

Impulse by Martina Königer

General Assembly 2019

Some weeks ago, I was at the annual reception of Jürgen Dusel, the German government representative for the concerns of people with disability. His slogan is "Democracy needs inclusion".



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If this is so important in secular politics, how much more should the body of Christ be concerned about belonging and accessibility for all people, including those with a disability. Often we hear from Churches and Christians- we have no one with a disability- but in case one day a disabled person should come, then of course we will do something to get this person in,...

On the train on my way to Berlin I met a man who was also going to Jürgen Dusel's reception. His disability: he was very small, could not walk

well and used a special tricycle. He asked me which group I was representing at the reception. I told him, that I lead the group Perspektivforum for disability in the German Evangelical Alliance. "The Church is against disabled people," he said. Then he began sharing his experience of church. The pastor of his protestant Church said someone with a severe disability should not marry. I have no clue how he supports that statement theologically. The man on the train finally did get married despite some further barriers in the church. Then he spoke about his experience with charismatic churches- he once had a girl friend from a charismatic church. He felt hounded by Christians who wanted to pray for his healing. When they had been at an evangelistic event with Reinhardt Bonke the evangelist, participants had been send out within the event to pray for people. Sure enough he got several people queueing up to pray for him, to the point when he had to scream at them to leave him alone. One lady who had prayed for him, accused him of having a devil, for otherwise he would be healed by now. These are not extreme exceptions, but sadly are situations all too common for people with a disability. Sound theological teaching on this subject is desperately needed. **Hebrews 12:15 „ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. „**

Positive examples:

Our church hosts a welcome cafe for refugees and others from town who want to join. When I said I wanted to be part of it, my husband and others from church were looking for a way I could get into the cafe. Initially my husband built a wooden ramp, then later the area was rebuilt and all barriers removed.

The Turkish man employed to help refugees was moved to tears when he saw that ramp. In the end there were five of us wheelchair users coming to the cafe. A German atheist with his electric wheelchair, one refugee from Syria, one from Iran, a lady from Iraq and me.

Catering for our disabilities will cause trouble, inconvenience and cost money. The willingness to shoulder that burden because you want us to belong and take part will carry a message with a very significant impact. It is a practical demonstration of what the gospel of Jesus Christ really means.

Think for a moment about how a deaf person could attend a church and access to the gospel. She or he, of course, will not hear what is being said. Many deaf young people move to big cities.

In Hamburg there are about 3000 deaf people.

What is available for them there? One small evangelical gathering of about 10 old deaf people, and one protestant Church holds occasional services for deaf people a few times a year.

The only church with a heart to reach out to these people, believe it or not, is the Jehovah's Witnesses. I know this because our youngest son is deaf and we live in Hamburg.

Years ago, at the evangelistic event via satellite, called Pro Christ, in one church in Linz (Austria) the person responsible for technology decided to install an extra satellite and screen for sign language interpretation.

Through this a group of deaf people in Linz found faith in Christ. The Church then had to find a way for the new believers to attend church. They could not find or afford a sign language interpreter for Sunday service. Together with the deaf believers, they developed a way to include them. Someone now writes everything on screen for them, and the deaf community help each other with reading it. Courses in sign language from the deaf are now being run in the church.

What we do for people with disability, at the end will be a benefit for ALL!

It says in the book of Acts that observers were deeply impressed by the love shared between the believers of the first church.

The way we treat people speaks more powerfully than the efficiency of our programmes or services.

Look around at these buildings here. They are very old, the flooring is not at all level, and when it was decided to have it renovated after reuniting the East and West German Evangelical Alliances, there were many who said it's impossible to make it accessible for disabled people. It would be far too expensive; it won't work!... Now there are eight bedrooms with wheelchair accessible bathrooms. With the elevators

and ramps, I can now get almost anywhere in the building. As Perspektivforum Disability, we are regularly having our conferences here, and disabled people can freely join the different events held here.



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One day a lady from the staff of the Evangelical Alliance house here told me how inspired they were by the way Christians with disability live out their faith. **That's what inclusion means.**

We need to develop a mindset that favors belonging over separation.

Here's a challenging thought for you. Membership of all the different networks of EEA should include disabled people if they are to reflect the actual situation in society. For example, 10-13% of children have a disability. 10-13% of women have a disability. I personally know migrants and refugees with disabilities and they have very specific challenges to try to get along in midst all the others in camps which are often not accessible.

That percentage applies right across the board, affecting every network area. Having disabled people on your team or connecting to the disability network would help you to find ways to include those from your target group with a disability.

This is what makes disability different from the other networks.

You see, disability in some way affects every aspect of life. In fact, every person at some point in their life will experience disability.

The crisis in Europe of provision for poor and vulnerable people is getting worse rather than better. Christians should be making a difference here. To be against abortion is one thing. Trying to find ways to assist families with disabled children and include them in church is quite another.

Parable of the great Banquet (Luke 14, 21)

"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' Later in Verse 23 it says compel, urge them to come in, so that my house will be full."

Sometimes I think that charismatic Christians rewrite this Bible verse so it reads, "Go out quickly, heal the disabled, the blind and the lame and then they can come to your church and you won't have to struggle, or even pay money to make it accessible." Non-Charismatic Christians read this verse something like: "Stay in the house and wait until some blind and lame person knocks at the door and asks to come in. Then start to think about what you could do."! What it really says: "Go to them quickly and urgently. Plead with them to come in!" In John 17 Jesus prayed for his followers that they are one, so that by this the world will see that you have sent me. He did not say the world will understand that the gospel is true by historical analysis, good logical thinking, or exploration of scientific facts. As important all of this research and profound teaching is, Jesus said the world will realize the truth by watching how we love each other.

We may cause trouble, inconvenience and costs because of our disability. When the church accepts and shoulders that burden and includes us because it wants us to belong and take part - that is when the world will see and take note. That's when true Christianity will be seen. Let us be one, let us be

accessible, let us be inclusive, let us be united in love so that the world can see the truth of Jesus; and believe!