

Christian Literature and Living

“Was Blind, But Now I See!”

www.christianliteratureandliving.com

www.christliving.com

International Online Monthly Journal

ISSN 1548-7164

6 : 1 January 2010

Ministry to the Disabled

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Disabled Is a Collective Term

Let us begin with an observation: the term *disabled* is a collective term that embraces a variety of disabilities including deafness, blindness, etc. This field has seen a variety of changes in terms and concepts. For example, the term *deaf and dumb* was dropped with the adoption of *hearing impaired*, which, in turn, is being dropped in preference for *hearing challenged*, etc. The Bible does not use a collective term, and for that matter it appears that many other faiths also do not use a collective term.

Dwindling Interest in Ministry to the Disabled

Around the world there is a welcome increase in governmental and secular efforts to develop institutions to help the disabled. On the other hand, unfortunately, one notices a dwindling interest in developing ministries for the disabled in our missionary efforts. Our missionary training curriculum, in particular, has very little focus on the ministry to the disabled or handicapped.

The Need to Include the Ministry to the Disabled in Missionary Training Curriculum

A significant part of humanity is under the category of disabled. Our missionary trainees need to develop an awareness of the nature and problems of the disabled. They need to be taught the specific features of disability and trained as to how they could serve the disabled and their parents and caregivers.

Secular Surveys

Governmental agencies in many nations undertake surveys of disability in their respective nations. For example, a survey conducted in Botswana in 1991 had the following questions:

Does any member of this household suffer from any of the following disabilities:

1. Blindness in one eye
2. Blindness in two eyes
3. Deafness in one ear
4. Deafness in two ears
5. Inability to use one arm
6. Inability to use two arms
7. Inability to use one leg

- 8. Inability to use two legs
- 9. Dumbness
- Other (specify)

A survey conducted by Canada in the same year (1991) had the following questions:

1. Do you have any difficulty hearing what is said in a conversation with one other person?
2. Do you have any difficulty hearing what is said in a group conversation with at least three other people?
3. Are you able to hear what is being said over a telephone?
4. Do you have any difficulty seeing ordinary newsprint, with glasses or contact lenses if usually worn?
5. Do you have any difficulty clearly seeing the face of someone across a room , with glasses or contact lenses if usually worn?
6. Have you been diagnosed by an eye specialist as being legally blind?
7. Do you have any difficulty speaking and being understood?
8. Do you have any difficulty walking 350 meters/400 yards without resting?
9. Do you have any difficulty walking up and down a flight of stairs?
10. Do you have any difficulty carrying an object of 4.5 kg. for 10 meters, or 10 pounds for 30 feet?
11. Do you have any difficulty moving from one room to another?
12. Do you have any difficulty standing for more than 20 minutes?
13. When standing, do you have any difficulty bending down and picking up an object from the floor?
14. Do you have any difficulty dressing and undressing yourself?
15. Do you have any difficulty getting in and out of bed?
16. Do you have any difficulty cutting your own toenails?
17. Do you have any difficulty using your fingers to grasp or handle?
18. Do you have any difficulty reaching in any direction?
19. Do you have any difficulty cutting your own food?
20. Because of a long-term physical condition or health problem, are you limited in the kind or amount of activity you can do:
 - a) In the residence or institution?
 - b) In other activities outside the residence or institution such as travel, sport or leisure?
21. Do you have any ongoing difficulty with your ability to remember or learn?
22. Because of a long-term emotional, psychological, nervous, or psychiatric condition, are you limited in the kind or amount of activity you can do:
 - a) In the residence or institution?
 - b) In other activities outside the residence or institution such as travel, sport or leisure?

The survey in India, conducted in 1981, had only one question: "Is there a physically handicapped person in the household? If so, indicate number of those who are totally (I) blind (ii) Crippled (III) dumb." There are quite a few nations with simpler questionnaires.

Information was taken from the United Nations website
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/disability/disabmethodsDISTAT.aspx>

Because of the efforts of the United Nations, national governments and non-Governmental agencies, we do have quite a bit of information and statistics on the disabled. Our missionary training needs to follow such information and use the same for training missionaries to serve the disabled.

Developing a Bible-based Theology of Disability

The Word of God clearly tells us that all of us, all races, ethnic groups, genders, the disabled, et al., are all made in the image of God. We read in Genesis, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them..." (Gen. 1:27). We also read, "the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong" (Ecclesiasts 9:11).

There are passages in the Bible that have been torn apart from the context and criticized as if the disability is a curse or sin. Passages such as Exodus 4:11, Leviticus 21:16-21, and even Luke 5:20 have been misinterpreted.

Moses pleaded with the LORD, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow in speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10). However Moses was anointed as the leader. Likewise, we also read in 2 Samuel 4:4 the moving story of Mephibosheth, who was made a cripple.

Apologetics on Disability - A Definite Need for the Missionaries

We need to include the Bible-based theology of disability in our missionary training courses because the redemptive power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands in clear contrast in these aspects against the theology of Karma and Samsara of Hinduism and Buddhism (or fatalism in several other religions). In such theologies, the sins of the past lives are offered as explanation for the present condition of the disabled person.

On the other hand, we believe and know that God is perfect, that there is no speck of darkness in him, that there is only one life, that we are all born in the image of God and that we all have the same invitation to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Apologetics on the mission field need urgent training in these aspects, apart from the command of the Lord to love and care for the needy and poor. A clear answer about the wrong belief that the condition of disability is brought about by sin or curse is given by our Lord himself in John 9: 2.

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

This, indeed, is a call for us to serve the disabled for the glory of God.

God's command to love one another extends to all. We read in Leviticus 19:14, "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind." Moses declares in Deuteronomy 27:18, "Cursed is the man who leads the blind astray on the road." In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the Lord tells us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." We also read that the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:22).

The Need to Learn about the Salient Features of Disability

The purpose of this paper is not to develop a full-fledged theology of disability, but we only wish to draw the attention of our missionary training schools to the need for an appropriate training program that will help missionaries prepared well for ministry in this area.

We suggest that apart from understanding the distribution of disabilities in a nation or multiple nations of the region, such as South Asia, it is also important to impart instruction presenting the salient features of the disability. The goal is not to train them as caregivers but to endow them with an understanding that will help them minister and counsel the disabled and their caregivers effectively and lead them to seek appropriate professional help.

Representation of the Disabled in Creative Literature

This is yet another important area to which Christian writers and artists should devote adequate attention to impart knowledge, understanding and empathy toward the disabled among the people. School textbooks and teachers should take a lead in this area right from the early school education. Love and grace is only one aspect. Extending recognition and acceptance is an important part of Christian ministry to the disabled. That the disabled have rights and skills of their own and that they contribute to the enrichment of lives of people through their own hard work and skills must be recognized as a matter of fact.

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