

Inclusion Demands Real Action!

Breaking down the social estrangement: inclusion, empowerment and accessibility for individuals living with a disability

By **Zachariah P. Duke**, The Broken Bay Institute

The theme of the 2012 International Day of People with Disability (3 Dec), “Removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all,” sends a message to break open the able-bodied world and genuinely include individuals and groups living with a disability.

Organisations and agencies across Australia, including the Catholic Church, and our own Diocese of Broken Bay, strongly support this United Nations sanctioned Day. It is our challenge to remember the specific purpose of the day and integrate it into our everyday lives – instead of just once every year!

The definition of ‘disability’ is widely debated amongst academics across the world. Those involved in this area of research jostle back and forth with their interpretations and personal insights, attempting to define and re-contextualise the precise nature of disability. The range of professions and bodies of research is broad, including psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, medical practitioners, philosophers, theologians, physicians, political scientists, ethicists, human geographers and social workers.¹ Moreover, it is evident that the term ‘disability’ is defined in different ways by individuals and groups from differing perspectives. For example, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, as a collective entity, has released, to date, eleven revised editions of its manual on the definition and classification of disabilities.²

Before the implementation of the Commonwealth Government’s Disability Services Act, 1986³, (DSA) people with disabilities were viewed as being “different,”⁴ “negative and separate”⁵ or “objects” of protection, treatment and assistance.⁶ Academics such as Oliver and Barnes,⁷ McArdle⁸ and Cocks⁹ strongly affirm that people with disabilities should be treated as individuals with the same rights as all other persons. However, individuals living with a disability were often denied equal access to basic rights and fundamental freedoms which non-disabled person takes for granted. Examples being health care; education; the right to vote; employment; developing lasting relationships; and in some instances prevented from reproducing and parenting children. They are simply not allowed to participate in these pursuits, whether subconsciously or (more often than not) consciously.



From the enactment of the DSA, there has been a dramatic shift in disability services and people living with a disability are rightly being viewed as holders of rights. Additionally, society is emerging from a long era where most people with an intellectual disability were forced to live, socialise and learn in special facilities and institutions, separate and in isolation from mainstream communities.¹⁰

It is clear that the Catholic Church in Australia accepts and welcomes all individuals and groups regardless of their cognitive and physical abilities. At the heart of Catholic teaching lays the belief that all human beings should be treated as equal and with the same dignity. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) makes clear that Catholics must seek an active role in pursuing and defending the rights of all human beings.¹¹ This theological and anthropological concept is grounded in biblical literature, especially in

the Hebrew Scriptures, where all human beings are “created in the image and likeness of God.” (*Gen. 1:27*) Furthermore, all issues that impact upon the vulnerable, sick and marginalised, are deep concerns for the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II reiterates the importance of human dignity by stating:

*The starting point for every reflection on disability is rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology; even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature.*¹²

The Catholic Church in Australia has set a challenge to the entire community in an attempt to “demystify disability”¹³ and cease the negative “attitudes and prejudices”¹⁴ against persons and groups living with a disability. The crux of this challenge is summarised in the following: “let us all commit ourselves to

take up this call and challenge, given by people with disability, to be communities where all can use their gifts.”¹⁵ During his visit to Australia in 1986, Pope John Paul II stated:

*No one is born into this world is free from human frailty whether it be physical, emotional or spiritual. Each of us must personally come to terms with this frailty... But in the providence of God a different life does not mean a less important life. It does not mean a life with less potential for holiness or for contributing to the well-being of the world.*¹⁶

It needs to be emphasised that there is always the possibility of there being a gap between the rhetoric or aspiration of inclusion and real social practice. Even in instances where attempts are made to include the marginalised, the very process can be stigmatising and may bring into sharp focus the reality of ‘otherness.’ Further, although an individual’s disability may restrict them from one or a number of different activities, their intellectual or physical ability may be unimpaired, leaving

them quite capable of determining their own destiny.¹⁷ When human interaction becomes involved, people perhaps tend to perceive individuals with disabilities differently.

Individuals and society in general often forget to remember that people with intellectual disabilities are human beings with the same basic rights, feelings, needs and dignity, which are afforded to every other individual.¹⁸

On this day, we join with those individuals working throughout the Diocese who support and minister to people living with a disability, knowing there is much more to be achieved if we are to truly be a Church inclusive of the disabled. To reiterate a comment mentioned earlier, what is critically important is action rather than mere rhetoric. Please find enclosed below, a range of books available for loan through the Bishop David L. Walker Library, which offer practical strategies to assist Church communities in the inclusion of people with a disability.

Zachariah P. Duke is currently completing his PhD at the University of Newcastle.

The title of his thesis is: “A critical analysis of a theology of disability in the Australian Roman Catholic Church: an ethnographic inquiry of contemporary inclusionary practices.” His areas of research mainly lie in the practical and pastoral strands of theology, including especially: theological voices of marginalised and vulnerable individuals and groups; faith and human development, notably in relation to individuals with intellectual disabilities; using ethnography and/or qualitative social science research methodologies to analyse a theological or sociological disjunct; and public theology, including the intersection between theology and political theory and practice. Zachariah is a lecturer in theology and biblical studies at The Broken Bay Institute and the University of Newcastle.



READING

Block, Jennie Weiss. *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*. New York: Continuum, 2002. (261.8324 BLO 2002)
 Carter, Erik W. *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: a guide for service providers, families and congregations*. London: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007. (259.44 CAR 2007)
 Eiesland, Nancy L. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. (261.8324 EIE 1994)

Reinders, Hans. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: profound disability, theological anthropology and ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008. (261.8323 REI 2008)
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Webb-Mitchell, Brett. *Dancing with disabilities: opening the Church to all God’s children*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996. (261.8324 WEB 1996)
 Webb-Mitchell, Brett. *Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. New York: Church Publishing, 2010. (261.8321 WEB 2010)
 Yong, Amos. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011. (261.8321 YON 2011)

FOOTNOTES

1. Oliver and Barnes, *Disabled People and Social Policy: From Exclusion to Inclusion*, 14.
 2. Cocks, *An Introduction to Intellectual Disability in Australia*, 43. See also Robert L. Schalock et al., *Intellectual Disability: Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports*, 11th ed. (Washington DC: American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2010).
 3. The DSA was one of the first sets of legislation passed, to acknowledge and defend those with disabilities. It can be heralded as Australia’s first exclusive legislation piece protecting individuals with disabilities, who are under the auspices of human service organisations.
 4. Mike Duggan, *Confidence and Capacity: Parish communities knowing and supporting people with disability* (Brisbane: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2003), 21.
 5. Duggan, *Confidence and Capacity*, 21.
 6. At times, individuals and groups are viewed as statistics and commodities within an algorithmic trend, rather than respected as human beings.
 7. See Oliver and Barnes, “Discrimination, disability and welfare: from needs to rights,” 267 – 277.
 8. Patrick McArdle, “Disability and Relationality: disrupting complacency,

entering into vulnerability,” *Australian EJournal of Theology* 17 (December 2010): 59, http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/301045/6.AEJT10.23_McArdle_DisabilityandRelationality_Formatted.pdf (accessed June 13, 2011).
 9. Cocks, *An Introduction to Intellectual Disability in Australia*, 1. Cocks affirms this by stating: “People with disabilities are people first and foremost. They are developing individuals in need of social and educational experiences and opportunities, and typical life experiences. They are entitled to be accepted as valued, worthwhile citizens with the associated rights and responsibilities, and able to make a real contribution to their communities.” (Cocks, *An Introduction to Intellectual Disability in Australia*, 1).
 10. S. Whitehead, “The Social Origins of Normalisation,” in *Normalisation: A Reader for the Nineties*, eds. Hilary Brown and Helen Smith. (London: Routledge, 1992) and Vera Hempel, “The Impact of Deinstitutionalisation: Where to From Here?” *Social & Public Policy Review* 3, 1 (2009): 17 – 33.
 11. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) 40, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar Documents*, ed. Flannery, 206.
 12. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Message of John Paul II on the occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the

Mentally Disabled Persons,” 2004. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jpii_spe_20040108_handicap_mentale_en.html (accessed March 8, 2011).
 13. BCFL, *I Have a Story: People with disability and their families participating fully in parish life* (Canberra: ACBC), 6. Moreover, Duggan affirms “Church communities are called to take a lead, rather than mirror what happens in society.” (Duggan, *Confidence and Capacity*, in *I Have a Story*, BCFL, 2).
 14. BCFL, *I Have a Story: People with disability and their families participating fully in parish life* (Canberra: BCFL, 2004), 7.
 15. BCFL, *I Have a Story*, 3.
 16. John Paul II, “Address to the Handicapped, Sick, and Disabled People,” Brisbane, 1986, in *Disability and Human Relationships*, ACSWC, Preface.
 17. Cocks, *An Introduction to Intellectual Disability in Australia*, 1.
 18. Selway and Ashman, “Disability, Religion and Health,” 431. Furthermore, Selway and Ashman argue that, “in some cultures, having a disability was viewed as a distinct liability.” (Selway and Ashman, “Disability, Religion and Health,” 431). See also, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of justice: disability, nationality, species membership* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 15.



Centacare’s “Boonah” Disability Arts Centre celebrates successful exhibition

Boonah Creative Arts Centre in West Pymble has recently celebrated another successful art exhibition at Gallery Red, Glebe. Many of the artists, all whom have a disability, mingled with guests and Centacare staff at the opening and throughout the duration of the exhibition. Boonah staff members shared some insight with guests into the background and inspiration behind the beautiful paintings and sculptures.

Many of the artworks sold assist in running costs of the program which is largely unfunded. Artists also receive proceeds of all sales.

Boonah is now getting ready for its Christmas exhibition that will be held in the newly refurbished West Pymble Village, an arcade, popular cafes, restaurants and a variety of other services. Commencing with an Open Day on Saturday 8 December the exhibition will run to Saturday, 15 December. Original artworks, craft and Christmas cards will be for sale as well as the opportunity to meet with some of the talented artists.

For further information about the exhibition or the Boonah art program, please contact Coordinator, Heidi Mecklem on 9499 5675 (Monday to Wednesday).

