62. As Paul asserted: "*we have this treasure in clay pots*" (2 Cor 4:7). The treasure is secreted in human bodies. God took dust, turned it into clay. The breath or spirit of God was contained in the clay vessel. Treasure is secreted in ordinariness, the image of God in ordinary human being. Paul's reference in the previous verse to God's creative word, "Let light shine out of darkness" reinforces the cross-reference to the creation narrative. The treasure is the divine light which has shone in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

63. Our ministry to children and adults with disability presents us with more than a chance to serve our neighbour. It presents us with a challenge to our culture where a worldly image (rather than God's image) is a priority, where ideal perfection is valued and weakness criticised, and where virtues alone are emphasised and failures are concealed. Ours is a witness to the centrality and visibility of the Cross in our lives.

64. Another fundamental challenge to theology is the attitude that is challenged by the presence of disability in our lives, is our misguided understanding of forgiveness. Misconceptions of old, often affirmed in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures and confirmed throughout Christian history, have led us at times to

connect disability with shame, sin, or a lack of faith. This is a difficult myth to dispel. When we are tempted to consider disability as punishment or test from God, we need to think differently. When families are weighed down by such feelings imposed on them by cultural attitudes, we must be swift to awaken them and ourselves to the reality taught by Christ. When asked about the man born with blindness, Christ responded:

Neither those with disabilities nor their families have sinned. But the persons who have a disability are born into this world in order that God's works might be revealed in them (John 9:3, paraphrase).

65. Each of us is born the way that we are, with the gifts that we each have, as well as with our inadequacies, in order that God's works might be revealed in us. When we think of forgiveness, we most often think of guilt and redemption. Yet the contemporary Greek word for forgiveness is *synchoresis*. The word literally means "fitting together" (*syn-chore-sis*), "sharing the same space" or "making space for all people". Perhaps such an understanding will help us to disassociate disability from sin and guilt.

### **Struggling with disabled people for their full realisation**

66. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as was the case before the Christian Era, sectors of the population who are unable to compete or to perform at the levels that society demands are vitiated, despised or, in more contemporary terms, discarded. Among them, we find a high proportion of people with sensorial, motor and mental disabilities.

67. We will find them living in any of the great cities of the world: men and women of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, colours, cultures and religions who, because they have a disability, live in abject poverty, hunger, dependence, preventable disease and maltreatment by those who are "able".

68. It is the role of the church in this new century to face the reality of humanity in the image of a disabled Jesus; the reality of people with disabilities who are rejected and abandoned.

69. It is painful that the churches throughout the world have not addressed more vigorously the sufferings of marginalized, poor, blind, deaf, and physically and mentally limited people. We do not need pity, or mercy, but compassionate understanding and opportunities to develop their vocations, possibilities and abilities.

70. In their efforts to attain peace, preserve the environment, ensure the equality of women and the rights of the child, care for the aged, churches and Christians should also include the struggle for the full realisation of disabled persons in their agendas. "*Truly I tell you: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however insignificant, you did for me*" (Mt 25:40).

71. Over the past twenty years, positive attitudes towards disability and disabled persons have increased in our churches and Christian institutions. While far from being universal, this is a welcome development.

72. But it is important to be aware that, in some parts of the world and in some churches, there has recently been a return towards overprotection and even disregard of disabled persons. In some places, we have been manipulated by evangelical groups. Even worse being ignored, manipulating disabled people could become the Church's new sin.

### **Church for all: community**

73. Perhaps when Jesus compared the reign of God to a king who prepares a banquet for his elite friends, He was remembering the passage in Isaiah.(Isaiah 25:6-7) Certainly many people who live with disability in themselves or loved ones have at times felt that a pall has been thrown over their lives, that they are considered a disgrace to their communities! In Matthew's account of this story, the king's intended guests are too caught up in their personal affairs to heed his summons. But he does not postpone the banquet. Instead, he invites whoever else who happens to be around at the moment. Jesus did not say God's reign was for a future world; he said, "the kingdom of God is at hand". It is a present reality; respond to it now! It is no longer the elite who are being summoned; rather, the presence of all those who have been ignored, forgotten, and left out is requested. When all are invited to this feast, to this church, the list will include people with physical and mental impairments and chronic illness. How does it affect our worship if, instead of inviting only those whose patterns of behaviour, speech and preferences are known, we extend an open invitation to all? What is the message for our congregations today?

74. The most evident expression of the gathering of the community is the common worship of the congregation. For the liturgy to truly be the work of the people and to accommodate the participation of all the gathered body in worship, we may need to be reminded of what God said long ago: "Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out," so there is room for everyone (Is 54:2). We may need to re-configure our space, re-imagine how we do liturgy, re-consider the role each person plays. Both the drama of liturgy and the drama of disability deal with the fragility of our lives and our dependence upon God. We need to be able to bring our struggles into our worship so that the symbols of the liturgy will be meaningful to us. Symbolically, this is God's banquet table. Have we made it possible for everyone who so desires to get there, to partake of the feast, and to join the conversation? In this gathered body, will there be a place for each person? To ensure that all can participate in worship means we need to consider how our experience and expression of liturgy engages the whole person; physical movement, senses *and* intellect. People with learning difficulties respond to the integrity of a congregation. They pick up the real and true involvement of those around them, and respond to that devotion.

75. Great significance has been ascribed to words in our teaching and worship, particularly in the Protestant traditions. The "word" of God is an important and vital part of our faith. Bible passages introduce us to people and events, recount the history of God's relationship to humankind, teach us about God's ways, and guide our lives today. The words of sermons, prayers and hymns can stimulate our minds and reach into the depths of our hearts to provoke, inspire or console us. The words we use have the power to create images and define our identities and relationships. Too often, they have *not* sounded tidings of good news or portrayed messages of hope to people with disabilities. Indeed, too often, children and persons with learning difficulties can be excluded from full participation "because they do not understand". They, along with people who are poor, homeless, sick, in prison or struggling with addictions, are often referred to in the third person as "those" in the prayers and texts our churches frequently use. This makes it sound as if these people are not an integral part of the congregation. We need to monitor our patterns of speech that create an "us/them" relationship that casts the disabled person as the outsider, the other.

76. Metaphors can also alienate some of our brothers and sisters. Equating a lack of compassion, an unwillingness to listen, or a lack of resolve to being blind, mentally ill, deaf or paralysed is disparaging and disempowering. By articulating our strengths or identity in terms that disparage persons who live with such physical or mental impairments, we align ourselves against them; we shut them out. Perhaps unintentionally, we project on them what is fearful or negative in ourselves and cast them as the embodiment of evil. The phrase "we are disfigured by sin" from a prayer of confession is an example of this insensitivity. It is doubtful that these words would bring solace to any person living with burn scars or facial deformity. Though we cannot change scripture passages that use such metaphors, we can find other ways to express the messages in our sermons, liturgies, and hymns.

77. All these words and expressions can stimulate thinking and help clarify certain points. But to follow such discourse can be tiresome or confusing for people with little education, short attention spans, cognitive disabilities or other mental impairments. Sometimes people "hear" or comprehend God's Word, and know the mystery and majesty of God's presence in their lives through a sensory experience: perception of light or colour, a picture or sculpture, a whiff of incense, silence, music, dance, a procession, a hug or clasped hands around a circle. This sensory experience in liturgy is important to all of us, but especially to children, elderly people and persons with disabilities. It should be considered in our planning of corporate worship and its setting.

78. Many elements of worship are non-verbal, and we can be more intentional about how we incorporate them to enhance the service for everyone. There is the movement of dance, drama, hands clasped in prayer or raised in blessing, making the sign of the cross, handshakes and hugs, lifting the eyes, bowing the head, offering gifts, and passing the bread and cup. There are tactile elements of anointing, baptism, laying on of hands, foot-washing, touching, and vesting. We can smell the incense, wine, flowers, and candles, and taste the bread and wine

or juice. Besides words, we hear music, clapping, bells, sighs, and breathing. Centuries ago when many did not know how to read or have access to printed material, churches were filled with visual renditions of the Bible stories. There were murals, tapestries, sculpture, icons and stained glass windows. Today, some churches still have many of these visual elements and can also make use of banners, altar hangings, colourful vestments, scarves, flowers, balloons, liturgical dance and drama to portray the messages of our faith.

79. For people who do not hear well, there should be much to see; for those with very little vision, there should be much to hear. Verbal cues from the minister or liturgist are helpful to a person who is blind. Otherwise she may spend all the service trying to figure out when she should be sitting or kneeling or standing. All that needs to be said is, "You may rise," or "You may be seated". For individuals who have difficulty sitting still for very long, there should be opportunities to move. There should always be a place for some to sit even if everyone else is standing for part or all of the service. At a service where the people are seated on the floor or ground, some sort of chair or bench should be provided for people who cannot safely get down or up from such a position. Some people cannot kneel or climb steps safely, so communion needs to be brought to their level. A clear path of travel and sure footing with no stairs is necessary for those unsteady on their feet. In the arrangement of space, people who use wheelchairs need to have seating choices so that they can sit with family and friends as part of the gathered body; they should not be limited to a space way in front or far behind everyone else, or stuck out in an aisle. Several pews can be shortened to make space for wheelchairs.

80. Acoustics will be particularly important for people who are blind or hard of hearing. Individuals with limited sight rely more on their hearing, and those who are hard of hearing need good public address systems to amplify the voice of the preacher or liturgist. Individual assistive listening devices (ALDs) that can be used with and without hearing aids may be particularly useful. Good lighting is crucial for persons with limited vision so they can make optimum use of the sight they do have. It is important for people who are deaf or hard of hearing that they can see the speaker's lips or the sign-language interpreter. A printed order of worship may be particularly helpful to people with hearing impairments. Copies can easily be produced in large print (size 18 font on a computer or enlarged on a photocopier) for people with limited vision. Large print Bibles are available and music for a service can be enlarged on a photocopier. Overhead projectors and computers can also be used to display print material in a large format for a whole congregation. While only a small percentage of people who are blind know how to read Braille, for those who do, this may be an important way to make the liturgy more accessible. Braille books, including Bibles and hymnals, take up a lot of space, so some congregations keep the pages in loose-leaf binders and remove only the ones needed for a particular service. When the service is over, the pages are put back for use another time.

81. Besides the physical accommodations such as lighting, sound systems and appropriate seating that can make a space accessible to everyone, we need to

consider the attitudes and behaviour patterns that can create barriers for people with disabilities or cause some to feel unwelcome or left out. To feel truly welcome in the church, persons with disabilities need to see people like themselves in leadership roles. For people with disabilities to play a larger role, a faith community may need to rethink its policies about who is and who is not allowed to offer welcome, usher, or participate as banner-bearer, to sing in the choir, to read the lessons and lead the prayers of the people. Is the altar area accessible to someone who uses a wheelchair or walker? Can the microphone be adjusted to different heights? Inclusion requires the conviction of the disabled person that he/she has access to leadership according to his/her abilities, attitudes and vocations, setting aside his/her complexes and frustrations.

82. Rigid codes of "acceptable" behaviour may need to be loosened. Just as some people cannot stand or kneel, others cannot sit still for a whole hour or more. They may need to stand or move about because of back pain or muscle spasms or some agitation related to their disability. Some may not be able to understand the "rules" about silence and may mumble to themselves, speak out when others are quietly listening, or utter exuberant vocalisations at unexpected moments. In these situations, as with people who "make a joyful noise unto the lord" by singing off-key, we can acquire tolerance that acknowledges such behaviour as a mild distraction rather than a great annoyance.

83. The integration of disabled people within the Church gives testimony to God's love as expressed by all His sons and daughters. It can also be an example and an inspiration in those societies in which disabled people suffer from humiliating marginalization.

### **A Church of all and for all**

84. This interim statement has outlined ideals to which every society might wish to aspire. It assumes that with increasing standards of health care, people with disabilities will be so valued, accorded equality with all, cared for in the community and not in institutions or on the margins of economically competitive societies. In such regimes of provision, rehabilitation may be less important than the achievement of a certain quality of life. Such care in the community is very expensive and is, at present, beyond the means of some societies. It may even become unsustainable in political climates which espouse low-tax economies. True care in the community tends to view disabled people in a holistic way, as this statement has attempted to show, but rehabilitation often has to focus on specific problems of impairment thus reinforcing the medical model of disability. Rehabilitation may reduce care costs and offer the possibility of a livelihood and a place in society. The fight for quality and rights tends to be encouraged by those disabled people who have no need of high dependency or who have been enabled by its services to join the articulate pressure groups seeking equality and social justice.

Whether the church is involved in provision of care, rehabilitation, chaplaincy or ministry to or with disabled people, it must recognise the central assumptions of

equality and dignity within the Christian message and promote it at the fore all its work.

85. The church is by definition a place and a process of communion, open to and inviting all people without discrimination. It is a place of hospitality and a place of welcome, in the manner that Abraham and Sarah received God's messengers in the Old Testament (Gen. 18). It is an earthly reflection of a divine unity that is at the same time worshipped as Trinity. It is a community of people with different yet complementary gifts. It is a vision of wholeness as well as of healing, of caring and of sharing at once.

*Just as the body is one and has many members so it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12:12)*

86. We all accept and proclaim that this is what the church is and stands for. It is the basis of our unity as Christians. Then why is it that, all too often, certain people among us and around us (usually those whom we consider as being unfamiliar or as strangers, as different or perhaps disabled) are marginalized and even excluded? Wherever this happens, even by passive omission, the church is not being what it is called to become. The church is denying its own reality. In the church, we are called to act differently. As St Paul says, the parts of the body which *seem* to be weaker (we should notice that he does not say "*actually are weaker*") are indispensable (1 Cor 12:22).

87. When we think of people with disabilities, too often we tend to think of people who are weak and require our care. Yet, in his epistles, St Paul implies that weakness is not a characteristic of an individual or a particular group, but of the entire church. Disability does not affect only certain individuals, but involves all of us together as the people of God in a broken world. It is our world that is shattered, and each of us comprise one small, fragile, and precious piece. We all hold the treasure of God's life in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Yet we hold it; and, what is more, we hold it together. In our attitudes and actions toward one another, at all times, the guiding principle must be the conviction that we are incomplete, we are less than whole, without the gifts and talents of all people. *We are not a full community without one another.* Responding to and fully including people with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church's defining characteristic.

88. Interdependence is the key here. Even though the secular world stresses independence, we are called to live as a community dependent on God and on one another. No one of us should be considered a burden for the rest; and no one of us is simply a burden-bearer. "We all bear one another's burdens in order to fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

89. Perhaps it is the starting point in our attitude and in our response that requires redirection at this point. Perhaps we should consider not simply the particular needs, but also the unique gifts of all people in the community. In another passage on the church as the Body of Christ, St Paul writes:

*"For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, though we are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another ..."*

Every child and every adult, those with disabilities and those without disabilities alike, will bring specific and special gifts and talents to the church. This is the challenge addressed to us all. Thus we can truly be A Church of All and for All - a church which reflects God's intention for humankind.

**May we who are made in your image, O God, mirror your compassion, creativity and imagination as we work to reshape our society, our buildings, our programmes, and our worship so that all may participate. In you we are no longer alone, but united in one body. Trusting in your wisdom and grace, we pray gratefully in Jesus' name.**

**Footnotes:**

1. In the UK, the term "carers" denotes people who offer care because of an emotional bond usually for little or no financial recompense. There are, in fact, national associations of carers which offer mutual support and encouragement. Professional care-givers are distinguished by a variety of nomenclatures. This may contrast with other cultures which may use terms like familial care-givers etc.