



**The United Church  
of Canada  
General Council**

# **GCE Open and Accessible: Ministries with Persons with Disabilities**

True Document Date: March 30, 2012

The Permanent Committee, Programs for Mission and Ministry, proposes that the Executive of General Council

1. Affirm that The United Church of Canada is committed to being an open, accessible, and barrier-free church, where there is full participation of persons with disabilities in the church's ministry and mission, and make this known in the church.
2. Direct the General Secretary, General Council to convene a consultation with a diversity of persons living with disabilities—and their allies—in the United Church, and that the insights from this consultation be gleaned to develop a report with concrete policy recommendations for the Executive of General Council by the spring of 2014.
3. Develop a process—as part of its efforts to become an open, accessible, and barrier-free church—that would work in collaboration with participants of the national consultation of persons living with disabilities, and that would commit to developing a vision and action plan for ongoing work with persons with disabilities, which would include but not be limited to:
  - a comprehensive vision statement
  - a theological framework and rationale
  - processes and programs to continue the work
  - practical suggestions for congregations
  - ways in which all courts of the churches can regularly review their progress towards becoming an open, accessible, and barrier-free church (such as an audit)
  - recommendations for educational resources and
  - clear integration with other work, including the ongoing work around intercultural ministries.

4. Direct the General Secretary, General Council to develop intentional relationships and partnerships with other church-related and societal networks doing work related to persons with disabilities—such as universities and non-governmental organizations—in order to offer mutual insights and sharing resources for the work.
5. Direct that the General Secretary, General Council offer approaches for doing advocacy work and offering prophetic witness around work with disabilities, in consultation with persons living with disabilities, their families, and their care-givers.

# 1. Context

## 1.1 Historical Markers:

Ministries with persons with disabilities are not a new phenomenon in The United Church of Canada. For example, since the inception of the Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network in 1998—a program of the World Council of Churches—the United Church has offered financial and logistical support for this member of our global partner community.

More locally in Canada, the Executive of General Council of The United Church of Canada recently formed a Task Group on Disability Policies and Procedures to review the current provisions of The Manual concerning disability for ministry personnel. The review will clarify the obligations of ministry personnel and, where applicable, their pastoral charges when ministry personnel are eligible for the restorative care plan or long term disability.

In related processes, the United Church is proactively exploring ways to respond to new provincial legislation—such as the Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disabilities Act. This particular act was enacted to achieve accessibility for all Ontarians with disabilities with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025. The first such standard—which addresses customer service—outlines that most of our congregations and many of our other ministries will be required to establish the following, by January 1, 2012:

- policies, practices, and procedures,
- a training program and train staff and volunteers, and
- a feedback process.

Before present-day, the United Church has a history of ministries with persons with disabilities. During the 1970s and 1980s, resources and programs were prepared to assist Christian Education leaders working with children with various types of developmental challenges. Materials were distributed to help congregations explore building changes to reduce physical barriers to persons with mobility and hearing limitations. Infant stimulation and parent support resources were made available for families at the time of the birth of a child with developmental challenges. In 1981, during the United Nations' International Year of Disabled Persons, The United Church of Canada held a national consultation with representatives from each Conference. This was an important gathering, which raised key questions and theological reflections on disability. More recently, a 2008 publication entitled *Welcoming Differences: Including Children Who Experience Challenges* was geared towards church school leaders who had children with disabilities in their classes.

There have been important historical markers from past to present. As such, the word "disability" is not new to us.

What is new for The United Church of Canada is proactively creating effective spaces throughout the life of the whole church for all—including people who may move, see, hear, speak, and think differently. What is new for the United Church is to deeply examine policies and procedures, and to build effective training programs related to open and accessible spaces. What is new for the United Church are ministries with persons with disabilities that look at systemic and structural issues, attitudinal and value shifts, and what it really means to be a church of all and for all, that moves beyond only building a wheelchair ramp in a church building. What is new for the United Church is to create policy in this area, and to enable access, voice, and agency for persons with disability that facilitates the full participation of all in this church of ours.

## **1.2 Full Participation and Marginality:**

Full participation for persons living with disabilities is an important question for exploration in the church. In 2011, The United Church of Canada conducted a national survey of United Church members. Of those who responded to the church's Identity Survey, 5.3% stated that they are a person living with a disability. The survey went on to state that people with a disability in the United Church are less comfortable participating in events outside of regular worship services and that their involvement has tended to decrease recently more than others. Persons with a disability also express discomfort with expressing opinions to others in

United Church; people living with disabilities are often on the margins of church life.

And, it is important to note that today there are indeed some persons with disabilities who do actively participate in church life. Perhaps some of the active participation today can be linked to the past—The United Church of Canada has historically been attuned to some of the ways in which persons with disabilities experience marginality within the church.

In 1977, for example, a resolution was passed by the 27th General Council of The United Church of Canada, entitled "The Handicapped and the Wholeness of the Family of God". In this resolution, it stated that:

the Church's unity includes both the disabled and the abled and a Church which seeks to be truly united within itself and move toward unity with others must be open to all; yet able-bodied Church members, both by their attitudes and their emphasis on activism, marginalize and often exclude those with mental or physical disabilities<sup>1</sup>.

The United Church has a history of being responsive to people on the margins, and enabling marginalized peoples to shape and change our notion of being church together. The United Church strives to enable minoritized persons to challenge what it means to be "normal", and to bring new ideas forward so that—led by the Spirit—we effectively change with time to expand our sense of being Christ's community together:

The United Church of Canada has always strived to be a justice-seeking, responsive, and inclusive church, and has responded to changing societal times through the ordination of women, participation in global ecumenical coalitions, the fight against apartheid, the creation of the All Native Circle Conference, the apology to First Nations peoples, the ordination of gay and lesbian peoples, the creation of Ethnic Ministries, the adoption of an anti-racism policy, and the creation of Ministries in French. Each of these actions was and is in keeping with the tradition of a responsive church striving towards inclusivity and racial justice in its time.<sup>2</sup>

The above statement was written for the 39th General Council in 2006. Since that time, the United Church has committed to becoming an intercultural church, has focused on covenanting for life, has engaged in work around gender identity including transgendered persons, and has sought an increasing focus on engagement with youth and young adults.

These too, are actions of a justice-seeking church that seeks to provide a space for all.

Perhaps another step in the United Church's ongoing journey is effective ministries with persons with disabilities.

## 1.3 Exploring Disability and Difference:

Disability is about difference. Persons with disabilities are people who may move, see, hear, speak, and think differently from one another. One item that is called forth in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities speaks about difference and diversity; the convention names one of the general principles as:

Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity<sup>3</sup>.

The United Church of Canada has already developed some understandings of what it means to live with difference.

For example, in 2006, The United Church of Canada made a commitment to becoming an intercultural church. The current understanding of what it means to become an intercultural church is explained as follows:

Becoming an intercultural church is the call to live together in intentional ways where there is the mutual recognition and understanding of difference through intentional self-examination, relationship building, and equitable to access to power; it is also our attempt to respond faithfully to such a call.

Effective ministries with persons with disabilities also involve our faithful response to the call to live in communities with degrees of difference, with the full participation of persons living with disabilities.

## 2. Background

Persons with disabilities are people who might have a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities. A disability may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental, medical, health or some combination of these. Persons

with disabilities can include people who are blind, people who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs or canes, people who have mental health challenges, people born with congenital conditions such as cerebral palsy, persons living with conditions such as severe arthritis or dementia, and many more<sup>4</sup>. Disability involves restricted movements, sense, or actions that limit participation in activities considered routine and "normal" by society. A disability may be visible, or invisible.

Understandings of disability continue to evolve and change. For example, several years ago, persons who live with ongoing health challenges—such as Crohn's Disease or chronic fatigue syndrome—might not have been considered as persons with disability. However, the social model of disability brings us to the understanding that it is not the impairment that creates disabling conditions, but rather the barriers encountered within our society that prevent full and equal participation for all.

According to the World Health Organization:

Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives<sup>5</sup>.

Globally, about 15% of the world's population lives with a disability; of this global total, 2-4% experience significant difficulties in functioning<sup>6</sup>. The World Health Organization reports that "more than one billion people in the world live with some form of disability, of whom nearly 200 million experience considerable difficulties in functioning".<sup>7</sup>

According to Statistics Canada, in 2006, 14.3% of Canadians are persons living with a disability—this is an increase from 2001, when the number of persons with disabilities in Canada was 12.6%<sup>8</sup>. With the most recent numbers from 2006, in Canada, 1 in 7 persons is living with a disability.

In the national Identity Survey conducted by The United Church of Canada in 2011 of United Church members, 5.3% of respondents stated that they were a person living with a disability.

The numbers of people with disabilities is expected to rise, because of:

ageing populations and the higher risk of disability in older people as well as the global increase in chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and mental health disorders<sup>9</sup>.

Work related to disabilities is complex.

Part of what makes disability complex is that—like all other aspects of one's identity—"ability" is one aspect of being human. "Ability" is an identity grouping, along with a person's gender identity, sexual orientation, racial identity, socio-economic class, age, and all of the many other characteristics that make up who a person is. As such, the conversation about "ability" must be a holistic one, which focuses on disability, but does not reduce a person to their disability alone.

In addition, it is noted that "while disability correlates with disadvantage, not all people with disabilities are equally disadvantaged<sup>10</sup>." It is the intersection of different marginalized identities together with disabilities that produces profound inequities. For example, women living with disabilities may have the intersecting challenges of gender inequity and ableism; racialized persons living with disabilities may face the intersections of racial injustice and ableism. Similarly, a young, immigrant woman living with a disability may experience different challenges than a White, middle-aged man living with a disability. It is often the intersection of socially constructed categories—such as race, socio-economic class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and language—that result in interlocking and intersecting oppressions even within a community of persons who might already be experiencing inequity.

Even though there are intersections between race, ethnicity, language and disability, there has been little statistical analysis done on these types of intersections in the Canadian context. There has been, however, limited research focused on disability in relation to Aboriginal communities in Canada. As such, according to the Government of Canada, it can be named that some Aboriginal communities have differing experiences with disability. For example:

... existing research suggests that the rate of people experiencing disabilities is higher among the Aboriginal population than in the general population, and that having a disability can compound other disadvantages many Aboriginal people

experience<sup>11</sup>.

It is also important to note that the degree of the severity of the disability that a person has can result in greater disadvantage; and, by contrast, wealth and status can help overcome activity limitations and participation restrictions<sup>12</sup>.

Even the term "disability" is not one where there is universal agreement: "disability is complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested<sup>13</sup>." And, "while disability is found in all cultures, there is considerable variation in how cultures interpret and address disability<sup>14</sup>." For example, in Canada, "disability" is often named in contrast to "ability". Disability is usually viewed by society as a limitation, and in comparison to those who have the power to define "normal". Because of this, "disability" is a social construct, created by what a society takes for granted as "normal". In fact, both the normalization of "ability", and the construct of "disability" can be challenged. One key question is to stop thinking of a disability as a body gone wrong; rather, to think about degrees of difference in community.

It is also important to note that many people with disabilities do not seek to be "cured" or "fixed", but instead simply view their limitation as part of who they are. Some would argue that their lives are enriched because of their difference; yet others would dispute that they have a disability nor any kind of limitation at all.

Further questions can be posed around the differences between having a disability, and having a disabling factor. For example, a flight of stairs is a disabling factor—not the fact that a person uses a wheelchair.

With this in mind, several questions begin to emerge. What is normal? What is ability? Who has limitations? What are the disabling factors? What is access? These, and many other questions, are keen ones for exploration when working with persons with disabilities.

As such, it is important not to view persons with disabilities as a homogeneous group. There are many degrees of difference within a community of people who are disabled—persons who have disabilities are diverse and the community is quite heterogeneous.

Yet, it is still possible to draw some powerful parallels among people who are living with disabilities throughout the world.

For example, in 2011, the World Health Organization released the "World Report on Disability". This comprehensive 350-page document was the first such report released by this body of the United Nations. Some of the commonalities that this report named included



these facts:

Across the world, people with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities. This is partly because people with disabilities experience barriers in accessing services that many of us have long taken for granted, including health, education, employment, and transport as well as information. These difficulties are exacerbated in less advantaged communities<sup>15</sup>.

According to the United Nations: "the majority of persons with disabilities live in conditions of poverty... [there is a] critical need to address the negative impact of poverty on persons with disabilities"<sup>16</sup>. Nationally, the overall poverty rate for Canadian adults was 10.5% in 2006; for Canadians with disabilities the poverty rate was at the higher rate of 14.4%<sup>17</sup>. Further, according to the Canadian Council of Canadians with Disabilities, "amongst people who live alone, 31% with disabilities live in poverty compared with 21.3% of their counterparts without disabilities"<sup>18</sup>.

In addition to living with higher levels of poverty, persons living with disabilities face increased stigma, discrimination, and lack of access. Further, persons with disabilities may experience barriers in accessing services that many people might take for granted, including health, education, employment, transport, information—and faith communities.

With this reality, the question is how will The United Church of Canada respond?

The Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network states that from Jesus' day until now, churches around the world "have often wrestled with how best to exercise an appropriate ministry for, to and with persons with disabilities"<sup>19</sup>.

The United Church of Canada is in an interesting and kairos time to continue to wrestle with questions about this ministry area. Some emergent questions might include whether there are policy shifts that would further facilitate this work? Attitudinal shifts? Value shifts?

Also, how do we understand and critique power in this context? For example, what are the implications of a statement such as this one:

At the heart of Christian theology is a critique of success, power and perfection, and an honouring of weakness, brokenness and vulnerability<sup>20</sup>.

Further questions might emerge about "access" and "ableism". Access is about opening up avenues for participation in activities otherwise off limits—this is an ongoing negotiation between people and not a one-time project. Ableism involves assumptions about what is "normal" and expected of all human beings in a given situation. Questions for consideration might be: what would enable better "access" for persons with disabilities in the United Church? How might ableism be challenged and deconstructed in church life?

One of the things that The United Church of Canada is being called to discern is what the global realities of living with disabilities mean for our church, and how we seek to be a justice-seeking and responsive church in this time.

## **3. Theological Rationale**

### **3.1 The Image of God:**

We are all created in the image of God.

The theological statement "A Church of All and For All"—written by the Ecumenical Disabilities Advocates Network—offers the following reflections on imago Dei:

Historically, the naming that we are created in the image of God has "also exacerbated the prejudice that we should all be perfect since we are made in God's image. ... How can this person who apparently has physical or mental defects be made in God's image?"<sup>21</sup>

This begins to expand our notion of what it means to be in Christ's image. Some theologians have begun to name that perhaps the likeness of God is more like a mosaic, so that it takes all of us together to begin to reflect the image of God. We are created to be in relationship with one another; we are inter-dependent and not self-sufficient. In this community, we all have important contributions to make to the whole as we see the Christ image in one another.

The Bible is rich with imagery about what it means to be members of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is made up of many members (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12). The essential contributions of all are recognized.

Some aspects of God's image in Christ can only be reflected in the church as the body of Christ by the full inclusion and honouring of those who have bodies that are likewise impaired<sup>22</sup>.

As the apostle Paul speaks about the church as the body of Christ, he reflects that "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7, NRSV). The gifts of many are given by the Spirit, and not according to people's sense of "normal", or "perfection". As such, to be an open, welcoming, and accessible church for all, the community is called to embrace and affirm people of all levels of ability.

Without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the church falls short of the glory of God, and cannot claim to be in the image of God.

Without the insight of those who have experience of disability, some of the most profound and distinctive elements of Christian theology are easily corrupted or lost<sup>23</sup>.

Reflecting on what it means to be truly in the body of Christ is one aspect of what calls us together as Christian community, and invites the church's response. We can be truly church together when all are present. What are some of the ways in which we can create a space where all can indeed be present and full participants in this church of ours?

## **3.2 Understanding Healing:**

Further reflection can be offered on Jesus' life and ministry, as well as the wounded Jesus.

When Jesus encountered persons who were different—including persons living with disabilities—the pattern of Jesus' reactions, as recorded in scripture, was to heal them. Jesus restored sight to persons who were blind; Jesus made it possible for persons who were lame to walk.

Does this mean that Christ sought to restore people towards "perfection"?

Many theologians would say that the answer to this question is a clear "no". Instead, there are differences and distinctions between healing, wholeness, and holiness; these are in stark contrast to a word such as "cured". Today, many people with disabilities do not seek to be

"cured". Instead, they seek equal opportunity to share their talents, skills and insights. Disability is simply a part of who they are; it is not something to be fixed.

In Jesus' time, people who lived with disabilities were often ostracized from the rest of society. Some were physically separated from the rest of their community; certainly, they were treated as second class citizens who were outcasts.

In Jesus' time—and in many communities today—living with disabilities has considerable social stigma. Then, and now, people with disabilities continue to face significant discrimination, and are excluded from many aspects of community life. Further, some cultures (then and now) might also name that disabilities are associated with sin.

Jesus' work of healing led to the re-establishment of community and the restoration of relationship. It removed the social stigma, and led to a sense of wholeness.

For example, in the theological statement "A Church of All and For All", reflections are offered about healing and wholeness:

Healing refers to the removal of oppressive systems, whereas curing has to do with the physiological reconstruction of the physical body. For some theologians, Jesus' ministry was one of healing and not curing.

In this kind of theology, disability is a social construct, and healing is the removal of social barriers<sup>24</sup>.

What social barriers need to be removed today, in order to create accessible and accepting communities for all? What further work might the United Church continue to do that promotes healing in this way?

Healing then is an act, event, system and structure which encourages, facilitates God's empowering, renewing, reconciling and liberating processes in order to reverse the negation of God's intended good for God's creation<sup>25</sup>.

We read in the book of Genesis that God's creation is very good. Interestingly enough, God did not say that the creation was perfect; instead, that it was very good. Much harm has been done historically to see to restore people to a sense of "perfection" or "normalcy", as defined by others. Instead, much good can be done by the affirmation of God's good and diverse creation, and by emphasizing the restoration towards community, the removal of social

barriers, and the continued journey towards wholeness.

And, by welcoming one another as Christ welcomed us, we welcome in the Divine.

For The United Church of Canada, in this time, the work around ministries with persons with disabilities can also lead towards the re-establishment of community and the restoration of relationship; it can continue our work in creating a church that is of all and for all.

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