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The involvement of people with disabilities in church matters in relation to gender equality in Tanzania: A case of Mbeya City

Ronald Mbao
Teofilo Kisanji University, Tanzania
ronaldmbao@gmail.com

Abstract

Involvement of people with disabilities in church activities, ranging from ordinary worship to resuming leadership positions, poses a great challenge to the African church. While African governments have put in place policies (Acts) regarding the involvement of people with disability in national economic development activities, findings in this paper revealed that the scenario in the church was different. This paper unfolds the real state of affairs in the church as far as involvement of people with disabilities is concerned. Even so, it appears there is a step taken that ushers in hopes for the fully-fledged engagement of the church in the near future. As a way forward, the paper appeals to the government authorities to direct and monitor the construction of church buildings to conform to inclusive standards, and that the churches should put in place policies regarding people with disabilities.

Keywords

disability; gender; equality; involvement; church

1. Introduction

The Bible speaks of human beings as creatures created in God's image (Gen 1:26); the human being who would be the overall in charge over all God's creation. This unique creature called human being was incomplete in some respects. In any case, the human being had some weaknesses that is why the male person exclaimed like: wow! After discovering the female counterpart lying or standing splendidly beside or before him; Adam was incomplete without Eve, likewise Eve was half-person without Adam. Therefore, the two individuals – male and female – make a whole person. Both sexes have been commissioned to participate in God's mission in the world

and are equally valuable. In Genesis, "woman" shares the same substance and nature as "man" and is equal to and distinct from him (Gen 2:18, 23). Through the creation account and the wisdom and prophetic literature in the Bible, we see a picture of women as highly valued representatives of life, wisdom, sustenance and strength (Prov 3:18, 8:7, 10, 14, 15, 16:22, 20). It can, therefore, be deduced that, the historical recognition of women as fully-fledged human beings came from the biblical doctrine of the *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–28) which affirms the intrinsic dignity of all people regardless of gender or social status.

This paper examines the question as to what extent people with disabilities or rather as many simply term them the disabled, are involved in church matters in relation to gender equality in the Tanzanian context. Before delving into the whole issue, it is necessary to look at some key variables, which are gender and people with disabilities as to how they are applied in this paper.

1.1 Gender

A good number of scholars have given the definition of gender, though, as usual, in different language styles but all pointing to socially and culturally roles assigned to males and females in any given society through socialisation (Kassimoto 2008; Hadebe 2009, to mention but a few). For example, Kassimoto (2008) illustrates the issue of gender as follows:

> … in many societies in Tanzania, a woman is not supposed to make decisions and argue in front of men … A decent woman is supposed to keep quiet and pay due respect to men, however younger than her the man or boy might be. In certain societies in Tanzania a young boy of seven years has authority over a woman of forty years. When the young boy tells the woman not to do something, the old woman will stop doing it because a man has instructed (2008:3).

Even in the church arena, the issue of gender is a hot debate. The issues are based on trying to stereotype some roles to a particular sex only excluding the other. For example, the issue of ordaining women as Pastors; in some churches, women are not allowed to be ordained or take pastoral responsibilities. While the degree to which "sex" and "gender" should be separated is contested amongst different Christian communities, basically,

it is crucial for all vying groups to acknowledge that "gender roles" – which simply means, ways of living out one's biological sex – are socially, culturally and historically shaped, and thus can change as they have in various historical eras (Schaefer 2008). Therefore, it would be futile for us in this era to cling to the concept of perpetuating the stereotyped archaic gender roles instead of struggling to change them for the betterment of our mutual life between the two sexes – female and male, in order to attain the creator's intention in *Imago Dei*; "… in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1: 27 NASB).

1.2 Disability

Various scholars have given definitions on disability (Eiesland 1994, Yong 2011; Thipa 2016; Kebaneilwe 2016). Nancy Eiasland in her book: *The disabled God: toward a liberatory theology of disability, a person with disability*, tries to put different arguments on the right term to be applied to people with disabilities in echoing various voices by saying:

> Euphemisms for persons with disabilities have abounded in recent years, including "differently abled", "physically challenged," and "hand capable."… Although different individuals may design themselves with terms, the current phrase acceptable to most persons with disabilities is just that, "persons with disabilities." This usage underscores the conviction that an individual's disability is just one of many personal characteristics, rather than being synonymous or coextensive with that person's self (1994:26, 27).

According to the Lausanne Forum of 2004, "A person with disability is any individual with physical or psychic impairment or limitations. Such limitations include lameness of body organs like legs deformation, visual impairments like blindness, deafness, or mental retardness". One of the outcomes of that forum was that people with disability were recognized for the first time as a "people group" implying that they were a special group of people who needed special attention and care and they adopted the term "people with disabilities" instead of the term "disabled people" (Lausane Forum 2004). In this paper, the scope of the people with disabilities is confined to people with visual impairment, people who are dumb and deaf and people with crippledness (people who cannot stand and walk on their own unless they use a wheelchair). The Lausanne Forum of 2004 found

out that, "In 1996 the World Health Organization estimated that 10 to 11% of the world's population has a disability up to 600 million. There is a need, especially in developing countries, for over 20 million wheelchairs." (Lausane Forum, 2004). The situation is alarming!

This paper examines how far people with various kinds of disabilities participate in the church matters which range from attending services to holding leadership positions in various areas in the church. Leadership positions include pastorship, deacon/ness, and church group leadership like leading the youth, women or choir groups. As people with disabilities comprise both sexes, male and female, the issue of gender-assigned roles is inescapable to look at in order to get a picture of how the scenario is for our brothers and sisters with disabilities in the church. This paper hopes to encourage extensive researches on national level and also enable the church to take appropriate action in as far as involving people with disabilities in church matters by covering areas that this short paper has not touched.

2. Methodology applied in getting results

Explorative design was used as way of organizing and discussing findings. The study area used was Mbeya City where examination was done on various elements regarded as indicators of the involvement of people with disabilities in church activities. Observations were carried out in various denominations found within the city. Sixteen church buildings were sampled out to represent the other church buildings country-wide on the infrastructure availability that were user-friendly to people with disabilities.[1] On the Church building infrastructure, observations were on whether there were entrance ways or pavements allowing the smooth flow of the wheel chair on the entrance. Where the availability of such would mean that people who used wheelchairs were cordially accommodated in the services and as such, it would not be a strange thing to find such people who use wheelchairs involved in various church activities.

1 Congregations visited include: two of the Roman Catholic, five of the Moravian Church, three from the ELCT, one Baptist, one Assemblies of God, one Seventh-Day Adventist, one New Apostolic, and two from the Anglican Church. Prior to the process of collecting data, I obtained permission from the University allowing me to do research and presented the letter to the various church leaders and local government officials for permissions to get access to people interviewed on streets.

Further observations were made on how the altar was constructed if it accommodated the movement of a wheelchair, a sign of whether a pastor with a wheelchair could use the altar and or the pulpit.

The second approach in getting data was interviews with congregational or Church leaders. Questions asked were geared to get a picture on the availability of tools and instruments to enable people with certain disabilities (like the visually impaired, and the deaf or dumb) which could enable them to participate fully in services or church activities. In principle, questions were on the availability of brail books for people with visual impairment. The availability of church brail books like the Bible, Liturgy and Hymn books would symbolize that people with visual impairment could as well lead the mass as clergy or lead other church groups with minimal barriers.

The third area scrutinized was how the deaf and or dumb people were involved in church services. For this case, the only facilitating way would be to have a person who would interpret the sign language. Just as Paul commended to Corinthians, that unless there was someone to interpret the language of the tongues, the one who spoke in tongues would better keep quiet (1 Cor 14: 6–11). Equally, if a deaf person is attending a service where there is no interpreter, or it is the deaf leading the service in absence of a sign interpreter, the message would not be conveyed in effectively.

In order to get a wider scope on the involvement of people with disabilities in church matters here in Tanzania, I deployed questionnaires to Teofilo Kisanji University community (TEKU) especially students who were put into two categories; Theologians/Pastors and the Lay Christians.[2] Due to the small number of Theological students, all students from that discipline were involved, which meant that representation of the areas to where they came from was attained. Likewise, the inclusion of Christian lay students undertaking secular disciplines at the University meant that widening the coverage area of the country on grounds that students at the University came from different parts of the country. Therefore, by administering questionnaires to these students in a simple random way, there was an assurance for the validity and reliability of the information obtained

2 Let it be clarified here that students at Teofilo Kisanji University (TEKU) come from different regions, parts and also religions of the country. Therefore, the community is representative of the whole country.

from the field. Had it not been for government logistical constraints in issuing permits, it would have been better to involve students from other universities in the vicinity for more area coverage. Even so, the number of respondents was satisfying where the number of respondents who returned filled questionnaires reached.

Analysis of findings, therefore, was done in two approaches, which were qualitatively and quantitatively depending on the nature of data involved in analysing. For quantitative data, the Scientific Package for Social Sciences commonly known as SPSS version 20 was deployed. Discussions on findings for both qualitative and quantitative data went side by side in relation to the subtopic under discussion. Findings were presented in statistical forms through tables, pies and histograms, and in narration for quantitative and qualitative data respectively.[3]

3. Presentation of findings and analysis

3.1 Demography of respondents

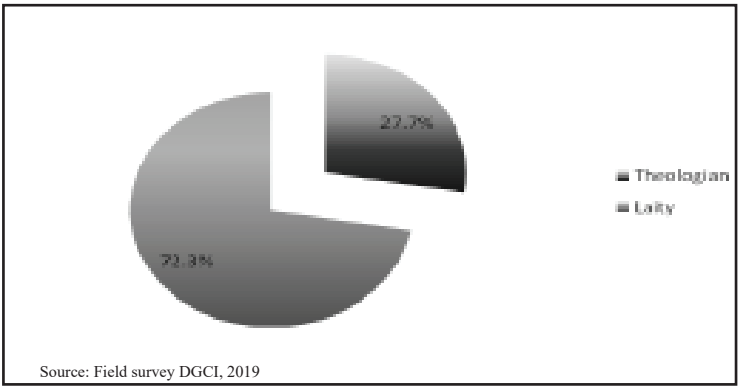
Description of respondents is necessary in every research work as that helps validate the representativeness of the sample to the study population (Omari 2011; Mugenda O. & A. 2003). Four variables were scrutinized in the area of demography which are: discipline of study, sex, home area, and denominational affiliation.

Discipline of study

Results as displayed in figure 3.1 below show that there were 33 theologians equivalent to 27.7 percent respondents compared to 86 non-theologians herein termed as the laity, equivalent to 72.3 percent. The implication for this scenario is that both lay and theologically trained Christians were involved in the study.

3 For observation of research ethics on collecting data see footnote no.1 above.

Fig. 3.1 Status of respondents according to church standards

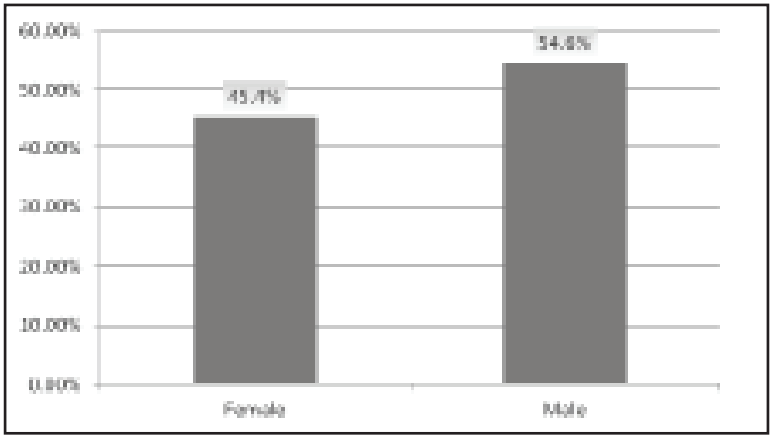


Source: Field survey DGCI, 2019

Sex

Since the study looks at gender as one of the components, and scholars testify how greatly intertwined or closely associated gender and sex are to the extent that often times they are used interchangeably (Meyer 2009), it is necessary to get a good representative number of the two sexes in order for the views to reflect a balanced measure. The outcome was that 45.4 percent respondents were females while 54.6 percent were male counterparts. No doubt, females were well-represented to reflect a good gender balance.

Figure 3.2 depicts this more visibly in a diagrammatic form

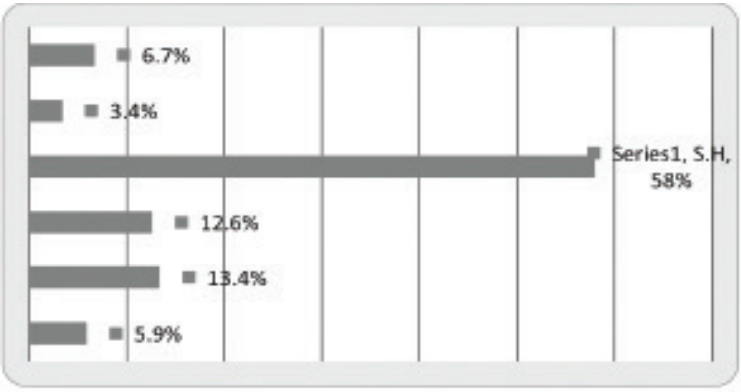


Source: DGCI field survey, 2019

Respondents according to region of residence

It was necessary to look at the variable of one's home area in order to certify for how widely spread the respondents were. Even when generalizing results to Tanzania, results would be acceptable with minimal reservations based on unprecedented errors. Tanzania is divided into regions for easy administration. At the moment, there are 25 regions including the Isles. For the sake of this study, regions were grouped into six zones.[4] The distribution of respondents was that respondents were in all representative zones. Having respondents from all over the country assured me of the validity and reliability of the ensuing views as reflective of the Church in Tanzania. Distribution is shown in the histogram as figure 3.3 below.

Fig. 3.3 Respondents according to home area



Source: DGCI field survey, 2019

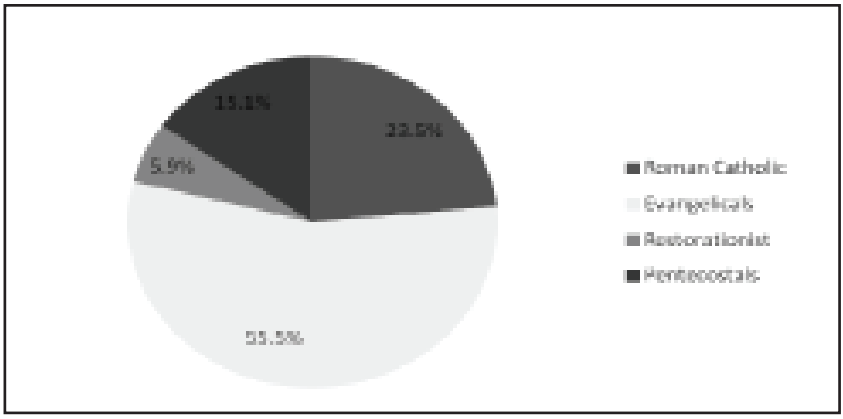
Denominational affiliation of respondents

To get a picture of the denominational affiliation of the respondents was crucial since that proved beyond doubt that a big area of the Christian denominations in the country were reached; and as such, when we talk of the Church in Tanzania, that is reflected from the representativeness of the

4 Zones were as follows with subsequent regions in brackets: i. Northern (Kilimanjaro, Arusha, and Manyala); ii. Coastal (The Isles, Tanga, Coastal region, Morogoro, Mtwara and Lindi); iii. Central (Dodoma, Iringa, Singida and Tabora); iv. Southern Highlands (Ruvuma, Njombe, Mbeya, and Songwe); v. Lake zone (Mara, Simiyu, Mwanza, Geita and Bukoba); vi. Western zone (Rukwa, Katavi and Kigoma).

respondents. Once again for the sake of merging the existing diversities in denominations, I stratified denominations into groups according to their theological classifications. In this respect I came up with four classes as follows, 1. Roman Catholic, 2 Evangelicals, 3 Restorationist, and 4 Pentecostals.[5] Interestingly, all the four categories were represented, thereby giving me confidence that results would not be biased in any way. The outcome for this demographic phenomenon is as depicted in figure 3.4 below.

Fig. 3.4 Respondents according to denominational affiliation



Source: DGCI field survey, 2019

With this demographic overview of the respondents, it can be established with confidence that responses from respondents were, to a great extent, representative of the problem under discussion. Furthermore let it be suffice to say that as an explorative study, no trouble was taken into the statistical elaborations for example of measuring the central tendency,

5 Roman Catholic stands alone; Evangelicals include all the historical denominations like Lutherans, Moravians, Anglicans, Presbyterians, most of which were formed after the Protestant era and before the Radical movements of the Anabaptist surfaced;, while Restorationist includes all Christian denominations that emerged during the Great Awakening but before the onset of the twentieth century. These include Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church, to mention a few. The last group is Pentecostals which encompass all denominations emerging after the Azusa Street Revival in the early 1900s. Some of them are Pentecostal churches, Assemblies of God like EAGT and TAG and also included here are the Apostolic or one-person led churches or ministries.

standard deviations or even p-values, but rather the study is based mostly on gathering the views and generalising them, based on the frequencies as generated from findings.

3.2 Analysis of findings

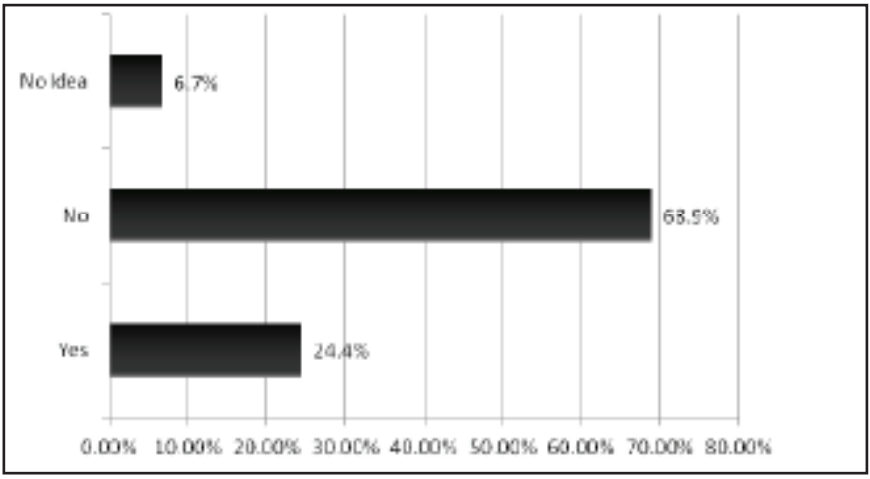
As pointed in the introductory section, the study used three specific objectives namely to assess the presence of wheelchair infrastructures in church buildings; to explore the availability of brail ecclesiastical books, and finally to find out the presence of language sign-interpreters in the church. It was these discussions on gender-related issues would emanate from.

Availability of friendly infrastructure in church buildings for wheelchair users

In the process of collecting data, I managed to interview six pastors or church leaders in different congregations. I also visited 16 church buildings, as pointed out in the methodology section making observations on the issue. And above all, one of the questions in the questionnaires administered was about the availability of the friendly wheel-chair infrastructure in one's church.

Out of all the 16 congregations I visited, in fact all of them within the city, not one congregation or church building had the wheelchair pavement. Equally, all the pastors I interviewed admitted that as a blind spot in their foresight for building design. However, all the church buildings that I observed had wide enough entrances to accommodate entrance of wheelchairs freely. Results from a quantitative side as given in figure 3.5 below can give us a glimpse on the state of affairs on a wider scope.

Fig. 3.5 Availability of wheelchair infrastructure in church buildings



Source: DGCI field survey, 2019

The underscore of over 65 percent for respondents who deny seeing any user-friendly infrastructure for crippled people indicates the absence of the infrastructures. In this way, it is difficult for the crippled to attend church services and hence participate fully in church matters.

In a discussion with one of the pastors from Rukwa Moravian Church, he testified to the presence in the church of an Evangelist who uses a wheelchair. More startling is that the said Evangelist lives in one of the remotest areas of the region where even the church's mud floored is not cemented. In fact, the plan of the Church is to ordain him to be a pastor (Mbao, R. & Simpanzye, E., 5/3/2019 at TEKU). Even with the presence of that Evangelist who is crippled and has devoted his time to serve God in that capacity, the Church has not started embarking on any initiatives to restructure the church buildings to accommodate people with various disabilities.

While the Tanzanian Government just like many other African countries have passed bills to improve lives of people with disabilities known as is "Disability Acts" (Republic of Kenya 2003, Malawi and Zambia 2012, to mention a few), making efforts to uplift the lives of people with disability,

the church on its side seems to be lagging behind. In the article "Disability and Work: The United Republic of Tanzania's Workplace Policies in the Persons with Disabilities, reflections on the Disability Act of 2010." H. Aldersey asserts as follows:

> Because Tanzania engaged in extensive and unprecedented consultation with Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) in the writing of the 2010 Act, people with disabilities who were formally thought of as a "burden," are starting to be regarded as valuable and contributing members of society with crucial input to provide on disability policy (Aldersey 2012: n.p).

In this respect, the Government has gone a step far ahead of the church in the issue of enabling people with disabilities lead normal and economically productive forms of lives while the church seems to neglect them. For example, in all government or public places under the see of the government, schools, universities, hospitals and government offices, wheelchair pavements are a must. Maybe the government should extend its arm to direct churches to put in place such infrastructures so the churches can take ideal steps.

On availability of ecclesiastical braille books in churches

Information gathered from my interviewees on this issue was also negative. The clergy admitted of not taking trouble to look for those materials which include the Bibles, Liturgical books as well as hymn books on grounds that such people were scanty in their churches. In one of the congregations I am conversant with, I reminded the clergy of the presence of two people with disabilities, one had visual impairment while another had audio problems, then the clergy in a solemn voice lamented for the oblivion over such people by saying, "May God Almighty forgive us for our selfishness!" (Mbao, R. & Katu, M. 3/4/2019, Mbeya). Findings from respondents in questionnaires show that 68.9 percent denied having seen any brail books for ecclesiastical use during worship services.

Although people with visual impairment may attend church services and hear the sermons or participate in church matters in almost the same way as the people without disabilities, the unavailability of worshiping tools is an attestation that such people are also forgotten by the church. For this respect, the Church should take steps to put in place such instruments for

such might end up attracting the few visual impaired to become clerical officers or Pastors in the church.

Persons with visual impairment can do just as many great things as persons with sight. In his work, *The Bible, disability, and the church*, Amos Yong contends that people with blindness are just as able persons as people with sight in leading and managing their lives. Yong illustrates his assertions from the incidence of a person born blind, whose sight was restored by Jesus in adult age by saying:

> … the blind man was not as pitiable or dependent a case as might be assumed from a normate point of view. After all he seemed to be able to find his way around just fine, without the help of others; when Jesus told him to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," John simply says that the man "went and washed" (v.7). Jesus did not (have to) call someone else to aid the blind man to get to the pool, nor does the text indicate that he groped his way about until led to his destination (2011:50).

The Bible entails Samson, the blinded person, defeating Philistines by demolishing the house they were gathered in for a party (Judg 16: 28–30). Another incidence of a visually impaired person doing wonders is that of John Ziska (born c. 1360 and died 1424), who is described as one of the great generals of Europe in the 15th C from Bohemia. John Ziska helped mobilize the Hussites, followers of John Hus, who in turn was burnt at the stake in Constance in 1415 by the Papacy for the reason that he criticized the wrong practices of the churches. In turn, he advocated the use of the Bible alone as a cardinal book instead of traditions that were prominent in the church at that time. After his barbaric death, many Bohemians and Moravians of the present-day Czech Republic rebelled against the King by taking to war. John Ziska, a one–eyed man helped these peasant rebels in the subsequent battles. One historian highlights the incidences by saying, "Even after losing his second eye, his genius was not impaired. He had his aides describe the battlefield for him. His name inspired such dread that enemies sometimes fled without a fight at his approach" (Curtis 2011: n.p). Through the works Ziska, the seed of the Bohemian rebels was preserved and germinated into a seedling of Unitas Fratrum, which later grew into the present-day Moravian Church.

Another hero in the church history with visual impairment was William J. Seymour (1870–1922), a grandson of the ex-slave in America (USA). It was Seymour who ignited the Pentecostal movement after launching the Azusa street revival movement in 1906. It is from that revival movement where the Pentecostal church was born, ushering into various sub-divisions like the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal churches. Seymour was a one-eyed person who was fully involved in church matters regardless of his inability to see properly. The writer, in an online publication edifies Pentecostalism by saying:

> Today, the number of classical Pentecostals worldwide and those who are considered Pentecostal-like charismatics has exploded. Because of a fervent missionary zeal, it has become one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in South America and Africa. *The Dictionary of Christianity in America* cites Pentecostalism as being "perhaps the single-most-significant development in twentieth-century Christianity." (Kroll 2011: n.p)

During my survey, I came across three women (young mothers) who had visual impairments in three different locations. All of them sat on the roadsides or near marketplaces where a good number of people frequented. Each one had a loudspeaker which emitted a recorded appeal to passers-by to assist by giving anything one had, for she did not have sight. Strangely all of them had children whom they confessed were theirs. Lucky enough all of them claimed they were Christians and two of them were Roman Catholic while the other one was an Assemblies of God member. Concerning their frequency of going to church, in general, they all detested going to church because they lacked close support from their fellow church members. One solemnly expressed that, "Since we live in abject poverty, we do not have decent clothes, we appear before other church members as a nuisance. Therefore, I feel it is better to just remain at home or come for my business on the streets." (Mbao, R. & "X" visual impaired woman, 5/15/2019, Mbeya).

Availability of sign interpreters for the deaf/dumb in the church

Deaf people have barriers in hearing due to problems in the auditory system of their ears. Successful verbal communication with people is through language-signs. So while attending a service which is predominantly

emitted verbally, the deaf people will not get the message and as such their participation in church matters will be barred or limited to a great extent. Findings from my field survey revealed that the deaf were also a forgotten group of people by the church. Table 3.1 below reflects the views of respondents.

Table 3.1 Sign interpreters' availability in church

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	23	19.3	19.3	19.3
No	91	76.5	76.5	95.8
No idea	5	4.2	4.2	100.0
Total	119	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data

As can be deduced from table 3.1, the majority, over 76 percent, testified that they did not have sign-interpreters in their churches. On the side of the six clerical officers I interviewed, only one Congregation admitted to having such a vision in his ministry. All the other five declined offering such a service on grounds that they did not have such people in their congregations. Even for the Catholic Church, who have done a tremendous work in empowering the deaf by building and running schools for such people, lack sign interpreters during their Mass.

Surprisingly, the Lutheran church pastor who professed to offer the service of sign interpreters in his congregation revealed that his initiative led to the officials of the government to borrow that idea where they deployed a sign interpreter at Mbeya Referral Hospital.

When the Clergy give excuses for absence of the sign-interpreters in the church on grounds that there were virtually no such people in the church, one can conclude that it is the church which has let them not come to church and participate in church matters fully. On 2nd May 2019, there was a programme on the national broadcasting media (TBC[6]) where the Director

6 TBC stands for Tanzania Broadcasting Services.

of Mbeya Referral Hospital (Dr. Godlove Mbwanji), was interviewed on their innovation of employing a sign-interpreter at that hospital. Mbwanji explained that they came to that decision after realising the problems that might have been encountering such people when they fell sick or needed physiological attendance. Mbwanji disclosed that from the time they started using the sign-interpreter, the number of deaf patients or those seeking medical advice had soared up significantly. In his words he said:

> Before we employed the sign-interpreter, we registered four to six patients of that kind per week. However, since the employment of the expert in sign-interpreting for the deaf, the number of patients of that kind has risen significantly, from a maximum of six patients per week, it is now six to eight patients per day making it about 40 patients per week. I urge religious institutions to deploy the sign-interpreters because what we have experienced at our hospital may be applicable in the worshipping circles where the number of deaf worshippers may rise up significantly (TBC Station, "Region by Region" programme, 2/5/2019).

During one of my walks around the city trying to look for people with disabilities, I came across a lad who had hearing impediments. He washes cars for owners who happen to park in his area of work. On that day, he was busy washing a car when I happened to face him. I approached him and gave him a "tip" to create some rapport situation, because I had no car to wash. In a trial and error attempt, I asked him where he worshipped. He showed the sign of a cross, so I realized he was a Christian. After my efforts to extract more information from him as to which denomination he belonged failed, he pulled me by the hand and took me to a man who was sitting nearby (whom I perceived was acquainted with the lad's sign language somehow). The man now interpreted to me that the lad was of the Roman Catholic affiliation. Asked as to why he had not gone to church on that Sunday, he responded it was because he got virtually nothing from the Mass since there was no one to interpret for him (Mbao, R. & Y. 27/4/2019, Mbeya).

Suggestions on what the church ought to do to people with disabilities

Following the suggestions posed by the clergy, I decided to include some of their suggestions in the closed-ended questions to both theologians and

non-theologian respondents. I analysed the findings by looking at sex to see the preferences within the variables that male and female. The results are as displayed in table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Responses by sex on how church should assist the disabled

		It is a difficult exercise	Advise the government to intervene	Pray for them to persevere	Give them financial support	Pray for their healing	No idea	**Total**
Sex	Female	2	23	8	15	5	1	54
		3.7%	42.6%	14.8%	27.8%	9.3%	1.9%	100.0%
	Male	3	20	15	21	4	2	65
		4.6%	30.8%	23.1%	32.3%	6.2%	3.1%	100.0%
Total		5	43	23	36	9	3	119
		4.2%	36.1%	19.3%	30.3%	7.6%	2.5%	100.0%

Source: DGCI field survey, 2019

From the illustrations in table 3.2, it can be deduced that high preferences for sexes lie in enticing the Government to assist people with disabilities and in the idea for giving financial assistance to the disabled.

In general, the findings reveal that the church has not done much, in as far as laying the foundations for inclusion of people with disabilities in it are concerned. The sad thing about this scenario is just how such a thing can occur in a state where the government is advocating for promotion of people with disabilities, and the government is doing all it can to comply with the international conversions on people with disabilities like that of the "… United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006," (Aldersey, 2012). It is an undeniable fact that the church has done a lot in contributing to social developments in Africa from the missionary era up to the post-independence era by participating in educational activities, building and running hospitals and the like all just to ensure that holistic ministry is affected. So, it sounds awkward when we see the government putting in place and trying to implement policies of people with disabilities, and yet the church is being passive about that. From the study of Aldasey (2012), it is apparent that the Tanzanian government has been working on efforts to promote the lifestyle of people

with disabilities since 1982 while the church has been in existence for over a century now.

The initiative taken by one congregation in Mbeya on ensuring the deaf are involved fully in church services by hiring a sign interpreter should be the starting point for church organizations in Tanzania to set in place policies for people with disabilities. Exclusion of people with disabilities from participating fully in church matters is going against the national decrees and moreover is a transgression against God.

With the scenario of findings in this study, the study which intended to look at how people with disabilities are involved in church matters, as based on gender, it became hard to start looking at gender while the involvement rate itself is almost non-existent for people with disabilities. Therefore, that dimension was overlooked in the whole study, and instead focus was made on gender sensitive and inclusiveness of people with disabilities.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The study explored the opportunities of people with disabilities to participate in church matters and basing it on gender. The study used various methods in accomplishing collection and analysis of data where observations in church buildings was done; an interview with pastors or their close assistants was carried out, discussions with people with disabilities and also a close-ended questionnaire was administered to 130 respondents with a return of 119 that were properly filled. Analysis of findings was done thematically which went concurrently with the analysis of quantitative data. Discussions brought in various incidences from the field to amplify a particular issue under discussion.

In simple and straightforward language, the findings from the study revealed that it is not yet the ripe time in Tanzania to talk about gender issues in as far as the participation of the disabled in the church is concerned. What needs to be done is to urge the church to create a good and amenable environment for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church in good numbers. After that, then the issue of gender balance

in the participation of people with disabilities can come in; otherwise as it stands, no one part between the two sexes stands better chances for participating in the church.

The study found out that people with disabilities were not taken as a serious concern of the church in as far as participation in church matters is concerned, although some denominations have built schools for people with disabilities like the Roman Catholic and Evangelistic Lutheran Church in Tanzania, who run schools for the blind, deaf and dumb, and people with special needs. Since the church is contributing in that perspective, it is needful for it to accommodate people with disabilities even in its matters, not just empowering them through education and then leaving them alone.

At Teofilo Kisanji University, just after the seminar in May 2019, we started to implement some issues arising from this topic. The Faculty of Theology took initiatives to include topics concerning ministry to people with disabilities in its curriculum. The rationale was that awareness of ministry to people with disabilities will be created in pastors and that will make a big leap in involving such people in church matters.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study, the study recommends the following: first, since the government is much further ahead of the church in recognizing and implementing the needs of people with disabilities, it should urge the churches, through the concerned ministry, to follow suit what the government is implementing; put in place policies on people with disabilities in the church to ensure conducive environment for people with disabilities; and facilities should be provided in the worship places like churches.

Second, enforcement of the government directives to churches should be strictly followed, just as follow up is done on hygienic issues in church areas to prevent spread of contagious diseases like cholera. All church building plans must be certified by the government and should conform to standards enabling people with disabilities to have access to worship places.

Third, churches, through their church councils like TEC and CCT should hold bold discussions on unfavourable cultures affecting the well-being of humanity in order to make every person enjoy life and enjoy it to the fullest

(Jn. 10: 10). Inversely it would also be ideal to carry out a study on church ministry to people with disabilities as a supplement to this study.

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