

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES INCLUDED INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST

By Monica Gartner

This paper includes lived experience along with academic references to illustrate that churches need to include people with disabilities in the body of Christ. People with disabilities are essential and a gifted part of the church community, yet many continue to fall short in including them because of physical and attitudinal barriers. As the shepherd of the church pastors have the obligation to provide an inclusive environment for their entire congregation and the church community can now take action to be more inclusive towards people with disabilities.

My name is Monica Gartner, I am a woman with a disability born into a Christian family in Toronto, Ontario. My life is a mosaic melody of experiences that has drawn me down several different paths. However, one path remains the same, my love for God, and the need for acceptance in society especially the body of Christ. All too often I am the only person in a wheelchair in a church. As time passes, I see seniors in church, but not younger people. I do not see many people with various types of disabilities. Why is that? It is my hope and prayer that the Christian community will become more accepting of all people with disabilities.

I grew up in a Christian home in British Columbia (BC), Canada. My mother was raised Baptist and my father was Lutheran. Together they settled on an Evangelical Free Church. We did what most Christian families did at the time - we went to church on Sundays and my sister and I attended the then Pioneer Girls (now renamed to Pioneer Club a church program for young girls) during the week. I would join in when I could as I was often recovering from either a broken bone or surgery to fix a broken bone. I have a rare bone disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI) or brittle bones.

Osteogenesis Imperfecta is a genetic disorder that is caused by the inability to process type 1 collagen. The result is decreased bone density; there are five primary types from mild to lethal. Originally, I was diagnosed with the most lethal form, but later it was determined I have type III a severe form that can be identified by fractures at birth, bones that curve on their own, and blue sclera. I experienced hundreds of fractures when I was a child, and my parents found it difficult with no family living close by.

My parents met and married in Toronto, Ontario. My mother's family moved from Alberta to British Columbia, so my parents thought it would be good to be closer to family for emotional and practical support. However, once they were settled they soon discovered they didn't get the support they desperately needed. Instead, my aunts told my mother it was the sins of her past that caused me to be

disabled. My mother was instructed to repent her sins. Clearly my relatives didn't fully understand or read what the Old Testament nor the New Testament said about disabilities. Ezekiel 18:20 states, "The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them." But after Christ died on the cross Jesus forgives our sins. We read in the New Testament, in John 9 1-3, "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." Therefore a child's disability has nothing to do with sin.

My mother grew up in an ultra-conservative Baptist Church where, for example, going to a movie was considered a sin. Regardless of my mother's past she felt guilty and was pressured into taking me to a healing service conducted by an evangelist and preacher called Kathryn Kuhlman. Kuhlman was from the United States and known for her healing conferences. She came to Vancouver in 1975. I remember sitting on a regular chair in the audience with thousands of people all around us. As Kuhlman spoke, I heard people yelling out, "I've been healed!" "I've been healed!" I looked down at my small legs with scars from surgery, but they looked the same. My heart sank. I didn't get healed I was very downhearted that night. The next time I broke a bone I asked my mother, "Why doesn't God love me?" I can't remember what she said as I was crying from the pain.

There were other times when my parents asked the church to pray for me. One time, I was sitting in my chair in the aisle of the sanctuary; the congregation gathered around me. They touched me on the shoulder, or arm, or head and started praying. I remember feeling claustrophobic as all I could see was a swarm of people surrounding me in a circle. I wanted to jump out of my skin. No one asked me if this was okay or if it made me feel uncomfortable. I knew my parents and the congregation wanted the best for me, but it scared me at the time.

Years after the church and family prayers didn't produce any healing some of our relatives said the ultimate insult to me. "You just don't believe in God strongly enough because if you did, you would be healed by now." My heart ached with sadness. Why was it so hard for my mother's family and the church to accept me just as I am? I wanted so much to be included not just in family events but also the church. I wanted to join the choir because I loved to sing. However, the choir director did not want a teenage girl in a wheelchair on the stage. My dad talked to the choir director and explained that my singing would be a blessing and that he should let me sing. There were so many activities I could not participate in but singing I could do. Thankfully, I was able to sing in the Christmas choir that year.

However, since there was no ramp, a few men lifted my chair to the stage. Unfortunately, the church was not structurally inclusive back in the 1970s.

In my twenties, I relocated to another city. With the help of my parents, I contacted a large Mennonite church and asked if the youth pastor could pick me up in my van to take me to college and career night. Once I made some friends, they drove my van to take me to church. I was not able to drive at the time, and at the time there was no other way for me to attend church. I became a member of the Mennonite church, and I asked to join the choir for the Easter production. In my mind the wheelchair shouldn't be a problem because it was the 1980s. However, the choir director didn't approve of an electric wheelchair on stage. He had another choir member talk to me explaining that in Jesus's time there were no electric wheelchairs; therefore, it would be best for me to be in a wheelbarrow if I wanted to sing in the choir. I was upset for two good reasons. First, it would be dangerous given my bone disease to be in a wheelbarrow. If the wheelbarrow tipped or I got bumped I could break a bone. Second, it felt like the church was rejecting me. My chair is an extension of who I am. God made me in his image and he loves me just the way I am. Again why can't the church! I find it fascinating that Nancy Eisland wrote about a disabled God in her book called *The Disabled God*.

Unfortunately, a choir member resorted to weaponizing the word of God by quoting Ephesians 5:21. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." I explained that the congregation would be blessed with me singing from my heart in my wheelchair. Admittedly, they would see my chair for the first few minutes, but then it would fade into the production. Thankfully, the choir director conceded and I was able to sing in the Easter production.

Finally in my college and career days the Youth Director decided to put on a cantata. It was an open call, and anyone could join. When I asked to join there was no question I could participate. He was one of the few pastors who treated me like any other youth. I loved the arts, and he inspired me. He made me feel welcome and accepted just the way I am. We all went on a college and career retreat, and I was able to attend because one of the cabins had a ramp. However, my friends had to help me to the washroom because the washroom in the cabin had a step. When I arrived at the conference centre, the director of the facility realized that Bible study sessions were up a flight of stairs. He along with the youth director understood I would not be able to participate if it was up a flight of stairs, so they changed the bible study to be held in the gym. That is love, acceptance and inclusion in action.

The Body of Christ and Full Inclusion

Acceptance and inclusion are vital for every human being in society and especially in the church. Unfortunately, people with disabilities have had to fight to

be included in every aspect of life. The church should be different from the rest of society because people with disabilities are part of the body of Christ. For the body to thrive, all parts must be included and utilized. (Pudlas, 2019)

The Bible talks about the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. The body represents the Christian church and the believers of Christ with Christ being the head of the church. The body has brothers and sisters, and they all have gifts. “All” means everyone; therefore, this also includes people with disabilities. We, too, can and should contribute to the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12: 23-24 Paul states the absolute use of weaker members of the body. (23) The parts that are less honourable are treated with special honour. And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty, while the representable parts need no special treatment. (24) God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it. This truth suggests that people with disabilities should not have minimal contact with the body, but be honoured. It is difficult to contribute to the body if people with disabilities are isolated. Some people with disabilities are isolated because of their non-verbal communication; some communicate with hand signs, while other have symbols on a board or a notebook. There are still other people with disabilities that make different sounds or display awkward movements that draw attention from the normal activities of the church. (Rick Langer, Summer 2011) If some people with disabilities have different ways of communicating, they can still contribute to the body of Christ, even if they are only able to accept help from others because of their developmental challenges.

People who use wheelchairs require modifications to get into the church, such as a ramp or elevator. Why not remove some pews, so people in wheelchairs can feel a part of the congregation instead of segregating them to the very back or the very front of the sanctuary? Washrooms can have automatic openers, sinks with motion detectors, motion sensitive lights, water flow, soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers, and napkin dispensers. People who are visually impaired require closed caption or large print and people who are hard of hearing or deaf one need sign language to understand what is being spoken. People with sensory challenges or people with autism may require a different space with lower lighting, lower volume or even braille. Do churches automatically think of disability access for their congregation? Generally, churches may not think of all the adaptations that are necessary because the church might not be large enough to accommodate every disability. Accommodations cost money and may also require volunteers. Some churches are very small and were never designed for people with disabilities.

Historically, public buildings including churches have not included universal design. The concept of Universal Design started to emerge in the late twentieth century. Ron Mace, an American architect, challenged the status quo. He advocated for equality and access for all to reduce the systematic discrimination that society had

and still has towards people with disabilities. At the same time, major social change started to emerge due to civil and human rights. People with profound disabilities and major injuries sustained from World War Two are living longer because of medical advancements. A new philosophy called “inclusion” began to allow people with disabilities to have easy access to societal designs. Universal Design redesigned the everyday environment. They created curb cuts, lowered the floor entrances of buses, lowered kitchen counters, and instituted closed captions for hearing impaired or deaf people. They included verbal crosswalk signs, easy door handles, utensils for better grip, and automatic door openers, to name a few. Their redesigns were the impetus for the Americans with Disability Act in 1990.

Activists fought hard in Canada as well in the 1980s and 1990s for reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities in society through the human rights commission in the provinces across Canada. Some progress has been made. In 2019 the Canadian Disability Benefit Act was proposed but did not come into effect until May 15, 2025. Then there is the Accessible Canada Act to create a barrier-free Canada by 2040. The intent is to identify, remove, and prevent systemic barriers for people with disabilities.

While federal and provincial laws are changing, it is unfortunate that people with disabilities still must struggle to persuade churches to become more accessible. Recently, my church has undergone seismic upgrades and restoration. On the list for accessibility is electronic doors. The front door does not open when I’m trying to get into the church. If I am a bit late and my caregiver isn’t with me, I have to bang on the glass door in the hope that someone will let me into church. They are aware that accessibility is a problem, but I am told by one of the pastors that things take time. Why do people with disabilities still have to fight so hard to have access to the word of God? Is it a lack of knowledge, a lack of understanding, or a lack of will?

The Leper’s Window

In medieval times people who had leprosy, an infectious disease, wanted to have access to Mass. Porter, an Anglican appointee and co-chair of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada’s Task Force on Ability and Inclusion explains:

In the 11th Century, the church cared deeply about its leper community, so deeply that the church allowed them access at a distance to the Mass. Not only were lepers allowed to witness the Mass through the lepers’ window which allowed them to participate in it at a distance, but they were also allowed in many churches to receive the host.

The Task Force on Ability and Inclusion went on to state, “In Christian communities, we are still at the lepers’ window. We are good. We care about disabled people. We give them access. We want to share with them. But access is not inclusion, and that is a huge issue.”

Giving access is removing physical barriers, but inclusion is a much broader concept that creates an inclusive environment that allows people to feel comfortable, valued, and respected. Full inclusion allows all people to participate regardless of racial ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic background, physical or mental disability. Inclusion is for all people regardless of shape, size, colour, or ability.

Inclusion is not just making a building accessible. Inclusion is not giving “Special” treatment because a person has a disability. Inclusion does not mean that the church has the need to “fix” or “heal” people with disabilities. The church should not condemn a person or a family member with a disability because a disability has absolutely nothing to do with sin. Disabilities happen, and God can and sometimes heals if he wants to but there is a bigger picture that we cannot see. Jeremiah 1:5 states the following: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart”. In God’s eyes I have meaning and a purpose just the way I am. In Psalm 139:13 “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to you, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

The word “knit” implies to nurture and care for the person intimately. Nurturing helps to encourage the well-being of the person. God has the well-being of his people in mind physically, emotionally, physiologically, and intellectually. God wants them to be joyful and fulfilled. In Psalms 37:4 “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” And in Psalms 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of Joy; at your right hand are pleasures forever more. Unfortunately, not many people with disabilities are in church and those that have disabilities are usually the elderly.

Ableism

Unfortunately, the church is plagued with the same social issue as the rest of society, called ableism. Ableism is a profound social discrimination against people with disabilities. The disability can be physical, developmental, behavioural/mental health or even sensory. Is it possible that on some level society believes that people with disabilities are inferior and or are incapable of making decisions on their own? Examples of false assumptions about people with disabilities include: they cannot hold down a full-time job, they cannot be financially independent, they cannot drive a vehicle, they cannot travel, they cannot have intimate relationships. While I was in a restaurant line-up on a ferry a woman turned around and stated, “Isn’t it nice that

the government lets you go on vacation!” My reply was, “Yes, thank you for paying taxes because I am a civil servant!” She flushed and turned around. People with disabilities are considered less than worthy, therefore they do not have the same access to medical care as their able-bodied counterparts because of physical and attitudinal barriers. This is very prevalent in the healthcare industry. I have experienced this and so have some of my friends.

Most people with disabilities are well aware that they are not entirely independent, but they have interdependence. When they have access to a network of friends, assistance and technology they can make informed choices and decisions about their lives. They are not a liability to society but an asset because, with supports, they can live normal lives.

In the spring of 2023, I developed a severe pneumonia and was admitted to my local hospital. When my oxygen level dropped critically low, and I had to be admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The ICU doctor asked a leading question. “You want a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) order don’t you?” When I responded, “No,” he insisted that we contact my next of kin (my sister). He assumed that she had medical power of attorney over me but she does not. I felt manipulated into saying yes to a DNR at that time.

While still recovering in the hospital, I was admitted a second time to the ICU because I was given too much hydromorphone which caused my lungs to collapse. The BiPap machine was pumping over 88 percent oxygen into my lungs. The doctor inquired how much medical intervention I wanted. He said I might need a tracheostomy and, if I survived the surgery, I would spend the rest of my life in an institution. I knew that was incorrect because I know people with a tracheostomy living in the community. I told him I was a woman of faith. I would make two plans, one in case I die, and the other in case I live. I prayed, exercised, and maintained a positive attitude every day. I endured a form of psychological abuse from the nursing staff who questioned me. “What do you mean you live alone?” “You are not on oxygen at home?” The disability dogma has existed throughout history in medical settings and in religious settings.

Social Model of Disability

To remedy these systemic barriers, the church should adopt a social model of disability rather than a moral model or medical model. The moral model of disability stems from misinterpretation of the Bible. One is sick because of sin, and the disability is a result of that sin. Thankfully, the church is moving away from this model. The medical model of disability sees a person with a disability as an “impairment” that needs to be fixed or cured. The person needs to be rehabilitated to fit into our society. (Christos Meletis July 2025)

In contrast the social model of disability is a conscious effort to resist viewing a person's disability as an impairment or being sick, moving towards acceptance of the person. The social model of disability rethinks disability not as an individual medical deficit but as the result of attitudinal, environmental and political issues. (Nurse Next Door, 2022) The environment was not designed with people with disabilities in mind, thus there are structural barriers to buildings with the lack of ramps or elevators to get in the building, washrooms that do not accommodate a wheelchair accessible stall, and sinks that are too high or have the wrong handles. While legislation is slowly changing, the barrier of attitudes cannot be legislated. The attitudes of the medical system in recent years have gone backward with the introduction of Medical Aid in Dying. This goes beyond the scope of this paper. It is imperative that everyone be seen as Imago Dei (Image of God). Since attitudinal change cannot be legislated, people must get to know one another through friendship.

Friendship

How does a church attract people with disabilities who have difficulty attending church? What did Jesus do? According to the Bible, Jesus had many friends. As in any organization, including religious organizations, friendship is vital. Friends share their lives, which contain sorrow and joy. Friendship is necessary for their physiological, emotional and physical well-being. Friends bring them emotional support, reduce stress, help them gain self-esteem, and keep them accountable when overcoming difficult decisions or obstacles. These friendships help them overcome loneliness and improve their overall health. They are created for relationship. (see Genesis)

Some people were introduced to the church through family or friendships made at work or other social activities. It is generally the connections that they make through friendships that keep them coming back. Of course, life stages might change certain aspects of friendship, for example, people get married, have children, or move because of work. But at the core the friendships usually remain. However, when persons have a disability, it is very difficult to find and keep friends. Depending on the type of disability it may be physically challenging to get to a church service.

When I moved out, my parents helped me find a church. I am an extrovert, so I do not find it too difficult to talk to new people. But transportation to church was only one challenge. Before I get to church, I need someone to help me out of bed, help me get dressed, assist with some personal care, make me breakfast, and then get to a church. Over the years, I have found it difficult finding caregivers who

can get me up early on Sunday mornings. I have interviewed caregivers who tell me that they are Christians, but they cannot come early because they are going to their own church. Still other caregivers tell me I need them too early on a Sunday morning. The time of day is important for people with disabilities who require assistance getting up in the morning. I was fortunate that I could make friends and that I had a job that allowed me to purchase a van, so my friends could drive me to church. The church I attended at the time started at 11 a.m., so my caregiver came at 9 a.m. to help me get ready for the day.

Not every person with a disability is as fortunate as I am. There is a service in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia called Handi-Dart, and one can book a trip to appointments. However, one has to book a trip five days in advance and be ready to be picked up a half hour or more before the booking time because the bus picks up other people along the way. Also, it is possible to be a half hour or more late because again the bus is dropping people off on the way to the destination. The bus has door to door service which means, if the person with a disability is ambulatory, the driver will walk a person from the door to the bus and from the bus to the entrance of the building. There also is have a taxi saver program that allows a person with a disability to take a taxi to their destination at a discounted price. However, the number of discounted tickets that persons with disabilities can buy each month are limited, and not everyone can afford the discounted price. Not everyone can leave their home because of medical challenges. Christ met and made friends with people on the street and in their homes.

Christ met his friends in various places on the road and in people's homes. He reached out and met people where they were. The socioeconomic status the person came from did not matter, but rather acceptance, respect, support, and trust with one another. The Canadian Oxford 2001 edition defines friendship as "1 A the feeling or relationship that friends have. B an instance of this (our friendship is very important to me)." Jesus felt that friendship was very important to him as well. In John 15:15, Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

Members of the body of Christ should become friends with one another just as Christ became friends with many people, such as his disciples. People with disabilities may not come to church because they do not know that the church is accessible. Educate the leadership team and the congregation on correct etiquette on how to interact with people who have physical, emotional, physiological, and intellectual disabilities. If the church does not have the financial resources to remove physical barriers, hold a fundraising event to finance the renovations. Ask the congregation for volunteers to drive people to church. Connect with government organizations and or private organizations to try and help facilitate caregivers to assist

people with disabilities to get up on Sunday mornings. Have volunteers visit people with disabilities who cannot get to church throughout the year.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic taught society that it is possible to listen and watch a sermon online. My church arranged for us to be paired up with another congregation member. We exchanged information and connected with each other every couple of weeks. This further helped to sustain mental health and removed the feeling of loneliness, and reduced anxiety. It brought us closer together, and friendships developed. While this helped reduce our stress and anxiety of being alone, it does not replace face-to-face contact when getting to know a person and making a new friend. Through friendship comes love. There is no greater love than God's love for us when he gave his own Son to die on the cross for everyone, including people with disabilities.

Jesus says in John 13:34, "A new command I give to you; love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." A person cannot love another person unless one gets to know the other person. In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Four Loves*, he writes, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal." Humans are made to love one another; they are made to be in relationships with one another; they just need to step out of their comfort zones and start opening their hearts, and minds.

Conclusion

Create a plan to include people with disabilities in the congregation. Talk to the leadership team and ask the congregation if they know of people with disabilities who would like to come to church but cannot and why the person cannot. Ask the person with a disability what their needs are. Would they like to attend a free Alpha presentation? Ask people with disabilities if they would like to serve in the church and what kind of role the person would like to perform. People with disabilities know what their abilities are, but perhaps the person would like to learn a new skill; give them a chance. If possible, consider having a later service, and or having the service in sign language or with closed captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing. Do not try to "heal" the person - you cannot. Only God can. Ask for permission to pray with people with disabilities, and if they are not comfortable, respect that and pray for them silently. God will hear the prayers. Like any other congregational member, remember to show up when people with disabilities are in need.

When I was in the hospital my family and friends from my church came to visit me several times. They encouraged me, made me feel like they care, and whatever happens, they accept me. Those people are my true friends. Friends show up when they are needed most even if it is just listening. The people of God are to

be friends with one another within the body of Christ and serve together. After all, God made me in his image just like he made you. The people of God are to do as God asks: “Love one another as I have loved you!” (John 13: 34-35)

Monica Gartner has a rare bone disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta and has fractured over 500 times. Her parents were told she would not live past one last year Monica celebrated her 60th birthday. She is a writer, keynote speaker, published author “Overcoming the Impossible a Life of Trials and Triumphs” Monica serves on the board of Technology for Living and founded a non-profit organization called Canadian Assisted Travel Society. She is available for speaking engagements and accessible church consultations. <https://monicagartner.ca/>

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