

Reality of Ableism in the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

Though ableism is a modern word for discrimination against people with disability, it is a long-term problem in almost all human societies. Each human society and/or culture has often had a unique way of perceiving, depicting and treating people with disabilities. In Nigeria, many Pentecostal churches, including the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria, often have continued to portray disability as an evil to be eliminated through divine healing. And this of course, makes it look as if disability is no longer part of human diversity. The findings of this study shows that in most of programs and events organized by the church, people with disability are not considered or put in perspective. Also, there is no action plans for tackling ableism and disciplining people with disability in the church. The paper recommended that the church should design a homiletical strategy that will contribute to shaping disability-friendly congregations. The church should articulate operational policy for the periodic conscientization of her members on the need for acceptance, genuine love, integration and inclusion of people with disability. The paper concluded on the note that people with disability, whether adults or children, should be loved and empowered both spiritually and otherwise not necessarily out of pity or out of service; but out of a genuine understanding, love, acceptance, and celebration of their life.

Keywords: Ableism, disability, Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria.

Introduction

Ableism is a modern word for discrimination against people with disability. Though the term was coined in the 1980s by some feminists in the United States of America, the issue is a long-term problem in almost all human societies. Each human society and/or culture has often had a unique way of perceiving, depicting and treating people with disabilities (hereafter PWDs). However PWDs amidst political and social gains, continue to experience discrimination in many areas and societies (Friedman & Owen, 2017; Linton, 1998; Putnam, 2005; Reber et al, 2022).

In 2010, during the Lausanne Cape Town Commitment, the Lausanne Movement made the following commitment to, “make our churches places of inclusion and equality for people with disabilities and to stand alongside them in resisting prejudice and in advocating for their needs in wider society” (The Lausanne Movement, 2011). This type of commitment was seen by many as a welcome development in Christendom. This is because, from a Biblical perspective, all humanity (both nondisabled and PWDs) were created in the image and likeness of one God. Hence, human beings, irrespective of their physical features, race, and social status, are to be treated as sacred and equal. In consequence, White (2017) urges the church (the universal Body of Christ), to “seriously consider becoming involved in issues of the rights of people with disabilities as part of its mission calling” (p. 121).

Despite the above development and facts, Mutlaneng (2020), observes that there is still reason to suspect that churches do not embrace PWDs wholeheartedly. Nwabuisi (2021) also remarks that in the contemporary Christian church, there are scanty and inadequate indications of a theology of inclusion in matters of disability. Yong (2010) corroborates,

Something as simple as the inaccessibility of some church buildings is indicative of the fact that faith communities are not interpreting reality from the viewpoint of disabled people, but merely accommodating disabled people rather than deeming them an integral part of the church and being inclusive in the true sense of the word (quoted in Mutlaneng, p. 3).

Though the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria has existed for over sixty decades in Nigeria, the organization is yet to design programs and practically run an inclusive community where PWDs are disciplined and helped to faithfully participate in God’s redemptive program for humanity. In the course of this study, the researcher interviewed many of the leaders of the church who have served in various leadership capacities in the organization and some PWDs in the church. Most of them agreed that the church is yet to consider PWDs as integral part of the church by being inclusive.

Moreover, looking at the church's tenets/belief statement, various directorates, arms and ministries, it is obvious nothing is mentioned about the church seeking to be inclusive organization or becoming a disability-friendly, or disability-inclusive congregations. Though divine healing is mentioned but there is no mention of "inclusiveness". For this researcher, this shows the church often sees disability as something to be eradicated via divine healing and not as part of human diversity. However, Raypole (2022) has noted that believing that every person with disability needs divine healing or to overcome a disability, is a form of ableism.

Since this is a descriptive research, the qualitative method was used to gather data for the study. People were thus interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. Questions probed for the built environment, and church community supports. For example, participants were asked to talk about the church community, how they are treated and how they feel as members of the church. Interviews were mostly done via phone calls and social media (Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger).

Biblical Foundations for Ableism

Genesis account of creation often gives the average reader the impression that since God created the first humans (Adam and Eve) perfect—without any form of deformity or disability, then disability is a problem that came because of the "Original sin". Hence, it is a problem to either be fixed or eliminated. Later in the Priestly code, Yahweh specifically commands Moses not to allow anyone with deformity or blemish approach His alter (Lev 21:16-23) even though He, the LORD, had earlier affirmed that He was the one who made some people to be dumb, deaf, blind and so forth (cf. Exod 4:11).

Furthermore, in the Old Testament, David, the greatest and most revered king of Israel, specifically commanded his soldiers to target and eliminate all the disabled in the Jebusites' city and rewarded them with honor and positions for doing so (2Sam. 5:8). King Uzziah's unfaithfulness to God made him leprous. In fact, the Bible mentions, "Because the Lord had afflicted him" (2 Chron 26: 20), King Jeroboam was afflicted with paralysis (1Kings 13:4).

Besides, the New Testament is full of images of Jesus and the apostles trying to eliminate all forms of disabling conditions via healing the sick, raising the lame, opening the eyes of the blind, and so on (Matt 10:8; 12:13-14; 15:29-31; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:18; Acts 3:1ff). And in most cases whereby Jesus healed the disabled, He often would cast out the "demon" supposedly living inside the disabled folk(s). Whenever these "demon(s)" is/are cast out, the disabled person often became healed and whole again (cf. John 5:2ff; Mark 1:34; Acts 8:7). Thus, the New Testament covertly gives one the impression that every disabled or deformed person was possessed by "demons" and thereby needs "deliverance".

Moreover, visual impairment (blindness) is depicted in the Bible as a symbol of ignorance, sin, and unbelief. It refers to the lack of intellectual or moral understanding (Isa 29:9-10, 18). In most cases, Jesus uses the expression "blind" as a term of abuse in the Gospels. For example, when he speaks against certain groups of people, he describes them as "blind guides", "blind fools", "you blind Pharisees" (cf. Matt 23: 16-26). When Jesus healed the physically impaired man who lay by the pool of Bethesda, He said to him: "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse will happen to you" (John 5:14). This clearly indicates that Jesus thought there was a connection between the man's disability and some sin. Similarly, when Jesus healed the paralytic man lowered through the roof (Mark 2:1-12), Jesus said to him: "Son, your sins are forgiven" (v.5), and then continued with the physical healing of the man (Nwabuisi, 2021).

The above scenarios of course, have led people with disabilities to often see themselves as people who are "bewitched" (or under Satanic attack), helpless and therefore needs God's healing power to salvage their situation. And when they do not receive this spiritual help, they begin to wonder what is wrong with them that prevents their reception of healing power.

Finally, the Bible gives one the notion that all forms of disabilities will be erased in the end of the Age. According to Jewish and Christian Eschatology, at the resurrection, the human body will be free from all forms of physical disabilities (Dan. 12:9-10; Rev. 21:1ff). This belief overlooks the fact that the Gospels describe the resurrected body of Jesus the Messiah as including the marks of the crucifix (Jn. 20:27). Therefore, superficial readings of these texts or narratives have led to ableist perspectives that continue to marginalize the disabled and exclude them from participating in society. Therefore, Amos Yong advises that "while the Bible has been read in ways that have portrayed disabilities negatively, it can and should be redemptive for people with disabilities today" (Young, 2011, p.17).

Forms of Ableism in the African Context

Ableism can be of different forms: personal ableism, and system or institutional ableism. Chukwuedo (2022) explains that personal ableism means having unconscious feeling and/or often being uncomfortable around PWDs. It also entails behaving strange towards PWDs; being nervous, awkward, viscerally disgusted around PWDs and avoiding talking to them so as to avoid some kind of feared embarrassment. On the other hand, "system or institutional ableism can mean physical barriers, policies, laws, regulations and practices that do not protect or

include people with disabilities. Such policies and barriers that regulate the freedom and equality of people with disabilities” (p. 173; Osmanski, 2021).

Actions like insisting on praying for healing when this has not been requested for, or offering unsolicited help, fall into this category. This common among Christians. A video once trended online whereby a so-called pastor was forcing himself on a psychiatric patient, trying to lay hands on him and pray for him. Unsolicited prayers and help are common especially in Africa. Moreso, people as earlier stated, organizations and individuals erect building and plan events without plans for PWDs: those on wheelchairs, or the visually impaired and yet assume that that is normal. People don’t often see the underlying ableism.

In essence, attitudes that devalue individuals with disabilities and privilege the nondisabled are motivated by ableism, which, as defined by Campbell, is:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell, 2001, p. 44).

The point is that ableism entails any attitude that does not favor or encourage but limits the inclusion, humanity, and well-being of people with disabilities. Any attitude that “devalue individuals with disabilities and privilege the nondisabled are motivated by ableism” (Reber, et al, 2022, p. 2). Commenting on what constitutes ableism in Igboland and other African societies, Chukwuedo (2022) notes,

In the Igbo culture, people with disabilities such as; hunch-back, albinism, cripple, blindness, deaf and dumb, imbecility, down syndrome etc. are often marginalized. People suffering from albinism are always stigmatized. They are called all sorts of names in Igbo language that are derogatory such as “anyari” which means, albino “bekee or oyibo” which implies white person. In some cases, people call them by these names neglecting the original names given to them by their parents. They are treated as inferior persons most times in institutions of learning, in the Church and even in the work place. They are treated with low expectation and prejudice as the weak and fragile (p. 174).

Apart from the above description, in Igboland, many parents would not like their children and wards to associate, talk of marrying PWDs. Hence, it is often difficult for PWDs especially the females, to keep relationships and/or marry a non-disabled. Though in the recent times, the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) has started discouraging ableism in their movies, the impact is yet to be felt in the Nigerian society.

Brief history of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria

The Foursquare Church, officially named the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, is a Pentecostal denomination founded on January 1, 1923 Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, a lady evangelist. The first branch of the church was opened on October, the same year in California, USA. It is from there that the church spread to other place like, Pasadena, Santa Monica, Santa Ana, Hawaii, Alaska and other places in the US.

In Nigeria, the Church started in October 1955 by a missionary couple, Rev and Mrs. Harold Curtis from USA. The registered headquarters in Nigeria is at 62/66 Akinwunmi Street Yaba, Lagos State. The Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria currently has about 4032 churches spread over 154 districts and 824 zones as at September 2018. The Church in Nigeria has also reached out to neighboring countries and had established in the Republic of Benin, Ghana, Gambia, Liberia, Cote d’voire and Central African Republic. Most of these churches in the west coast have been nationalized (Foursquare Gospel Church, FGC Employers’ Handbook, 2019, p. 2).

Various Manifestations of Ableism in the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria

The truth is that many people in Nigeria still hold negative views and beliefs about PWDs and this has also affected how PWDs are handled in the church including the Foursquare Gospel church. Osukwu (2019) explains the challenges of PWDs in the church to include:

...degrading treatment, marginalization, and exclusion from recruitment opportunities, as well as discrimination in churches. Some people believe that disability has negative connotations and that persons with disabilities are hopeless, helpless burdens and passive “objects” meant to receive charity as well as physical and spiritual deliverance. Persons with disabilities are stereotypically seen as incapable of being productive. It is assumed that because people live with disabilities, they are not meant to occupy leadership positions or fully partake in church activities. The expectation that persons with disabilities be wholly embraced into the Christian fold is yet to be met (pp. 52-59).

According to most of the interviewees, in the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria, PWDs are unconsciously seen as inferior to the non-disabled members of the church. They are seen as people to be pitied, helped (financially), and prayed for; but not necessarily as part of the church and/or potential church workers. They are not seen and taken as people to be disciplined for the purpose of harnessing their talents and ministerial gifts. Hence, often, a different corner is reserved for PWDs during church programs with the intent of ministering healing to them. Raypole (2022) remarks that separating PWDs with physical and cognitive disabilities from their peers is an

example of systemic ableism. Some of the members of the church interviewed were of the opinion that many PWDs who attend Foursquare church programs come to receive divine healing, they are promised such in adverts. Hence, it is simply assumed that such PWDs come to want to be “healed” and to “overcome” their disability.

Church’s Programs and Events

Based on the researcher’s personal observations as a member of the church, over the years, the organization spends hundreds of millions to organize several programs meant to meet the spiritual, social and other needs of the non-disabled members. Some of these programs include:

A. The national convention is a major program of the church. It is a camping program that takes up to three to five days at the Ajebo campground, KM 75, Lagos-Ibadan Express, Ogun State. During this program, preachers are invited from within and outside the church to minister to the spiritual and mental needs of the members. The General Overseer and the wife are often the conveners/chief hosts of the program. Some of the activities done during the program include preaching/teaching God’s word, intense prayers for church and individual needs, several departmental meetings, choir ministrations and so on. The program is often held around November/December every year. Aside from this, every year, each district of the church is also expected to do their own annual district convocation. It is also a camping program and often presided over by the District Overseer (D. O.).

Before the actual convention kicks off, there is often a “Business meeting” often presided by the General Overseer and the key leaders of the church. This meeting is done to review and evaluate the activities/programs of the various districts, arms and departments of the church. This researcher took time to go through some of the Business meeting program booklet, and discovered that often all the items discussed, projects carried out church activities and programme done in every church calendar, do not take PWDs into considerations. Based on some of the booklets reviewed in the course of this study, there is not even a single page devoted to discussing on how the church could be an inclusive organisation or on how PWDs could be discipled and helped to mature in Christ and be useful to themselves, the church and the society at large. All the various programmes and projects are geared towards meeting the spiritual, social, and otherwise needs of the non-disabled audience. This for the researcher, is not good as Jesus has commanded the church to go and make disciples of ALL nations (cf. Matt 28: 19, 20). In fact, though the church usually would allude to this command popular referred to as the Great Commission, but based on the experience of the researchers, it seems they limit this commission to reaching out to the non-disabled and not also reaching out and empowering the PWDs with the gospel.

B. The International Conference for Ministers and Leaders (ICML) is another important annual program of the church for in-house training of her ministers and church leaders at all levels. The program is often held around April every year. According to the church’s website, the attendance of this program has continued to increase over the years. People from within and outside the Foursquare Church and several other foreign delegates from West Africa, East Africa, Europe, and the United States often attend the program. The target audience comprises mainly pastors, arm leaders, Sunday School Teachers, Church Council members from the local churches nationwide, leaders from the Zones, District and National.

Of course, all the above-mentioned target audience are often the non-disabled audience who are at the helms of affairs of the church. During the program, so many activities are put in place for the benefit of the non-abled audience. And even when disability and/or PWDs are mentioned, it is said in such a way that makes them feel inferior to the non-disabled thereby making the non-disabled thank God they are not like PWDs. In fact, after studying some of the program booklets of the church, the researcher discovered that all the programs and activities do not in any way favor PWDs: the camp facilities and rules, the materials/programs booklets, mode of registration for the program. For example, the visually impaired are not provided with reading aids: there are no special reading materials or resources for them.

C. The men’s and women’s (biannual) programs often sponsored and hosted by the Council of Foursquare Men (CFM) and Foursquare Women International (FWI) respectively. Also, Pastors’ Wives and Lady Ministers Fellowship, which is another arm of the church often organizes their own (biannual) programs. Every year, these bodies usually organize programs for their members; however, going through some of the program’s booklets and also based on oral interviews conducted, the researcher discovered that PWDs are not put in perspective in such programs.

D. Youth, teens and children’s camp/programs are also being held both at the national, regional, district and zonal levels. Again, all such programs do not seek to take care of the needs of PWDs. Even when they come, they are pitied, prayed for or given alms.

Church Buildings and Structures

Most of the FGC church buildings and/or structures including the pulpits are not built having PWDs in mind. They are built in favor of the non-disabled audience. The researcher has been to some of the churches in Lagos, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Uyo, Benue, Enugu, Asaba, Imo, and other places and has observed that none of the

auditoriums, pulpits, toilets/bathrooms, and other facilities are built to also make it easier for PWDs use them. In most cases, church leaders in the Foursquare Gospel church do plan church buildings, offices and other facilities to accommodate people with hearing impairments, wheelchairs, clutches, sight impairments. Of course, public buildings, including church building, lacking accessible facilities like bathrooms or braille on signs and maps, is a prove of systemic ableism in place (Raypole, 2022). Mr. Charles K., who lost one of his legs to accident, and Mrs. Bright C., a visually impaired worshipper all lamented that most times they do not like attending church services of the church because they often find it difficult to climb the pavement in the front of the church to enter the auditorium. In most cases, due to the way church auditoriums are constructed in the church, some of the people in wheelchairs will either forced to remain outside during the church service or literally, will need to “crawl” into the auditorium. According to Nwabuisis (2021), such is dehumanizing. For him, it is the duty of the church to accessibility ramps to enable PWDs enter the church building and also wide doors, to fit a wheelchair.

Church Leadership Structures

Many of the respondents noted that in Foursquare Gospel church, PWDs are not to be denied priestly ordination if they are qualified and wished to be ordained. According to most of the respondents, once anyone is qualified: born again, spirit-filled, called, and has passed through LIFE Theological Seminary and also applied for induction, will be accepted for induction. However, they noted that unless the disabling condition is something that will affect the effectiveness of such a person. Accordingly, for example, a person who is visually impaired or deaf may not be given the opportunity to lead a local congregation not because of discrimination but because the condition may not allow him or her to carry out certain pastoral duties.

Based on the above fact, the researcher deduced that the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria does not necessarily ban PWDs from been inducted or ordained as ministers in the organisation based on Lev 21:16-23; but the policy is that one must be physically fit to be inducted/ordained. According to the church’s Employers’ Handbook, article vi., states that, a prospective inductee should have “Received a satisfactory report of physical fitness from approved hospital after comprehensive medical examination” (p. 8). For the researcher, the above condition/statement seems to be vague because it is not specifically mentioned whether PWDs will be accepted or not. However, the clause, “satisfactory report of physical fitness...” suggests systemic ableism.

Furthermore, going through some of the church’s handbooks: the Constitution, Arms & Ministers’ handbook, Christian Education Ministers’ handbook, Ministers/Staff handbook and Guidelines on Church Ceremonies, all show that PWDs are not put in perspective in the church’s leadership structure. None of these materials mentioned inclusiveness, and/or how PWDs should be treated in the church talk more of how they can climb the leadership ladder of the church. All the rules, guidelines, programs, and portfolios are designed to favor the able-bodied members and prospective members of the church. For the researcher, the above condition, “satisfactory report of physical fitness” seems to be vague but it may simply suggest that PWDs are not welcomed to serve in any leadership position in the church. It presupposes that only able-bodied members are fit for induction, licensing, and ordination in the church. Hence, one may easily conclude that the church supports and practice systemic ableism even though that may not be the case.

Church’s Homiletics/Preaching

Most of the people interviewed acknowledged that the church believe and preach divine healing. According to them, since sickness and disability are from the devil, they have been called and empowered by God to heal PWDs and sick persons. Though the researcher also believes in divine healing; but he also believes that it is not all the time that God chooses to heal. Healing is what God does according to his purpose and not because of human pressure. Besides, what about cases whereby after prayers, fasting and exercise of faith, nothing happens; what should the church do? Should the sick person or PWDs be left to disciple him or herself? Should he or she be seen as a useless fellow until divine healing happens? The point remains that the way many ministers of the gospel preach and pray for healing negatively impacts people who are not healed, especially those with a disability” (Clifton, 2014).

Furthermore, the researcher observed that many preaching in Foursquare, either explicitly or implicitly support or communicate such views that PWDs and sick people are to come to church/church programs for divine healing. And when healing did not happen, then something is wrong somewhere. In some cases, it is believed that people do not receive divine because they lack faith or because they have not sowed or given something worthy to God. The above views are wrong. They depict God and faith in a wrong way. In fact, one observable fact about most “Word-of-Faith” and some Pentecostal movements is that faith is often used in an “abusive” and manipulative manner, even to the point of becoming addictive (Arterburn & Felton, 2001, p. 9).

Practical Exclusion of PWDs in Some Spiritual activities and Exercises

Based on the researcher’s personal experience and data gathered in the course of this study, in most cases, PWDs are not put in perspective when organizing evangelism/church rallies, crusades, district convention and programs and so forth. Some of them are even discouraged from joining the choir and other departments in the

church mostly out of pity. Some of the respondents who are visually impaired members of the church in the south west and north central regions, remarked that often they feel embarrassed with the way people in the church pity them. According to them, people see them as helpless people. One of them noted that though she was accepted to join the choir after much pleas; but often, she is embarrassed when fellow choir members try to pity her because of her condition. According to her, many a times, she is not reminded of choir practice, and more especially, she hardly copes with the songs been learned during practice because, there are no special materials provided for her. Hence, she often will rely on friends who will volunteer to teach her and make her follow up.

The above problem is not actually peculiar to the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria. The truth is that most Nigerian churches, as Nwabuisi (2021) notes, lack improvisations, customization and inclusion plans for PWD when it comes to some spiritual activities such as evangelism, crusades, choir ministration and so on. There are no innovations to enable PWDs to fully participate in some spiritual activities in the church.

Media Projections

The researcher has discovered that over the years, huge resources are expended and gigantic plans made to “package” the church in order to make it appealing to people and thereby attract new “worshippers”. Most times, these prospective audience being targeted by the church via the media are the able-bodied folks. There are no much efforts to reach out to and/or attract PWDs to the church. In fact, in most of the programs/church activities the researcher has attended over the years, the church prefers showcasing their able-bodied members online/on the media so as to probably boost their corporate image. One will hardly see them showcasing PWDs unless when such people are allegedly healed.

In fact, indiscriminate display of disability pictures is common in the church. It is common to see many pastors/ministers in the Foursquare Gospel church using pictures of PWDs for miracle adverts. Some of these pictures are displayed in an offensive manner with careless abandoned attitudes. When asked the reason for such attitude, most of the interviewees noted that such pictures are used to display the healing/miraculous power of God and to attract such PWDs to church programs. For the researcher, such attitude is not good and should be discouraged. It often will end up portraying PWDs are “useless” set of people that are only “useful” when healed.

How PWDs can be helped to Become Assets in the Foursquare Gospel Church

Below are some of the ways ableism can be curtailed and PWDs helped to discover and fulfill their ministerial gifts in the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria: First, by building inclusive structures that favors all people irrespective of their gender, race, or physical appearance. As stated already, the church leadership should take the lead in this area. Both the leadership structure, the church’s constitution and facilities should be designed and built with PWDs in perspective.

Some of the student-pastors interviewed in LIFE Bible College, Aba where the researcher serves as a lecturer, noted that the whole issue of addressing ableism and making the church an inclusive entity should start from the leadership of the church. According to them, if the leadership should take the lead by redesigning the church’s constitution and employers’ handbook and also, initiating programmes to that effect, then with time, ableism will be minimized in the church. According to most of the respondents, in fact, that will attract many PWDs to the church and that can trigger bountiful harvest.

Second, through preaching, teaching and organizing seminars and programs to empower PWDs in the church. Though Bible references to disability present varied likely confusing pictures: as noted earlier, some of these references depict disability as evil; however, it is the duty of the church to develop a hermeneutic that encourages and promotes inclusiveness. For example, there are many Bible passages that can be used to promote inclusiveness in the church. Below are some of the passages that give a picture of God’s redemptive and inclusive plan for PWDs: Isaiah 35:5-6 outlines the joyous return of the liberated Israelites: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongues shout for joy....” In Isaiah 29:18, God includes PWDs in His plans of salvation: “In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.” In Isaiah 33:23-24 we read that the abundance of spoils will be divided and even the lame will carry off plunder.

Other passages that promote human diversity include Jesus’s sayings that people are to love their neighbors as they love themselves and to treat others as they would wish others to treat them (Matt. 5:43, 44; 22:37-39; 7:12; cf. Gen 1:26-28; Exod 4:10-12; Psalms 139:13-14; Isa 55:9; John 9:2-4). Pagitt (2005) remarks that “preaching isn’t simply something a pastor does - it’s a socialising force and a formative practice in a society” (p. 25). Retief (2016) postulates that preaching is a powerful tool which can serve as a powerful instrument in shaping people’s perceptions and actions within the church. He notes that if the church responds to sound preaching/teaching of the word of God, and begin to act as the “salt and light” within society, a lot will change in the society. For him, preaching serves as one of the most powerful agents of change.

Also commenting on the importance of sound preaching of God's word, Swinton (2016) affirms that preaching as an act of imagination, is not limited to concepts, values and morality. According to him, "...in preaching the Word of God, the hearers are offered a special gift of a changed world (p. 13). To show how powerful preaching is in societal transformation, Smith (1992) calls it the "act of naming". His explanation of this concept, "acts of naming" in regard to the importance of transformational preaching is noteworthy:

Preaching is an act of public theological naming. It is an act of disclosing and articulating the truths about our present human existence. It is an act of bringing new reality into being, an act of creation. It is also an act of redeeming and transforming reality, an act of shattering illusions and cracking open limited perspectives. It is nothing less than the interpretation of our present world and an invitation to build a profoundly different new world (p. 2).

Based on the above facts, the researcher postulates that for ableism to be minimized in the church and for the church to become inclusive, a disability homiletic and practice that ensues from the Word of God is needed, which will be aimed at liberating the minds and actions of the hearers. PWDs and non-disabled members of the church need to understand and treat disability in light of the Word.

Third, conscientization of church programmes for worshippers including PWDs is needed. The leadership of the church needs to design, develop and articulate operational policy for the periodic conscientization of the members on the need to genuinely accept, and integrate PWDs. According to Nwabuisi (2021),

The conscientization program has to accommodate general awareness of the characteristics of disabilities, how to integrate and work with them, knowledge of their ability levels as well as behavioral characteristics. It has to also include relationship skills, modes of communication, and how to care for individuals with complex needs, reaching out to families of children with disabilities and how to bridge social gaps for their maximum benefits (n.p).

Fourth, organized training on empowering PWDs. There is the need for the church to provide the enabling environment and opportunities for PWDs to "learn, dialogue and interact while journeying with them in advocating for attainment of sexual and reproductive health. The truth remains that though there are not many PWDs in the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria, some of them who are worshippers/members of the church sometimes, feel confused, helpless, emotionally and psychologically traumatized due to hostility and rejection they face in the society. Hence, there is the need for the church to design programs, materials/resources, and opportunities for them to develop healthy self-esteem, become useful to themselves and to the larger society.

Lastly, PWDs should be seen and treated as assets and not liabilities to the church. As earlier stated, most worshippers in the church see PWD as candidates for charity and miracle and this in turn affect how PWDs see themselves. In most cases, there is the impression that PWD do not really come to church except for the purpose of receiving miracles or charity. In fact, Mrs. Charity T. who is visually impaired, noted that the first time she came to church with the daughter, the pastor thought she was coming for alms.

Learning from the Eritrean and Romanian Orthodox Churches

In the cause of this study, the researcher stumbled on Buda's article on his experience in Eritrea, when he visited the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church in 2017. This story is worth mentioning at this point. According to him,

"In several communities, youngsters and children were taught in the yards of the church buildings and monasteries how to sing ecclesial songs and chant in Ge'ez a dead language...I noticed that some of these teachers were blind." Even though these folks were disabled/blind, the church preferred using them because "Blind people have excellent memory; so, they learned all the sacred songs and texts by heart and can teach them to our children." This way, the church was harnessing the excellent memories of the blind in teaching their children in the church (Buda, 2019, pp. 100-111).

Father Theophilus Paraian (1929-2009) is another notable case at hand. He was a blind Romanian Orthodox Church monk and priest who had much influence on the spiritual-monastic tradition of the church there via his teachings, and large publications. After observing Theophilus for some time, Metropolitan Anthony confessed, "When I saw his abilities and his skills in approaching certain issues, I decided to ordain him a priest and, in this way, to give him the possibility to manifest in ways he considered most appropriate."

Though Father Theophilus was blind, he was optimistic and zealous to serve God and humanity and he did that with the best of his abilities and his impact is still being felt in the Romanian Orthodox Church today. Apart from the above-mentioned cases, there may have been other numerous cases that were not recorded in history. But from all indications, it seems that the two incidents mentioned above happened because their churches did not discriminate them. They were loved, cared for and given opportunities to express themselves and fulfill their ministerial calling; hence, their works still speak for them. This is a great lesson for the Foursquare Gospel church in Nigeria. There are many talents among PWDs to be tapped for God's kingdom advancement.

Conclusion

From the onset, this paper establishes that disability and ableism are universal and complex phenomena. They transcend age, gender, race, social status, culture and religion. The researcher believes that it is the duty of the church/faith communities to practically ensure and enable faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world Block (2002) provides the following perspective on the church becoming an inclusive community:

When we live for God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but give hope to others, and we cannot help but be inclusive. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to a new world where outsiders become insiders. The church as the body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community, where Jesus Christ, the one who is always identified with the outsider, presides as the copious host. We are called, through our baptism, to be His co-hosts (p. 132).

In consequence, the church and every faith community are required to not just be loving and caring, but to practically help the weak to know Christ, grow in Him and serve Him with their talents and spiritual gifts. PWDs whether adults or children, should be loved and empowered both spiritually and otherwise; not necessarily out of pity or out of service, but out of a genuine understanding, love, acceptance, and celebration of their life.

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