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Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities

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ADDRESSING DISABILITY IN A HEALING AND RECONCILING COMMUNITY

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This presentation is made within the overall theme of CWME, which is “Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities”. The emphasis of the plenary is on “community. And the way community life may or may not have healing and reconciling quality and effect. I have attempted to explore this in the light of persons with disabilities in the contemporary church and society.

The terms “healing” and “reconciling” are all so common to us especially in the ecumenical fraternity to the extent that it is assumed that they mean the same and evoke the same positive feelings to all of us. This is certainly not the case. To the people of South Africa to whom apartheid is still flesh in their memory, and to the peoples of the Sudan who are just emerging out of many years of conflicts that has brought about a lot of suffering, the terms will have an understanding of bringing hope and sense of creating harmony with neighbors that were once enemies. In societies which are still hopelessly torn apart by armed conflicts and dominated by the experience of death and suffering, the terms will have no meaning and their use will be considered as consistent reminder of the suffering. Even among persons with disabilities in the church and society, the terms will have very different meaning and experience depending on the circumstances of different individuals.

As the WCC Interim Statement “A Church of All and for all” rightly points, “No social group is ever the same, and disabled people are no exception to the rule. We come from a variety of cultures, and are thus culturally conditioned in the same manner as every person. We have experienced different kinds and levels of medical care and differing social attitudes. We have come to an acceptance of our disabilities by diverse routes. Some of us have been disabled since birth, either by congenital conditions or by the trauma of birth itself, whilst others have been victims of accidents or have had disabilities develop later in life.” This makes the two terms have very different meaning to different individuals contrary to the common view of the society as observed in the statement that “In the case of disability, it is often assumed that healing is either to eradicate the problem as if it were a contagious virus, or that it promotes virtuous suffering or a means to induce greater faith in God.”

If your disability is as a result of sickness or accident, the term healing come with the yearning and hope for recovery for as long as you have not accepted that as a new condition in your life. To those who have been disabled since birth and have gone through the necessary processes of adjustment, the term healing has little to do with their disabilities until others remind them of this understanding. To them, disability and sickness are two very different things and healing applies to sickness and not to disability.

Let me make it clear at this point that there is no doubt in my mind and to many persons with disabilities whom I know that divine healing is biblical and applicable in the Christian faith. However, its understanding as it relates to persons with disabilities is made complex by differing teaching, doctrines and theology. Some of these have made the word healing anathema in the ears of persons with disabilities. This is especially the case where the Disabled people become vulnerable to easy commercial fixes and religious groups, which offer miraculous healing in the setting of superficial acceptance and friendship. A few scenarios can illustrate this:

Take the case of a well-known evangelist from abroad that jets with his whole team of assistants to a city in Africa. Prior to his arrival, the city is alight with posters and media announcements about his powers to heal and inviting all those vexed with all manner of infirmities for healing. An entire school for the physically disabled turns up at the stadium where the evangelical crusade is taking place with all the hope for cure. An Alter call for those with needs is made after the sermon and the enthusiastic ushers push forward all the children on their wheelchairs and crutches to the front. A moving prayer is made and everyone is called upon to receive healing by jumping out of the wheelchairs and throwing off their crutches. The ushers assist the children by pulling them off the wheelchairs and taking away crutches. Although in the confusion some get badly heart, no cure takes place and the crowd scatters away some carrying with them the crutches as evidence of some imagined cure and in the process inflicting more suffering on those poor kids left in the field unable to move.

Another case is that of a mature Christian with a disability who turns up to such an evangelical gathering with the simple objective of listening to the word of God from the reputed evangelist and thereby receives spiritual blessings. An alter call is made for those who would like to accept the Lord and those who have needs requiring prayers. The enthusiastic ushers believing, rightly or wrongly that the disabled Christian must have come to seek healing pushes him in the front without any consultation or even consent. No healing takes place and as the crowd scatters away the "poor" disabled is left alone, still with his disability, the reason given being that he had no faith. Hypothetical as this may look to you, these are live experiences in the part of the world where I come from and I have personally been a victim of such circumstance. As can therefore be seen, whereas healing can bring joy and relief, it can also bring pain, frustration and serious theological questions.

One might want to ask, are the healing stories today a matter of faith, reality or imagination? Are some, if not most of the evangelists who claim divine healing especially where it refers to cure or fixing up of impairments that course disabilities true to their proclamations or are they seeking self glory impervious of the humiliation, embarrassment and frustration on the part of those who are the subjects of their attempted healing missions? Most important, in this modern age of information, communication and technology with all the assistive devices to enable persons with disabilities too function in the society and to take part in nearly all aspects of societal's life, is miraculous cure or fixing of impairments in the body the central reason for presenting those who bear these impairments to God? Were this the case, then the soul which is the ultimate subject of the gospel mission is less important than the physical body. People, irrespective of their bodily condition need to hear and to be reached with the gospel. They need to partake in getting the gospel to others. Their impairments can neither be a cause for their remission of sin nor excuse for their failure to play their part in the extension of the kingdom. This is best illustrated by the example of Saint Paul who, having a bodily condition he calls a thorn in the flesh that troubled him prayed three times to have it taken away. Instead of a cure, God assured him that His

grace was sufficient to uphold him. In the process, Paul gets the revelation that God's strength is perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 12: 7-8). Is that same grace not sufficient to persons with disabilities to March on as crusaders of the gospels and partakers of the Kingdom?

I have mentioned differing teaching, doctrine and theology. These have at times led to serious and unhelpful paternalistic and patronizing attitudes in the church. The interpretation and believe among some churches that there is relationship between disability/sickness and sin has made them develop an attitude of pity and sympathy to those disabled or sick. To them, the presence of people with disabilities in the church is a sign that the church is unable to combat the devil that is the source of these infirmities. The response to this is endless prayers for those in this condition and when these prayers do not yield the expected result, the victim is blamed for having no faith. Consequent relation is that the person in question will opt to stay away, not only from that particular church but also from the Christian faith. This explains why more often than not, persons with disabilities feel alienated, marginalized, embarrassed and in some cases offended by the treatment meted on them by the church.

Whereas we cannot blame a church for the interpretation of the bible that they may adopt, it is necessary in this age that a more inclusive and empowering theology and therefore interpretation of the bible be adopted. Although Jesus in his language in some of the gospel healing stories seems to have associated healing with forgiveness of sins, he is at the same time the one who led the way in departing from this line of thoughts. Referring to the man born blind in John 9: 1-3, contrary to the believe expressed by his disciples that the man must have been blind because of either his own sins or those of his parents, Jesus made it clear that his blindness had nothing to do with sins. He was blind so that God's work may be made manifest in him. The interpretation to the gospel healing stories needs to take this line of thought.

The healing stories in the New Testament and especially those in the gospel had a hidden dimension that modern society should consider as it deals with disability in the modern concept of healing and reconciliation. In the first place, Jesus made precedence in including the sick and the disabled as a focus of concern in his ministry. He chose to use healing to unite them with the rest of the society. Prior to his time, they were excluded, ignored and considered unclean. His reconciling mission meant good news for the poor, release for oppressed, recovering of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4: 18).

Healing as a means of reconciliation in respect to the ministry to persons with disabilities had two complementally dimensions. These are cure and restoration. Restoration has been seen in this context as what could be defined as healing to distinguish it from cure. His mission had to take into consideration the aspect that the society of the day best understood. That was the cure though it was only a means to the end and not necessarily the end. What was and still is most important in our reconciliation message is the acceptance, inclusion and restoration into the mainstream of the society. In order to understand this aspect of the mission, let us take a few examples.

When the blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52) received his sight, we are told that he joined with the rest of the crowd that followed Jesus. He became one of them and was no longer isolated, excluded and ignored. He was no longer the blind beggar on the roadside. Not only was he cured from his blindness, he was restored and reconciled with the rest of the society which henceforth had rebuked him, screamed at him, spoke at him instead of speaking to him, considered him different, inferior and imperfect.

In the story of the physically disabled man at the Beautiful Gate (acts 3: 1-10), it is clear that on gaining strength in his legs, he entered the temple and joined with the rest in worship and praise to God. Prior to that, he was a stranger who, though always in the sight of the temple had no business with what went on there. His cure was the means to his reconciliation not only with the people but also with God. He

became a worshiper like the rest of the community. He was no longer different as he had been reconciled with his people.

In the John 5: 1-18 story of the man who had been at the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years, we are told that he met with Jesus later after his cure in the temple. This might probably be the first time that he had ever been to a temple because prior to that, his disability according to the Jewish culture and religion made him unclean and therefore unworthy of being in a holy place. Like the other two, he had been restored, set free, made human and therefore reconciled with the rest of the Jewish people.

There are approximately twenty-six different scriptures on people with such infirmities as paralysis, blindness, deafness or physical disabilities in the Gospel. There are, in accordance to the Judeo-Christian culture and practice of the day some main distinct characteristics in all of them. They have no names; they are poor, unemployed, beggars or servants. They are patronized, treated with contempt, publicly rebuked and humiliated. It is from this state of affairs that Jesus declares that he came to set the captives free and to give release to the oppressed. His healing mission, though at times within the language of forgiveness of sin as this is what the Jews understood was precisely to set free those who had lived in the bondage of oppression, ridicule and humiliation. He invited them to his banquet table contrary to the expectations of the prevailing norm and practice.

As already mentioned in the WCC Interim statement, at the beginning of the 21st century, as was the case before the Christian era, sectors of the population who are unable to compete or to perform at the levels that society demands are vitiated, despised or, in more contemporary terms, discarded. Among them, we find a high proportion of people with sensorial, motor and mental disabilities. We will find them living in any of the great cities of the world: men and women of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, colours, cultures and religions who, because they have a disability, live in abject poverty, hunger, dependence, preventable disease and maltreatment by those who are “able”.

It is the role of the church in this new century to face the reality of humanity in the image of a disabled Jesus on the cross; the reality of people with disabilities who are rejected and abandoned. It is painful that the churches throughout the world have not addressed more vigorously the sufferings of marginalized, poor, blind, deaf, and physically and mentally limited people. We do not need pity, or mercy, but compassionate understanding and opportunities to develop our vocations, possibilities and abilities.

In their efforts to attain peace, preserve the environment, ensure the equality of women and the rights of the child, care for the aged, churches and Christians should also include the struggle for the full realization of disabled persons in their agendas.

Suffices to mention that over the past twenty years, positive attitudes towards disability and disabled persons have increased in our churches and Christian institutions. While far from being universal, this is a welcome development. But it is important to be aware that, in some parts of the world and in some churches, there has recently been a return towards over-protection and even disregard of disabled persons. In some places, evangelical groups have manipulated us. Even worse than being ignored, manipulating disabled people could become the church's new sin.

In light of the above, it is necessary for the church to consider defining healing in dealing with persons with disabilities in the widest possible meaning to ensure that all aspects of their lives is sensitively and realistically covered. One helpful option is to define it in a way that makes clear distinction between healing and cure. Healing is understood to be the removal of oppressive systems, whereas curing has to do with physiological reconstruction of the physical body. In this kind of theology, disability is a social construct and healing is the removal of social barriers. From this perspective, the healing stories in the

gospels are primarily concerned with the restoration of the person to their communities, though for purpose of making it illustrative for the Jews, it went with cure of physiological conditions.

The prevailing emphasis on physical healing of the body found in the charismatic theology is not the only problem persons with disability encounter in the Church. The more liberal theology of the traditionally known organized churches too has its share of keeping persons with disabilities outside. In the first place, the charity approach to disability has been the most negative aspect in their address to disability concern. They are largely responsible for the growth and maintenance of a “helping” profession, which relegates persons with disabilities to a receiving end. Helping becomes an excuse for exclusion and this is characterized by separate schools, rehabilitation centers and other caring institutions. Very few churches have so far developed procedures for initiation of persons with disabilities and especially the intellectually disabled into sacraments prerequisite to full church membership. In the process of caring, persons with disabilities are not considered to have anything to offer in the church. Even those well exposed and willing to serve find it very difficult to be incorporated in to the life of the church. Being educated in these church run institutions does not seem to make any difference. They are assumed to be disabled and therefore needing to be served rather than to serve. Their place is seen to be in the special institutions set aside and not in the central operation of the church. No wonder that though many persons with disabilities are educated in these church run institutions, the church is unable to account for their whereabouts after their school life. They do not feel welcome and as such they do not associate with the church. The few bold ones who persist find their presence largely ignored. It will be an open fact for instance that whereas most of such churches represented in this conference or in any international or regional ecumenical forum, there will already be established mechanism to ensure that representation of Women, youth and clergy is ensured. We had difficulties to get any persons with disabilities here because no church wanted to consider them in their delegations since, according to them, they do not fall in the classification they are familiar with of Women, youth and clergy. The situation is no different in the World Council of Churches members, Regional and National ecumenical organizations. Thus, persons with disabilities are not considered to belong and are therefore largely not included in the life of the church.

In summing up the fundamental theological principle that guides the WCC Interim Statement, it is made clear that the integration of disabled people within the church gives testimony to God’s love as expressed by all his sons and daughters. It is a continuation of Christ’s healing mission. It can also be an example and an inspiration in those societies in which disabled people suffer from humiliating marginalization.

Whether the church is involved in provision of care, rehabilitation, chaplaincy or ministry to or with disabled people, it must recognize the central assumptions of equality and dignity within the Christian message and promote it at the fore of all its work.

The church is by definition a place and a process of communion, open to and inviting all people without discrimination. It is a place of hospitality and a place of welcome, in the manner that Abraham and Sarah received God’s messengers in the Old Testament (Gen. 18). It is an earthly reflection of a divine unity that is at the same time worshipped as Trinity. It is a community of people with different yet complementary gifts. St Paul reminds us: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, though we are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...”

It is a vision of wholeness as well as of healing, of caring and of sharing at once. Just as the body is one and has many members so it is with Christ (1 Cor.12:12).

We all accept and proclaim that this is what the church is and stands for. It is the basis of our unity as Christians. Then why is it that, all too often, certain people among us and around us (usually those whom we consider as being unfamiliar or as strangers, as different or perhaps disabled) are marginalized and even excluded? Wherever this happens, even by passive omission, the church is not being what it is called to become. The church is denying its own reality. In the church, we are called to act differently. As St Paul says, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker (we should notice that he does not say “actually are weaker”) are indispensable (1 Cor. 2:22).

As the Interim Statement concludes, in our attitudes and actions towards one another, at all times, the guiding principle must be the conviction that we are incomplete, we are less than whole, without the gifts and talents of all people. We are not a full community without one another. Responding to and fully including people with disabilities is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church's defining characteristic.