

UNDERSTANDING ABLEISM

Part 1: Ableism Basics

Ableism in the Bible

Ableism is not a new phenomenon. Picture Bartimaeus sitting at the side of the road outside of Jericho (Mark 10: 46-52). He may have worked before he became blind, but he is now relegated to sitting outside the town wall and begging for his living. Hearing that someone important is passing by on the road, he takes the initiative to ask people in the growing crowd who the man is. Upon learning that Jesus is near, he shouts to get Jesus's attention. Those around him, presumably including some disciples, try to shush him. Other translations say they rebuke, scold, or sternly order him to be quiet, but he persists. The crowd deems Bartimaeus unworthy of Jesus' attention. Probably wanting to get on the good side of Jesus, their tone turns **patronizing** when Jesus calls for Bartimaeus to come, but they don't offer to guide him to Jesus.

Note that all words in **bold** print are defined in the *Ableism and Disability Glossary*

In Jesus, Bartimaeus encounters a different sort of response. Jesus looks at him, seeing him as a whole person who can speak for himself, and asks what he wants. Jesus makes no assumptions but listens to the response. "I want to be able to see again." Since Bartimaeus appears to be quite independent, his request was likely due to the isolating effects of being blind in that era. Jesus offers healing and a return to community. Bartimaeus is so touched that he leaves his cloak behind and follows Jesus into Jerusalem and the passion week drama that was to unfold.¹

What is ableism?

While the words "sexism" and especially "racism" confront us daily, many in our churches are not familiar with the term "ableism". Moreover, when organizations lift up oppressed and **marginalized** groups, prejudice and stigma against people with **disabilities** may be among issues that remain forgotten. Rather than questioning why buildings and events do not accommodate persons who use wheelchairs or cannot see, people assume that the situation is just the way things are. We don't see the underlying ableism, for instance in the actions of denominations that lobbied successfully against churches being subject to the **Americans with Disabilities Act** (ADA) in 1990.²

If we don't have a disability, we may be unaware of how much **able privilege**,³ or unearned advantages, we enjoy because of the way our world is set up. We may make well-meaning small talk, only to be offended upon learning that we have inadvertently committed a **microaggression**⁴ that is perceived as a put-down or dismissal of the person with a disability.

Learn more about *Able Privilege* and *Ableist Microaggressions* in the *Ableism Toolkit*

*...I ran into preconceived ideas about my abilities. When asked to read the Scripture for the opening convocation service, I accepted the request, even though I sensed it was given because of my belonging to a minority group. After this beautiful service one of the professors came up to me and said "I did not know someone like you would be able to read so well." I was startled, even though I knew the professor's words were meant as a compliment and he did not hear what those words could sound like to me.*⁵ Rev. Dr. Evy McDonald, New York and Desert Southwest conferences.

Actions like insisting on praying for healing when this has not been requested, or offering unsolicited help, fall into this category. Even the United Methodist Social Principles⁶ and some disability theologians tend to categorize persons with disabilities as the "**other**," or outsider. When people with disabilities are written off as "they" or "those people" and the terms "we" or "us" are reserved for the temporarily **able-bodied** and **able-minded** eighty percent of the population, the Body of Christ is broken.

What does ableism in the church look like?

In the context of the church, ableism should be easy to spot. Sanctuaries with no chancel access for wheelchair users communicate that no one with a disability is expected, certainly not to serve as preacher, liturgist, or choir member. Remodeling budgets that favor new carpet and pew cushions over **pew cut** spaces, **accessible** family restrooms, or **hearing loop** systems relegate persons with disabilities to second-class citizen status. Hymns and liturgies regularly equate disabilities such as blindness or deafness with sin.⁷ Persons with disabilities may never be asked to serve on committees or as teachers, but rather treated only as ministry recipients.

*As a wheelchair user, I have never worked in a church in which I had access to the pulpit. When preaching, I constantly have to endure comments about how people cannot see me because I am preaching from the floor. While I appreciate people's need to stand in order to feel they are properly worshipping, it is disheartening when you have to remind people that "standing" is not necessary in order to be in an attitude of worship.*⁸ Rev. Hank Jenkins, Missouri conference.

Events are planned without consulting people with disabilities, checking the **accessibility** of the venue, or arranging for **accommodations** that would enable equal participation. Requests for captioning of audio messages and verbal explanation of projected images and printed messages are often met with eye-rolling and the implication that the person asking is being bothersome. Families of children with atypical disability-related behavior are often asked to leave and find a church that better meets their needs. Is it any wonder that many people with disabilities find it exhausting to try to participate in church life, even while yearning for the fellowship and faith development that would come from truly **belonging** to a welcoming faith community?

What are the effects of ableism?

The repercussions from ableism are many, and all of us lose. Individuals with disabilities need thick skins to let the daily offensive comments and actions (microaggressions) bounce off instead of wounding them, but this consumes energy better spent on daily living. In addition to battles with low self-esteem and **internalized ableism**, there are tangible external effects. There is a well-grounded fear of not receiving adequate medical care, especially when facing COVID-19 complications or a terminal diagnosis.⁹ Many have extra expenses for treatments, medical equipment, caregivers, and transportation, while income opportunities are limited. The gap in employment between people with and without disabilities is significant. Accessible housing is hard to find because not enough is being built, creating lengthy waiting lists for places that are both affordable and accessible.

Church members whose gifts are not used in the church may offer them elsewhere, or their unused gifts may atrophy. Pastors with disabilities who are called to the ministry and complete their expensive seminary education, but are denied a chance to serve, offer an unnecessary sacrifice that wounds the church and the individual.

I have had more than a few 'good Christians' inform me that my disability was likely a result of sin.... God was angry, and specifically God was angry with me.... That misguided type of theology robs you of so much. It steals hope and life from you, but worst of all, it steals the love of Jesus from you.¹⁰ Rev. Jonathan Campbell, Greater New Jersey conference.

Churches lose opportunities for making disciples and transforming the world when ableism limits congregational membership to persons who appear to be non-disabled. This culture of **normalcy** reinforces stigma and keeps members from sharing about their **hidden disabilities**, including mental health concerns. Churches forgo potential innovative models of ministry that could be generated by people well-equipped by disability to offer creative problem-solving and ideas. After experiences of rejection, some persons with disabilities become bitter. They may spread their distaste for the church to friends and family members who see the church as irrelevant at best, toxic or abusive at worst. Congregations lose when the pastor who may be the best fit for their situation is excluded because of architectural or attitudinal **barriers**.

When people with much to contribute to society lack the options to do so, and instead are forced into financial dependency by ill-conceived laws and policies, society loses. Tolerance of stigma and prejudice against people with disabilities contribute to society's divisiveness. The worship of autonomy and productivity keeps some of us on a workaholic treadmill where quality of life and relationships are limited, excluding others who cannot keep up with these expectations.

Anyone who does not currently have a disability could easily acquire one tomorrow, yet ableism persists and contributes to a generalized fear of living with a disability. All of us lose when bound by myths of perfect bodies and minds that must stay forever young and capable.

Instead, as Christians we are called to acknowledge that we are all interdependent and that mutual help within church and society benefits all of us.

How do we dismantle ableism?

So how can we address ableism? We can start by assessing how well our congregations provide accessibility and opportunities for full **inclusion**. We can ensure that the voices of people who identify as disabled are at the table before church buildings are designed and when events are organized. We can learn to use inclusive **person-first language** unless requested to use **identity-first language**. Before any decisions that affect people with disabilities are made, people with disabilities must be at the **speaking center**¹¹ of the conversation. If some of us are uncomfortable around persons with specific types of disabilities, we can learn and practice appropriate disability **etiquette**.¹²

Find the link to the *Annual Accessibility Audit*, tip sheets on *Dos and Don'ts for the Disability Ally* and *Approaches to Dismantling Ableism*, and the *Ableism Resource List* in the *Ableism Toolkit*.

*Listen! Listen to people who tell you what helps and hurts. Listen to our stories. Believe us. Include us in processes. Expand the circle.*¹³ Rev. Chris Wylie, Upper New York conference

We need to follow the path of Jesus, who modeled that all are created equal in God's sight. As he respectfully engaged Bartimaeus, we too need to treat each other with dignity, offering community and hope as we do ministry together. We need to spend time in introspection and discussion to address able privilege and **implicit bias**. We must listen and respond to the voices of those of us with lived experience of disability. All of us can become disability **allies** and speak up when we see injustice and ableism. Joining Bartimaeus and the crowd, we can move forward together to the new Jerusalem. We can help create a church and society where people of all abilities are valued, and the full expression of God's kingdom on earth is a little closer.

Part 2: Ableism - going deeper

Types of ableism

Ableism is a broad concept, covering a range of discriminatory actions and attitudes which favor persons without disabilities. Refusing to serve customers with disabilities and taunting people are examples of **explicit** (or overt) **ableism** in which perpetrators know exactly what they are doing. Such actions may have declined over the decades with the passage of laws requiring accessibility, reasonable accommodations, and education in the least-restrictive setting. These laws have increased the visibility of persons with obvious disabilities who are now less frequently restricted to institutions and segregated classrooms. Implicit bias, hidden to the person who holds the negative attitudes, remains unchecked. According to some studies,

implicit (or unconscious) bias against persons with disabilities is more prevalent than that against persons of other races or ethnicities.¹⁴

Internalized ableism is often experienced by persons with disabilities who grow up believing the negative messages they have heard about themselves. Unlike other minority groups, many children with disabilities lack the support of peers who face similar life situations. They may have been mainstreamed in school alongside typical children or have rejected being grouped with other children with disabilities because of a desire to fit in and **pass** as non-disabled.

*A disability became something to “hate and fear” and I, unfortunately, began to believe it to the core of my being. I started to feel as if no place – not even a church – was safe. I began to realize that people treated me differently, and expected less of me than they expected of others of my age. Teachers would ignore me; the other children would tease me or completely ignore me.*¹⁵ Rev. Jonathan Campbell, Greater New Jersey conference

Many do not find a disability community of advocacy and affirmation until they become adults. Disability advocates endorse the social model of disability, accepting their bodies as they are after realizing that most of their limitations come from society’s lack of access and accommodations rather than from their impairments.

Laws, buildings, and policies often discriminate against people with disabilities, which is known as **systemic** or institutionalized ableism. Denominational opposition to the ADA is one example. Building inspectors may ignore state accessibility codes rather than enforce them. Some countries have refused to ratify the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**,¹⁶ which outlines minimum standards needed to integrate persons with disabilities into society. Laws which eliminate access to government health care coverage for persons who want to work may trap people in poverty.

Intersectionality describes the added stigma faced by persons who live with multiple oppressed identities such as a disadvantaged economic status, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Each additional status contributes to overwhelming statistics regarding rates of abuse, incarceration, poverty, and health disparities among people with disabilities. A future article will address intersectionality in more detail.

Causes of ableism

Ableism stems from many factors and backgrounds. Western society’s emphasis on economic productivity and rugged individualism plays a role. While human traits come in an abundant variety that contributes to the diverse beauty of society, many people retain the belief that some bodies and minds are better than others. Popular media reinforces intolerance when people with disabilities are seldom portrayed as well-defined characters with personality and **agency** rather than as caricatures.

The emergence of the normal curve and concept of “normal” versus “defective” or “deviant” in the mid-1800s was amplified when IQ testing began in the last century. Experts could sort

people into categories, overlooking the many flaws of these tests. The medical model of disability comes out of this orientation, positing that individuals with disabilities have deficits that need fixing. The **eugenics** movement evolved at the same time, and the church was complicit or silent.¹⁷ Many disability advocates note a resurgence of the eugenics mentality in medical care rationing, selective reproduction, and support for assisted suicide.

In the church, ableism comes in part from co-opting societal norms rather than adopting Christ-like values. Biblical texts read through a literal lens may cause some to insist that people with disabilities could be healed “if they only had enough faith.” Hebrew scriptures are misused to insist that anyone with a “blemish” is not fit for service in the church, since only male priests with perfect bodies were allowed to perform temple worship rites (Lev. 21:18). Historically the church has followed a charity model, offering support out of pity or duty, without discerning what people with disabilities perceive as their needs. While this led to the establishment of hospitals and residential homes providing valid services, these institutions also tolerated abuse and encouraged segregation.

Individuals may retain ableist beliefs they were taught as children unless challenged by exposure or education. Due to fear of the “other,” people may unconsciously reject persons with disabilities whose presence triggers the realization that they, too, may someday have a disability. United Methodist retirement homes that for many years banned wheelchair users in common dining areas catered to this fear. If someone has no close friends with disabilities, ableist behavior may come from a lack of knowledge and awareness. In turn, this often leads to misguided attempts to offer compassion and do *ministry to* and for people with disabilities, rather than *ministry with* people with disabilities.

Moving beyond the charity model, medical model, and even the social model of disability, the church can embrace a relational model¹⁸ which recognizes we are all members of the Body of Christ, diverse but stronger together.

Written by Deaconess Lynn Swedberg

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<https://sojo.net/articles/resisting-ableism-american-church>

See also: <https://adata.org/factsheet/religious-entities-under-americans-disabilities-act>.

³ Leibowitz, Cara (2015). 10 Examples of Walking Privilege That All Walking People Should Acknowledge, Dec 2

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<https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/03/19-examples-of-ability-privilege/>

⁴ Keller, Richard M. & Galway, Corrine E. (2010). Microaggressive Experiences of People with Disabilities in Derald Wing Sue *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact*, pp. 241-267. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved at <https://in.nau.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/185/2018/04/Microaggressions.pdf>.

⁵ McDonald, Evelyn (2012). What? And She’s Disabled, Too? In Walker, Robert (Ed.) *Speaking Out: Gifts of Ministering Undeterred by Disabilities*, p. 116. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace.

⁶ *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2016), Paragraph 162.I.

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- ⁷ Hermans-Webster, Corrie (2018). Ableism in United Methodist Hymnody, from Boston University Theses and Dissertations: <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/30025>
- ⁸ Jenkins, Hank, personal communication.
- ⁹ Powell, Robyn (2020). The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Brought out Society's Alarming Disregard for People with Disabilities. Mar 25, 2020. *The Appeal*: <https://theappeal.org/coronavirus-disabilities/>.
- ¹⁰ Campbell, Jonathan, A Journey to Wholeness, In Walker, Robert (Ed.) *Speaking Out: Gifts of Ministering Undeterred by Disabilities*, p. 180. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace.
- ¹¹ Eiesland, Nancy L. (1994). *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, pp. 81-83. Nashville: Abingdon.
- ¹² Disability etiquette: See <https://umcdmc.org/resources/ways-to-welcome-all/etiquette-and-communication/>.
- ¹³ Wylie, Chris, personal communication.
- ¹⁴ Nosek, Brian A. et al. (2007) Pervasiveness and Correlates of Implicit Attitudes and Stereotypes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 18(1), pp.1-53. Retrieved at http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~dchugh/articles/2007_ERSP.pdf
- ¹⁵ Campbell, Jonathan, *Ibid*, p. 179.
- ¹⁶ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
- ¹⁷ Repentance for Support of Eugenics, *Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church (2016)*. Resolution #3184: <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/social-principles-and-resolutions/repentance-for-support-of-eugenics-3184>
- ¹⁸ Shakespeare, Tom (2014) *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*, 2nd Edition. (p.2) New York: Routledge.