

Disability Inclusion in Church Service: Realizing God's Mission of Mercy and Justice

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: inclusion, disability, church service, mission. The Church is called to be a sign, an instrument, and an embodiment of God's love and justice for the world. One of the church's important vocations is to serve the vulnerable and marginalized, including those with disabilities. The Church needs to reflect on God's heart and mission that is full of mercy, equality, and justice for all without exception. This article will explore how the church can live out this divine calling by actively involving congregational members who have disabilities in ecclesiastical life and ministry. So far, church service is still in the concept of charitable diaconia rather than diaconia of community initiative development or also transformative diaconia. The research method used to solve this problem is qualitative. The expected outcome of this study is to ensure the full involvement and participation of everyone with disabilities in church service, as well as an appreciation for their dignity and uniqueness.



Introduction

Henry W Beecher, a very influential American pastor in the 19th century, said a wise phrase about the church: "The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of prominent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect people (Kaisuku, 2018)." The church is indeed a place where the people associate to worship the Creator and Keeper of Life, not a place of exhibition (Simon, 2021). Listening to this wise sentence, Beecher wants to state that the church should not be a place for people who only want to show their religious achievements or piety. Rather, the church should be a place for education, coaching, education and devotion for people with disabilities (Widharsana, 2018). The Church is not limited to spiritually mature people. Instead, it should be open to everyone, including those who are immature in the faith and those with disabilities, such as people with disabilities. As the executors of God's mission, the church must concentrate on the process of growth and learning, not only improving their appearance but especially guiding those who continue to fight for their faith. The church becomes an inclusive, loving, and focused place on self-formation and development.

The church as a fellowship of believers has an important role in realizing God's mission in the world. God's generosity and justice for all people, including those with disabilities or special needs, are essential components of His mission. In the Bible, we can find many examples of how Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, loved, healed, and empowered people with various physical and mental limitations (Matthew 15:29-31, Matthew 20:29-34, John 5:1-15).

However, the reality is that churches in Indonesia still face many challenges in developing inclusive services for people with disabilities. There is still an attitude of separation, rejection, and negative stigma that appears in the congregation against them. In addition, physical facilities and service programs in many churches are often not friendly and accessible to people with disabilities. This is certainly contrary to the church's call to be a means of God's mercy and justice for all people.

The church needs to recognize and understand that people with disabilities are an integral part of the body of Christ and have the same rights and opportunities to participate in the life and ministry of the church. The Church is called to embody a vision of inclusivity, where all people, including people with disabilities, can be engaged and recognized as equal and valued members. This is in line with God's mission of mercy and justice which wants to free people from every form of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion.

Therefore, this study examines the church's efforts to make disability into the ministry and life of the congregation. Churches can be increasingly encouraged to become a friendly, inclusive, and equitable community of faith for people with disabilities by understanding challenges, best practices, and theological grounds.

This research aims to:

1. Identify the challenges the church faces in developing inclusive services for people with disabilities.
2. Describe best practices that can be applied by the church to realize disability inclusion in the life and ministry of the congregation.
3. Examine the theological foundations that support the church's call to be a welcoming, inclusive, and just community for people with disabilities.

Research Methods

The method used in this study is qualitative. According to Sugiyono, the qualitative method is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivism, used to research the natural condition of objects, where the researcher is the key instrument. The qualitative method was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and practices of disability inclusion in church ministry. The data collection technique is carried out in a triangulation (combined) manner, data analysis is inductive and emphasizes meaning rather than generalization. For Margono, this qualitative research method will use a descriptive approach, because qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive words in the form of written or spoken words from

observable people and behaviors. This descriptive data is generally collected through observation and interviews.

Based on the opinions of Sugiyono and Margono above, it can be concluded that qualitative research with a descriptive approach is a series of activities to obtain data as it is without any specific conditions whose results emphasize more meaning. Here the author uses a qualitative descriptive research method because the nature of the problem being studied is more suitable for this method. Through this qualitative research method, it is hoped that a deep understanding of the practice of disability inclusion in church service can be obtained as well as the identification of strategies to realize God's mission of mercy and justice for all.

Results and Discussion

Disability Inclusion Theology

Human beings are created from the soil that depicts honesty, weakness and limitations. All are the same in God's eyes, but different because they were created as male and female (Sutarman & Setyawan, 2017). Differences are God's gift for humans to complement each other in life. Men and women have equal roles and there is no difference in rights and responsibilities (Hartono, 2022). It is man's limitations and weaknesses that cause him to fall into sin. Sin presents a sharp gap between humans and their neighbours, including people with disabilities (Lerebulan, 2016).

Disability in the Bible is not a punishment or a curse, but a human weakness about sin. Disability is a means of declaring the glory of (Porayouw, 2019). Therefore, the Bible shows that God invites everyone, including people with disabilities, to come to Him. In contrast to the tradition of the church in its history, it views disability as a disgrace and then emphasizes care and service for those with special needs (Manafe, 2019).

Inclusion is a philosophy and approach that accepts and values human diversity. Inclusion sees differences as normal, ordinary and valuable, not to be contested. This means that all people, including those with disabilities, have the same rights and opportunities to participate equally and fully in various aspects of life (Kasinda, 2022). As such, inclusion seeks to remove barriers and provide the necessary facilities for everyone to be involved (Simanungkalit, 2020). Changes and adjustments to systems, structures, policies, and community cultures are part of holistic inclusion. The goal is to make society more accessible, more welcoming, and supportive of diversity. Recognition and enforcement of human rights, including the rights of persons with disabilities, is the basis of inclusion. Inclusion is carried out to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities can be used in daily life, both in the world of education and amid the service of religious institutions such as churches. Although Tim Loremann and his colleagues wrote about inclusion referred to educational activities in schools, these notes were very useful for enforcing in church institutions. According to them, inclusion works best, if the stakeholders whether it is a teacher in a school or a teacher in a congregation/church who in this case are special ministers, able to understand and demonstrate effective teaching

and learning practices, and are capable of solving the problem of how the church in this case meets its needs to respond to disability inclusion.

The concept of inclusion, especially about disability, has grown rapidly since the 1970s in Western countries. The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 later reinforced this concept. Over time, the term inclusion implies the full acceptance of a student regardless of any differences, shortcomings or disabilities in a regular class by making adjustments and ensuring each student is fully involved in all classroom activities. For this to be successful, a high level of intellectual and emotional commitment is required (Daming, 2016).

The concept of inclusion, which first emerged in Western countries, has been adopted and applied with varying degrees of success in various countries outside the West, including in Asia and developing countries such as Indonesia, although it must be acknowledged that its application is and continues to be carried out, especially in the areas of education and access to public services. This concept is increasingly accepted and adopted in many countries due to the global commitment to create inclusive and accessible societies for all, including people with disabilities.

Disability inclusion in church ministry is grounded in God's mission of restoring and providing justice for the marginalized. The Church is called to manifest God's love and justice for all people, including those with disabilities. Christian values such as love, forgiveness, and acceptance of each other form the foundation for the church to embrace and integrate the congregation with disabilities fully. Christian values such as love, forgiveness and acceptance of each other are the foundation for the church to fully embrace and integrate the congregation with disabilities

Liberation theology emphasizes the liberation and empowerment of marginalized groups, including those with disabilities. In this view, the church is called to fight against all forms of oppression and discrimination against people with disabilities.

The theology of disability inclusion affirms that everyone with all conditions has divine dignity and has the right to be equally accepted, loved, and served in the church community. This theological view became the foundation for the church to realize God's mission of mercy and justice for all people.

Theological Understanding of Disability

Disability is an umbrella term used to refer to conditions in which the functions or structures of the body are limited, such as physical, sensory, intellectual and mental limitations, limitations in doing things, and obstacles to participation. Limitations – these limitations result from the interaction between health conditions (such as disease or the presence of abnormalities), environmental conditions (such as behavior, physical access, and the availability of technology), and personal conditions (such as confidence and self-motivation)

Disability comes from the word disability in the United Kingdom and is used to denote the condition and circumstances that a person is experiencing. Incapable people are considered disabled. According to this definition, disability is considered something bad or abnormal for a person.

The Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language Edition V uses the term "tuna" to describe disability which means 1. Disappear; loss; do not have; deficiency; disabled; broken and 2 not; without; - Same: Visually impaired, speechless, deaf, visually impaired, handicapped. The term "tuna" in KBBI refers to a person's lack or inability to do so, including in the context of disability. In addition, this definition often contains negative stereotypes and sees disability from a medical point of view as an individual's shortcomings, and this is no longer in line with the modern perspective that considers disability as an interaction between the individual and his or her environment

In the Regulation of the Minister of State for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia No. 10 of 2011 concerning Policies for Handling Children with Special Needs, including its attachments, as well as Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 35 of 2014 concerning Amendments to Law Number 23 of 2002 concerning child protection article 1 paragraph 7, the definition is contained as noted by Aritonang, namely: Children with Disabilities are children who have physical limitations, mental, intellectual and sensory in a long period in interacting with the environment and attitudes of the community can encounter obstacles that make it difficult to participate fully and effectively based on equal rights. Meanwhile, Children with Special Needs are children who experience physical limitations/abnormalities both mental-intellectual, social and emotional which have a significant influence on their growth and development compared to other children of their age.

According to Article 1 paragraph (2) of the Regulation of the Minister of State for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2011 concerning the Policy on the Implementation of Education for Children with Special Needs, it states that "Children with special needs are children with special characteristics that are different from children in general without always showing mental, emotional, or physical disabilities. Article 2 paragraph (1) also explains the types of children with special needs, which include: children with visual impairment, deafness, blindness, disability, impairment, children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), children with Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD), the disabled, slow learners, children with learning difficulties, children with communication disorders and children with potential intelligence and/or talent special.

From the definitions mentioned above, there are still differences in their meaning and application in Indonesia. Indeed, the definition of disability for me, as Arulang et al said, is not without problems, because disability is considered to reduce personal value to be able to participate in various life situations. Of course, participating here, the intention is to match the measure of normalism that is built. Individuals with disabilities are considered unable to participate according to these normal standards, so the concept of abnormality is considered to be representative of their existence. This understanding is an implication of the concept of normalcy created by society. Anne Waldschmidt in her article "Who is Normal"? in the book by Shelley Tremain (ed) states that a person is considered normal if he can fit in with society, obey rules, and meet social expectations.

As a result, a normal person is limited by behaviours that are oriented to dominant norms. These dominant norms then become influential social norms in every aspect of life.

Church Service and God's Mission

Diakonia or Ministry is one of the duties of the church in addition to fellowship (Koinonia) and witness (Marturia). Etymologically, diakonia comes from the Greek "diakonos" which means "servant" or "service". In the New Testament, other terms mean to serve as a slave, namely *Douleuein*, to serve for money, namely *Leitreueien*, *Leitourgein* which means to serve in general for the welfare of the people and the state and *Therapeueien* which is to serve as best as possible which is often synonymous with healing and efforts to serve about work. In the New Testament, Stephen Tong says that diakonia, which means service or service, is often associated with Jesus Christ's ministry to the poor, sick and marginalized. Diaconia is not only related to social work but also connected to the service of Christ's love, without expecting anything in return. Consequently, diakonia becomes an essential component of every Christian's vocation. In the context of the church, diakonia refers to the calling and commitment to serve others.

According to Jan Aritonang, diakonia means service or help driven by love, It was initially more personal and then developed by and to the community. In the Old Testament world, especially in the Israelites, serving was not understood as lowly, because the law of Leviticus included a willingness to serve one another. However, in the Greek-Roman world, the term *deakonein*, which means "serving the table," has a connotation of being demeaning because it is employed as a slave. To avoid that derogatory connotation, the word diakonia / *diaconein* is no longer used in the Septuagint.

Aritonang also states that this term is used exclusively in the New Testament, because there are approximately 100 times this word is used mainly for service to the people, even to those in the lowest positions. Service to others is also understood as service to God. Jesus Christ gave a new meaning and content to the term diakonia because He was the Great Theokonos. Thus the term Diaconia or Diaconia gives a broader meaning, that is, all the work done in the ministry to build and glorify Christ by those who are called as Special Ministers or members of the ordinary church. In the last few decades, especially among ecumenism movements, the concept of diakonia has evolved so that it has undergone a paradigm shift. This change is shown by three aspects: First, the aspect of ecclesial diakonia, which is currently very concerned. If in the past diakonia was seen as the activity of professional diaconal workers or institutions, it is now emphasized that diakonia is included in the nature and mission of "churching". Second, diakonia must be holistic, considering physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions, and oppose practices that tend to sort out sectors of human life. Third, diakonia promotes courageous diaconal actions, even so to speak, in solidarity with those who need them.

Based on the opinion of the above experts, it can be said that the action of Diakonia is not solely oriented to charitable ministry driven by compassion but by the awareness of faith and love and the sincere motivation of the church to bandage, restore, embrace, facilitate and perhaps even create job opportunities for people with disabilities. Diakonia is a task given by God and the church is called to be a tool of its mission that is

present to provide help and bring the signs of God's kingdom to the world and people who dwell in it.

Diaconia as said above is a call to share life with the marginalized, whose scope is not limited to the walls of the church but covers every corner of life, both socioeconomic and political. The purpose of the church's diakonia is to realize the sharing and loving community, not to create a relationship between the giver and the receiver. Diakonia must be carried out in the framework of *Missio Dei*, which is the presence and signs of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church in its presence does not build walls, but bridges, especially for the marginalized, because Jesus the Great Deacon has set an example for him. The role of the church's diakonia to the deaf cannot be separated from these three forms of diakonia, namely: charitable, reformative and transformative diakonia. Qualitative diakonia is diakonia that boils down to assisting directly individuals or groups in need without directly changing or overcoming the underlying cause of the problem. The charitable diakonia approach focuses more on providing volunteer and charitable assistance, to help people directly; Reformative diakonia refers to services or assistance that not only provide direct help to individuals or groups in need but also seek to change or improve the structure or condition that the underlying cause of the problem. This approach emphasizes efforts to address the root of the problem so that it not only provides short-term solutions but also seeks to create sustainable change in the system or environment involved, while transformative diakonia creates fundamental changes in the structure or society as a whole. This approach focuses on systemic transformation to address inequality, injustice, or other social problems more holistically. Diakonia Transformative seeks to create a long-term impact by changing the social and structural dynamics that may be the root cause of the problem. To translate these three forms of diakonia, the church needs to maximize its role for the disabled community. The Church needs to create a welcoming and missionary-friendly educational space through programs that can help sustainably. The Church must strive to create a long-term impact and address the root of the problem. The church must also be a safe and comfortable main place, a place where people with disabilities can grow together so that the negative stigma of society is reduced because they become skilled, dedicated, integrity, character and competitive people.

God`s Mission

The term Mission according to the Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language is the activity of spreading the good news and establishing local congregations, which is carried out based on sending as a continuation of God's mission. A mission is a statement about what an institution must do to realize its vision. The word Mission is a substantial form of the verb *mittere* (*mitto*, *missi*, *missum*) which has several basic meanings, namely: (1) to throw, shoot, (2). Send, send, (3) to let go, to let go and (4) to take - to tap.

The perspective of Christian missions is understood in two forms, namely multiple missions (missions) and single missions (missions). Missions or plural missions refer to the general mission owned by an organization, agency or group and so on. While mission or single mission refers to God's Mission or *Missio Dei*. God's Mission refers to God's

plan and work in realizing His Kingdom in the world and restoring all of His creation. This mission of God is based on the teachings of the Bible and Christian theology.

Arie de Kuyper also gave a definition that God's Mission or *Missio Dei* is the entire work of God to save the world through the events of the Old Testament and the New Testament which includes the election of Israel, the sending of Christ to the world, the sending of apostles and messengers of the Gospel to the nations and God is the Great Messenger. act of sending: sending, sending. So the mission is about the act of sending out, that a person is sent with full authority for a specific purpose to be achieved. This refers to the duty of Jesus' disciples to preach the gospel to all the world.

Mission is a send, so from here two terms emerge, namely *Missio Dei* (God's Mission) and *Missio Christi* which means God's self-revelation as He who loves the world, and is involved in and with the world. That is why the focal point of God's involvement in the history of the world is called mission. Christian awareness of history is a missionary consciousness that recognizes the divine mandate He is God at action in history and is history itself. The Bible clearly describes God as a person who is active and involved in the history of man and the world. Therefore we seek God's involvement not only in man's heart but also in his daily life amid this mortal world.

Mission in the Old Testament, is centripetal, meaning "from the outside to the centre". To introduce Himself to people outside of Israel, God used Israel as His place of work. This is described in Isaiah 60:3 "Nations flock to your light, and kings to the light that rises to you," and Isaiah 62:2 "Then the nations shall see your righteousness, and shall call you by a new name, which shall be determined by the LORD himself." In God's plan and purpose, Israel was always responsible for conveying to others the news of God's grace. Israel was chosen and sent by God for a purpose that was to be a blessing to other nations.

Mission in the New Testament, is "centrifugal," meaning "from the centre outwards." The message of salvation that Christ is working on must be preached to all people. The church as a fellowship of believers is chosen and sent to be the instrument of God's mission for the world. God is the God who preaches the gospel. Therefore He wills and commands that the preaching of the Gospel be carried out. Matthew 28:19-20 states, "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do all the things that I have commanded you. And now, I am with you always, even to the end of time" This is the main commandment known as God's Great Commission for His church in carrying out the task of preaching the gospel. Matthew introduced the Great Commission with a glorious announcement from Christ, "To me have been given all power in the surge and on the earth." Thus, the supreme sovereignty, perfection and absoluteness of Christ in all spheres are proclaimed here. He is the only sovereign God over history and geography, the supreme Leader who has the power and authority to send His ambassadors to proclaim the good news wherever He will. The focus of the mandate according to Matthew is "making a discipleship" Making disciples is the process of Christian development through fellowship and teaching. Christian disciples are not produced instantly, through alienation

or detached from teaching. Teaching, time, and fellowship are very important to look out for. Therefore, discipleship is understood more as a path, than as an achievement. Discipleship is a continuous school, which may take students from one level to another. Therefore, both beginners and advanced students are students. Thus Christ's commission obliges His church to make everyone a faithful and obedient disciple of Him, including those with disabilities. The chief reason for carrying out this task lies not in the words of Christ alone, but in Christ Himself and what He says and tells. The words of Christ do not create new obligations, but reveal eternal obligations, the basis upon which all the words of all things and the facts of life lie.

The existence and nature of God are the main reasons for preaching the gospel. Without it, we cannot imagine God from the point of view that allows us to preach the gospel. Therefore, if the Christian faith does not reach its peak and perfect itself by the act or act of introducing Christ to the whole world, then it is utterly unreal and meaningless, poor in power in life and unconvincingly proven to be true, Peters says in his view of Speer's writing in *Christianity and The Nations* and Philips Brooks' opinion in the same book.

Thus, the descriptions mentioned above give the idea that there is a close relationship between the implementation of draconian and the mission of the church. For the main mission exemplified by Jesus Christ is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and demonstrate it through His words, actions, and suffering. Even Jesus' humanitarian service, healing, and deliverance are integral to His mission. God's mission carried out by the church has a holistic dimension, meaning that it is not only limited to the aspect of evangelism and spiritual development but also includes the diaconia aspect which is not only charitable but transformative for the implementation of disability inclusion.

Disability Inclusion in Church Ministry: Realizing God's Mission of Mercy and Justice

The church as a fellowship of believers who preach the gospel and serve should be an example of practicing inclusion for congregations with disabilities. In the church, everyone without exception must be treated equally, accepted, and supported to be able to participate fully in the life of the church. Some things can be practised by the church in supporting the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities in their ministry (diakonia) according to Thomas Ogletree, including:

1. Accessibility of Church Facilities
 - a. Ensure physical aspects in the form of buildings, worship halls, and other facilities that have easy access for congregations with physical disabilities such as ramps, elevators, and accessible toilets.
 - b. Provide hearing aids, translated texts, and sign language interpreters to facilitate congregations with hearing disabilities.
 - c. Using printed materials with appropriate font size and contrast for congregations with visual impairments.
2. Inclusive Worship Services

- a. Design liturgies, sermons, and chants that are accessible and involve congregation participants with different types of disabilities
 - b. Train worship leaders to have sensitivity and skills to serve congregations with disabilities
 - c. Providing worship materials in appropriate formats, such as braille, audio, and video with sign language translation.
3. Small Groups and Pastoral Ministry
- a. Forming small groups specifically for congregations with disabilities to support each other and grow together.
 - b. Providing pastoral assistance that is responsive to the needs of congregations with disabilities
 - c. Train and engage congregations with disabilities as servants of God, such as music players, LCD operators, sign language interpreters, graphic designers, etc. according to their talents.
4. Advocacy and Empowerment
- a. Encourage the congregation to become agents of change that promote the rights and welfare of people with disabilities in the surrounding environment.
 - b. Organizing training, seminars, or awareness campaigns on disability issues for congregations and the community.
 - c. Building partnerships with disability organizations to increase inclusion and access for people with disabilities.

By implementing holistic inclusion practices, today's churches can be exemplary in creating a community of faith that truly accepts, serves, and empowers congregations with equal disabilities. The positive impact that will occur is that members of the congregation with disabilities become more confident, as well as change their views and reduce the stigma in the congregation against disabilities. Thus the church can be a real witness to God's mission of mercy and justice and a truly inclusive and transformative community for all.

Conclusion

All people, both with and without disabilities, are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, the church as an ambassador of God who preaches the gospel and serves, is called to realize God's love, mercy, and justice in the practice of inclusion and empowerment of church members with disabilities.

Disability inclusion in church ministry is a biblical calling and an integral part of God's mission of mercy and justice. Inclusive and accessible church ministries for people with disabilities not only reflect a correct theological understanding but also allow for full and equal participation for all members of the congregation. Disability inclusion demands the church's commitment to remove all forms of barriers, physical, structural, and attitude, that can impede access to and engagement for people with disabilities.

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