

Discipling the Differently Abled into Disciplemakers: A Preliminary Exploration

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Discipling the Differently-Abled into Disciplemakers: A Preliminary Exploration¹

BY JACQUELINE WOO

Drawing on her own experiences as a differently-abled person² with generalised dystonia, Jacqueline Woo takes us on a thoughtful exploration of helping differently-abled Christians to become disciples and disciplemakers. This article is adapted from a chapter that Jacqueline wrote for “Enabling Hearts: A Handbook for Disability-Inclusive Churches” (to be published by the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia in 2021).

1. INTRODUCTION

Christian discipleship is central to following God in our personal spiritual walk with Jesus. Since God remains resolutely the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, discipleship has been at the very heart of Christianity from ages past to the present day. We live as disciples of Jesus because God loves us and desires to shape our everyday lives.

Unfortunately, in churches in Singapore, differently-abled Christians are usually only *present* in churches, rather than being actively disciplined or taking on the role of a disciplemaker. While disability ministries are making headway into Singaporean churches, even in churches with such ministries, these ministries are often conducted separately from mainstream services, resulting in the continued alienation of Christians with disabilities from the wider congregational community. Sadly, it is also not uncommon to hear skeptics opining that it is impossible to meet the needs of the differently-abled, which can be rather discouraging to differently-abled Christians who love God and wish to be part of the faith community.

¹ This paper was also published in an Easy Read version entitled “Discipling Christians with Disabilities into Disciplemakers”.

² The author recognises that there are different conventions for referring to people with disabilities, e.g. person-first language. In this article, she has chosen to use the expression “differently-abled” to highlight the Holy Spirit’s gifting of *all* Christians with a *diversity of abilities* to build up the Church.

Without engagement with other members in the body of Christ, differently-abled Christians are often left to their own devices, and bereft of deep relationships. To address their own spiritual needs, they sometimes turn to online platforms (e.g. online sermons, websites, podcasts, social media) but such alternative faith modalities do not lessen the need for a loving church community. Without such a community, differently-abled Christians might backslide and lose faith in God, sending them down the path of apostasy.

As such, it is imperative that we take a step back and consider how we can empower our fellow differently-abled brothers- and sisters-in-Christ to be disciples of Christ, and even more, to be disciplemakers, proactively serving to edify others in the Church community. Such empowerment is, of course, a complex question, and this article will merely serve to undertake a preliminary exploration of the issue.

The article is divided into the following sections: It will first (1) clarify what discipleship is, and then (2) identify some existing gaps in inclusion in Singaporean churches today. Thereafter, it will (3) pose some questions that concern the core elements of Christian discipleship, and end by suggesting (4) some practical advice concerning how a local church might promote the inclusion of differently-abled Christians in discipleship and disciplemaking.

2. WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

In the Bible, discipleship is undergirded by two key relationships. The first relationship is between God and the individual believer; the second is between the Christian community and the individual believer. Both relationships are equally important in God's eyes and are deeply interrelated. As Jesus emphatically states: "By this all people will know that you are *my disciples*, if you have love for *one another*" (John 13:35, italics added).

***“Discipleship
– understood as ‘following after one’s Lord’ –
is an integral component of Christian identity.”***

This quote by Jesus also highlights a key dimension of discipleship. Disciples are marked by the desire *to follow Jesus* – to be shaped in their thoughts, feelings, and actions to be more Christlike. Early Christian confessions of the faith often articulated the gospel in the pithy expression “Jesus is Lord” (e.g. Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:11). Thus, these early Christians defined themselves as people who submitted themselves under the *lordship* of Jesus. As such, discipleship – understood as “following after one’s Lord” – is an integral

component of Christian identity. We must not fall into the mistake of conceiving discipleship as merely learning facts about God, but rather see it as developing an intimate relationship of obedience under God and following His lead.

Moreover, discipleship is important to God because it shapes Christians in Christlikeness. This is the very purpose of the gospel. As Paul writes in the Letter to Titus (2:11-14),

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ *who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.* (italics added)

Discipleship is God's way of shaping followers to become holy, righteous, and pleasing in His sight so that they might also pass on that character to others. The common evangelical dictum "saved not by works but for works" captures this dynamic accurately. As Paul further reminds us in his Letter to the Ephesians (2:8-10):

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ *not a result of works*, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (italics added)

Sometimes when people ask, "Why did God choose to save us?", we casually answer this question by simply saying, "God loves us." While this is true, it is an insufficient answer, for God also has a *purpose* for saving us, namely, to shape us through discipleship into Christlikeness.

Moreover, we must also not misunderstand discipleship as that which takes place within a church setting only on a Sunday. Instead, it is a continual process that Christians undertake *through* the week as they seek to live out the will of God in all of life, whether they are in church or not. Thus, for example, discipleship occurs even at work, e.g. a differently-abled Christian working at a non-governmental organisation can advocate for justice in order to reflect the kingdom values of God (cf. Micah 6:8).

So, what is the "will of God" that disciples seek to follow? This is closely related to the theological concept commonly called the *Missio Dei*, i.e. the mission of God. This is the mission that God has chosen to undertake for creation, with the will of God being His desire to see His

mission fulfilled. This then further leads us to ask: What is the *Missio Dei*? Namely, it is to renew all of Creation by bringing it under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, i.e. what the Bible calls “the Kingdom”. This is why the aforementioned differently-abled Christian doing justice work is engaging in discipleship, since the “kingdom” that Jesus seeks to introduce is characterised by justice (e.g. Matthew 12:18, 20). Therefore, how we work in the marketplace is as much a part of discipleship as what we do at church.

3. THE DISCIPLESHIP GAP FOR CHRISTIANS WITH DISABILITIES

How can we enable differently-abled Christians to actively participate in discipleship and be disciplemakers? In order to answer this question, we first need to identify the gaps, challenges, and obstacles that lie in their way. In my experience, these include (not exhaustive):

1. Little or no opportunity to attend church services that are accessible to them, e.g. the lack of a Deaf service;
2. The inability to keep up with a regular worship schedule due to the challenges of daily living, e.g. behavioural meltdowns;
3. Insufficient opportunities to build relationships with other Christians in a home setting, e.g. ministry activities are restricted to the church building which might not be accessible for some differently-abled Christians;
4. Inaccessible venues, e.g. older church buildings might not be upgraded to be aligned with modern building accessibility codes;
5. Exclusive mindsets that see differently-abled Christians as incapable of being discipled and disciplemaking, e.g. treating them only as objects of charity;
6. Lack of formal training opportunities for differently-abled Christians, e.g. the availability of training opportunities for differently-abled Christians who wish to enter into full-time ministry;
7. Rejection by church members resistant to cultural change, e.g. it is not uncommon to hear parents of neurotypical children ask for differently-abled children to be placed in their own segregated Sunday School class;
8. Even when church ministries are targeted for differently-abled Christians, what is taught is not connected with how differently-abled Christians live the other six days of the week thus limiting discipleship to only what takes place during “church time”.

Given this plethora of challenges, differently-abled Christians may then feel obliged to “self-exclude” to avoid causing trouble to their local church, or even lose confidence in their ability to participate in the faith community.

4. RETHINKING THE CORE QUESTIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Given the present less-than-satisfactory situation, it is essential that churches rethink current practices, attempt to foster hospitable attitudes, and implement disability-inclusive practices. This, in turn, will allow differently-abled Christians to live out their spiritual lives within the context of a loving faith community as God intended. Such “rethinking” is, of course, a challenging task. So, where might one start? Nancy Eiesland, a pioneering disability theologian who herself was a person with disabilities, argued that in order to promote inclusion, it is important to (re)engage with the core elements of the Christian faith, so that inclusion does not degenerate into mere tokenism.³ Rather, by engaging with such core elements, the resulting theological formulations will be inclusive enough to welcome both persons with and without disabilities.

“What role do persons with disabilities play in the communication of the Gospel in the Bible?”

In this vein, some questions that churches seeking to be disability-inclusive need to ask include:

1. *The Bible*. What does it mean to read the Bible from the perspective of the differently abled?
2. *The Gospel*. What role do differently-abled persons play in the communication of the Gospel in the Bible?
3. *The Sacraments*. What do the sacraments (the Lord’s Supper, Baptism) have to do with differently-abled Christians?
4. *Ecclesiology*. What is the meaning of “the Church” and how does that relate to the inclusion of differently-abled Christians?

By rethinking these key dimensions of the Christian faith, a more inclusive form of discipleship might be obtained that transcends mere tokenism.

³ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 20-23.

5. PRACTICAL STEPS

At the same time, in order to complement the aforementioned task of theologisation, it is crucial to reformulate church practice to facilitate the inclusion of differently-abled Christians. Here, drawing from my own experience and observations, I offer some suggestions that churches might take to promote the discipleship of differently-abled Christians.

At its most fundamental level, the Church functions as the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). As a collective body, we should acknowledge and invite differently-abled Christians to be not just a *part* of the church community, but also to play an *involved* role in the affairs of the church by using their God-given gifts and talents. In order to do this, a mindset shift is required: We need to assume the giftedness of differently-abled people, and thereafter seek to identify those competencies. After all, Scripture attests that all Christians are gifted by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:11) to build up the Church in love. While identifying such gifting might be a challenging task, undertaking such a task would be crucial to sensing how God leads His people. It is therefore a core task of church leadership that must not be neglected. Further empowerment could then also come in the form of allowing persons who are differently abled to take on discipling roles where they demonstrate gifting in that area.

“While identifying such gifting might be a challenging task ... it is therefore a core task of church leadership that must not be neglected.”

In addition to this, churches could also undertake an internal audit of the accessibility of church facilities and practices, based on guidelines generated together with the differently abled.⁴ These guidelines could then serve as a blueprint for the creation of best practices for church services, cell group meetings, and other activities of the local church. One key area concerning accessibility is communications. Communication could be thoughtfully organised on accessible platforms using technology to bridge the gap for persons who have communicative disabilities. For example, over an online written chat, communication is enabled between Deaf and hearing people.

Another way of creating greater access into the community is through education and changing mindsets. To foster inclusion, churches should regularly talk about disability during

⁴ See, for example, Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore, MD: Brookes, 2007).

congregation-wide activities to foster awareness, correct misconceptions about persons with disabilities, and sustain the idea that the differently abled are very much a part of God’s beloved family too. Where possible, just like we would do for other members of the church, it would be a good practice to publicly celebrate the achievements of differently-abled Christians as a testimony to God’s goodness and faithfulness in their lives. Additionally, churches could also learn from other churches with disability ministries or institutions that are disability-centric and cross-pollinate ideas.

Often, the most painful part of having a disability is not the disability itself but the resulting social isolation. As such, it is paramount to recognise that one of the key goals of discipleship is the generation of rich networks of relationships in the local church that promote mutual growth. For a start, churches could match volunteers to be spiritual mentors or buddies to differently-abled Christians. Such volunteers could serve at both the spiritual and practical levels, by providing friendship and providing concrete help. Importantly, when doing such matching, churches should respect the individual agency of differently-abled persons by consulting with the individual first,⁵ rather than *only* consulting their caregivers or family members.

“The most painful part of having a disability is not the disability itself but the resulting social isolation.”

If a church member’s disability is severe or fluctuates over time, causing them and their family to miss church for an extended period, these mentors/buddies can then mobilise other church members to offer pastoral care. For example, church members could offer to deliver meals, lend a listening ear and presence, or drive those in need around as they run errands. In this regard, we seek to follow the Lausanne Covenant’s vision of “the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.”⁶

⁵ Do note that in some circumstances, it might be ethically inappropriate to consult with the differently abled first *without their guardians being present*, e.g. when they are children or when they are intellectually-disabled. Flexibility should be applied in such circumstances while still bearing in mind respect for individual agency of the differently abled.

⁶ John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: Complete Text with Study Guide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 32.

6. CONCLUSION

Differently-abled Christians often do not have the opportunities to be disciples or disciplemakers in the Church community. Many local churches still have some way to go in conceptualising and nurturing a level playing field, so that persons with and without disabilities can co-participate and co-lead in discipleship. Including Christians who are differently abled in discipleship and disciplemaking ultimately starts with this question: Do we know them well enough to identify the gifts that God has equipped them with to build up the Church? When we look at them, do we see a potential usher, Bible study leader, song leader, Sunday school teacher, mentor, prayer warrior, or even church leader? Or do we simply see a disability?

There remain many unanswered questions and unfilled gaps for differently-abled Christians who wish to be disciples of Jesus. As the situation stands now, the Church does not look like one body of Christ. It looks more like a set of conflicting limbs – less than the sum of its parts. While there is no simple answer to this situation, we need to start the journey of inclusion now, one step at a time. God will bring us to His Promised Land in His good time.

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Jacqueline WOO read History at the National University of Singapore while living on campus at the College of Alice and Peter Tan, and graduated with a BA (Hons) in 2017. She is currently working in corporate communications. She recently wrote a 31-day devotional entitled *Let Us Consider* based on her daily experiences of disability (co-authored with Dr Tan Lai Yong).

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