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Embodied theology with children with disabilities in South Africa

ABSTRACT

There is a fractured relationship between the Christian belief system and disability reality in South Africa. Disability provides the opportunity for an embodied theological discourse on being human and being spiritual, with limitation. This article is based on a research study that formulated a theological framework to support advocacy for children with disabilities and their families within local congregations. Data was collected via focus groups with four Christian families impacted by disabilities. Disability is viewed not merely as a specialised ministry, but as an integral aspect of community life. An ecclesial theology emerges. The church is presented as an authentic community, with diverse abilities, reflecting a renewed vision of the imago Dei as diverse. The church in South Africa is encouraged to value the contributions of families with special needs – and the disability theology they embody – in shaping discipleship, responding authentically to life's challenges, and advancing the ongoing work of Christ in the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Statistics South Africa (2022), 3,3 million South Africans identified as living with a disability. According to UNICEF (2021), one in ten children lives with a disability. Koistinen (2018:15) reports that Africa is home to the largest population of children with disabilities who present as the most vulnerable persons in our community. In Africa, the plight of the child with disability is linked to socio-economic disparities (Graham *et al.* 2010; South African Ministry of Social Development



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2015; Philpott & McKenzie 2017:84). To initiate a meaningful dialogue on why disability is a crucial topic for pastoral reflection, the following should be considered. Historical inequalities in South Africa reinforced the segregation of persons with disabilities from mainstream society (Palm 2023:16; Graham *et al.* 2010; South African Ministry of Social Development 2015). Furthermore, the church's failure to fully integrate individuals with disabilities at congregational level may contribute to their continued marginalisation (Mashau & Mangoedi 2015:3).

In a recent study on disability theology in South Africa, Palm (2023:6) states:

While there is a human rights lens on disability in South Africa at policy level, it is also apparent from studies that harmful cultural and religious beliefs about disability continue to shape lived realities of many people with disabilities and their families.

The alternative is true. South African theologians affirm that the church has a pivotal role in advancing social justice ministry and driving social transformation (Dames 2017:9, 11; Mashau & Mangoedi 2015:4; Palm 2023:26; Pillay 2022). Therefore, the church should lead the way in disability mainstreaming. Religion plays a significant role in shaping how people perceive and understand disability (Kersbergen 2022:12-13; Bowa 2022:390). The way in which Christian communities engage with disability can deeply impact the lived experiences of children with disabilities and their families. It influences attitudes, beliefs, and responses – either fostering inclusion and dignity or reinforcing stigma and exclusion. Faith traditions and theological interpretations affect whether disability is viewed through a lens of compassion, justice, and belonging or as a burden, punishment, or test of faith.

Theologians (Bowa 2022:398; Palm 2023:7; Retief & Letšosa 2018:2,4; Tagwirei 2024:8) agree that the Bible and the way in which it is interpreted have shaped attitudes and perspectives on disability. The church can play a role in transforming how society perceives and engages with disability. In both its theology and praxis, the church should embody God's love in welcoming individuals with disabilities as both counter-culture and as true of Christian culture (Pillay 2022:4; Palm 2023:30; Whitehead 2016:262; Tamminga *et al.* 2020:108). Greig's (2015) essay on radical hospitality is an example of the envisaged transformation of the church community into a powerful agent of witness.

This essay argues that the church has an opportunity to witness to society's devaluing of persons with Down syndrome by intentionally seeking to adopt them into their faith communities. This approach

not only provides a home for the rejected but facilitates the church's transformation into a people who personify reconciliation and unity (Greig 2015:i).

The full integration of individuals with disabilities renews both the ecclesial community and its Christian witness to the secular world (Greig 2015:50).

To this end, this article surveys the development of disability theologies, tracing their formation and key contributions toward more inclusive communities of faith. It includes a selection of quotes from four focus groups (FFGs 1-4) with four Christian special needs families (n=12) conducted for a previous study (Manuel 2024). The participants represent various impairments (autism, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, Down syndrome, epilepsy, and rare diseases).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sampling method

The study employed random-referral sampling to recruit special needs families. Families in various local churches in Cape Town were invited through recruitment partners who were familiar with them. The recruitment process was sensitive to the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants, aiming to treat families as partners in the research. Families had to be members of a local congregation and willing to share their experiences regarding inclusion/exclusion within their community of faith. The focus groups included families with diverse structures: a traditional family with both parents, a single-parent family, a foster family, and a family where a child resides primarily with the grandparents.

2.2 Interview process

Semi-structured interview questions were modified with the help of peer reviewers to ensure that they were appropriate for children and focused on the experiences of children with disabilities and their families. Families were interviewed individually to maintain confidentiality.

2.3 Analysis method

A narrative thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data collected from the focus groups (Braun & Clarke 2022; Maguire & Delahunt 2017). The primary investigator and two peer reviewers independently coded the interviews, which were then discussed in a collaborative session to identify themes. The peer review team consisted of two experts: a special education

professor and a disability activist who has cerebral palsy and is the parent of a child with disability. They provided insights on question quality and helped ensure ethical practices throughout the research.

2.4 Ethical clearance

The study adhered to the Stellenbosch University guidelines for ethical research, ensuring no harm to participants, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality (Senate Research Ethics Committee 2013). Special care was taken when involving minors, with assent forms completed alongside caregiver consent.

3. GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT OF DISABILITY THEOLOGY AND DISABILITY MODELS

Volpe (2024) traces the roots of pastoral reflection on disability back to the patristic period. She highlights that more structured spiritual and ethical deliberations on disability gained prominence in the 1970s, where scholars such as William Gaventa and Stanley Hauer were playing key roles. She notes that Eiesland's (1994) *The disabled God: Toward a liberation theology of disability* formally introduced the phrase "disability theology", establishing it as a distinct theological discipline intersecting with disability studies. The integration of disability theology into disability studies significantly enriches the field, by addressing a critical gap, namely the frequent neglect of spirituality within disability discourse.

While disability studies focus on social, political, and economic dimensions such as rights, representation, and accessibility, they often overlook the spiritual desires and practices of individuals with disabilities (Chataika 2013:123; Creamer 2008:77, 78; Eiesland 2002). This omission sidelines an essential aspect of human experience, particularly for many people with disabilities who actively seek to live out their faith. Disability theology brings this dimension to the forefront, emphasising that spirituality is not peripheral, but central to the lives of many individuals with disabilities and those (caregivers, family members, and friends) in solidarity with them.

Concurrently, the 1970s also saw a paradigm shift in disability perspective, moving from a predominantly medical model to a social model (United Nations 2019:47) that later shaped a human rights-based understanding of disability (Palm 2023:5; McMahon-Panter & Bornman 2025). Disabled persons organisations lobbied against welfare approaches to disability concerns, seeking self-representation and equal access (Rowland 2004). Likewise, it emerged from a literature review and empirical data that the

Evangelical Church in South Africa has several disability models that need reworking, as these deviate from upholding human rights and human dignity (Palm 2023:5; McMahon-Panter & Bornman 2025). Pentecostalism, which has entered many Christian denominations in South Africa, influences African theology significantly (Hendriks 2021:35; Mashau & Kgatle 2019, Moon 2020). According to Antombikums (2024a:2), "[a]pproximately 15% of African Christians are Pentecostals". This renders it important to reflect on Pentecostalism's disability theology. Pentecostal theologians such as Yong (2010:80) and Kgatle (2024:1-7) indicate that leaders who are proponents of extreme neo-Pentecostalism – which preaches a prosperity doctrine – are ideologically challenged by constituents with impairments.

The moral-religious model of disability is an example of a harmful theology mentioned by the research participants (Retief & Letšosa 2018:2; Retief 2016:51). This model assumes that individuals with disabilities are being punished for moral failings. Such religious interpretations have historically linked disability to sin, leading to discrimination towards individuals with disabilities. By framing disability as a moral failing or "punishment of God" (Retief & Letšosa 2018:2), the moral model inherently undermines the dignity of individuals with disabilities. It suggests that their worth is contingent upon their ability to conform to societal ideals of health and ability. The moral-religious model can lead to a theology that emphasises healing and normalisation over acceptance and inclusion. This model results in disability stigma and social exclusion (Van der Mark *et al.* 2017:9; Retief 2016). Jesus settled moral-religious dilemma thinking when he was questioned as to the sin that resulted in a man being born blind:

It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins,' Jesus answered. 'This happened so the power of God could be seen in him' (Jn. 9:3 NLT).

Churches in South Africa should remedy theologies to the harmful moral-religious thinking that has pushed individuals with disabilities to the periphery of society. In a focus group interview, an evangelical parent of a teen with autism made this statement, revealing the impact of the prosperity doctrine in South Africa:

I wonder how pastors feel about disabilities. Because, you know, when you read the parables – stories in the Bible and Jesus healing the blind – you know, it's all these miracles. And people are so quick to want to pray for a miracle. But have they stopped and asked them? You know, just asked them what they need. 'Do you want us to pray for your sight? Do you want us to pray for your wheelchair?' So, I do think that, yeah, I think a lot of pastors' theology will be challenged a little bit if we really

have conversations with them around this ... I mean, you simply can't have the 'name it and claim it' variety and be accepting of special needs in church (FFG1).

In a study in South African Pentecostal churches, persons with disabilities, who were not healed of their impairment, were blamed, judged, ostracised or belittled (Kgatlle 2024; Retief 2016:5). The supernatural (physical) healing model in Pentecostal and Charismatic movements can be compared to a medical model, as both seek a cure for the impairment (Clifton & Wells 2020:346). These models fault in undermining the worth and potential of individuals with disabilities. Medical models view the impairment without holistically considering the life story of an individual with disabilities. This perspective results in a reductive view of personhood. Similarly, when the church views an individual with a disability through a narrow lens, it fails to recognise this person beyond his/her impairment, overlooking his/her full identity and dignity. The church conveys a message that the individual with disability needs to be fixed, rather than accepted as whole in Christ (Kersbergen 2022:9).

Hendriks (2021:36) explains that charismatic tradition proffers to

an illusionary world full of blessings, where the notion of suffering and the cross tends to be ignored. Success and being winners, notions drawn from the affluent world created by the capitalist economy of exploitation, often receive support.

The lived experience of disability presents doctrinal challenges to a Pentecostal theology, which needs to answer to its constituents why it is that God does not always physically or mentally heal everyone – and that this is not due to a lack of faith. This is based on a prosperity gospel that promises to remove all of life's ills such as suffering and poverty. This becomes a one-dimensional theology and does not suffice to address any aspect of suffering, disability, or hardship. A question for theological inquiry is: "What is God's perspective of holism, considering persons with disabilities?" (Kabue 2021:xi). More theological reflection is due to uproot toxic theologies that lead to a discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Yong 2010; Kgatlle 2024; Palm 2023:26; Retief 2016).

Not discounting the testimonies of those who have experienced miracles such as physical healing throughout the church dispensation, it is noteworthy that a healing doctrine, embedded in a prosperity doctrine, isolates those perceived as weak. Chataika (2013:125) states that persons with disabilities "are not a distortion or an inferior image of God", as held by "the illusion of normalcy". She terms such thinking as cheap theology (Chataika 2013:126).

Macaskill (2022:423) reminds the church that modernity has defined contemporary assumptions on health and wholeness, which should be challenged by Scripture (Macaskill 2022:422). A biblical view to thriving is not aligned to modernism's vision of independent, prosperous persons who do not rely on the care of others (Macaskill 2022:422). A teen with cerebral palsy mentions her dependence on God because of her disability:

You know what? God wanted you so much, that he made you despite of this ... If I'm physically capable of everything I'm going to do, where's God in that? (FFG2).

Christians with disabilities should be heard as theologians of their own experience (McMahon-Panter & Bornman 2025:98). In literature, several such persons have accepted disability as part of their God-given identity (Okola & Kilonzo 2024:34). Many individuals with disabilities do not perceive themselves as suffering. Lipiec (2019) entitles an article "People with disabilities as a gift and challenge for the church". In focus group interviews, the researcher has come across those with deep faith, who embrace their impairment. A non-speaking teen with autism declares on a spelling-to-communicate board:

Society benefits since autistic people have a unique perspective that we can share. Otherwise, they lack our perspective ... I struggled to play with the kids when I was young, since I couldn't talk then. But I mostly felt that we belonged. Church definitely became more meaningful, once I could sit in the sermon and listen to the pastor preach and it was fantastic that my father could baptize me (FFG1).

This teen does not wish to be fixed or healed.

In the New Testament, some illnesses and impairments are healed. However, the healing is not amplified more than the person who is restored to society.

The church should realize that Jesus' healing mission not only relieved disease, but it also integrated the person back into full membership of the community (Bunch 2001:i).

Investigating Christ's view on disability, the New Testament follows the history of Jesus, who mixed with the marginalised. A Christocentric view calls the church to its ambassador role (2 Cor. 5:18-21) to restore all to Christ as an eschatological community (Trout 2021:i). The end-time call of Christ is for the marginalised to be invited to the banquet table: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Lk. 14:13-23 (NIV)). White (2017:125) mentions that this parable is indicative of Christ placing individuals with disabilities into the church community:

The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) defines the place of persons with disabilities in the life of the Kingdom of God. The parable shows that Jesus Christ, in both word and action, sets persons with a disability within the circle of unity of the Christian church.

Christ did not heal all the impairments he came across. However, he did invite disabled people, as they are, into the kingdom. The church, therefore, has reason to address an ecumenical approach that enables the full participation of individuals with disabilities (Tagwirei 2024:6). This calls for a theological reformation that offers a renewed framework for disability advocacy. What should follow are well-considered position statements on inclusion, with a clear emphasis on belonging and social justice for individuals with disabilities and their families.

4. AFRICAN THEOLOGIANS SHAPE DISABILITY THEOLOGY

Africa is home to an influential body of disability theologians, emerging from the World Council of Churches – *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network* (WCC-EDAN). EDAN operates from Kenya.¹ Samuel Kabue, the first Executive Secretary of EDAN is a member of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee). In an interview on his memoirs, *From the village to the world with eyes wide open*, visually impaired Kabue recalls being turned away from seminary (Schneider 2016). He overcame overt discrimination towards disability, modelling leadership as a Christian with disability. Angeline Okola (leader of EDAN since 2017) has co-edited significant publications that reflect on the theological implications of disability, advocating for a church that recognises ministers with disabilities in leadership roles (Okola & Kilonzo 2024). Okola grew up with blind parents.

4.1 Disability theologians in South Africa

South African scholars are rising to the occasion to present disability theologies. Evangelicals Manikam and Mbali (2023) emphasise a Christocentric model for church practices, advocating for a framework that centres on Christ's role in restoring marginalised individuals, including those with disabilities. Their work highlights the importance of integrating disability theology into practical church life. Mbali is an individual with a disability. Manikam and Mbali (2023:340) describe how Jesus opposed cultural and religious bias towards disability:

1 EDAN's website "Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN): Advocating for the participation of persons with disabilities in the spiritual, social and development life of church and society": <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/edan#:~:text=The%20network%20is%20managed%20as,of%20 the%20eight%20WCC%20regions> [15 May 2025].

The scope of Jesus' ministry crossed barriers of spirituality, gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, and physical condition. It might have invited criticism from the Jewish elite but was a welcome relief to many others, particularly those living with disabilities. Jesus' acts of kindness and healing towards people with disabilities sent a powerful message to the world – that everyone is a child of God and deserving of His mercy. It is a message that is just as relevant today as it was in Jesus' time and just as important to convey and act upon – considering the deep bias in societies across the world against those who are 'different'.

Retief (2016) wrote his dissertation as a Pentecostal pastor in Cape Town. His dissertation, entitled *Enabling faith: Towards a Pentecostal homiletical strategy for shaping disability-friendly congregations*, describes how Pentecostal ableism preaching forms toxic faith and toxic churches. His study offers a corrective remedy for responsible preaching, with a disability lens. Retief approaches disability not as a deficit or punishment, but through a redemptive and empowering theological lens. Retief challenges traditional Pentecostal views that often associate disability with sin, lack of faith, or the need for healing. Retief (2016:i) advocates for "disability-friendly ethical and theological perspectives". Such contributions inspire pneumatologically-informed understandings of disability that affirm the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of persons with disabilities, not despite, but within and through their disability (Yong 2011:95). It is noteworthy that both Retief and Yong have a sibling with a disability.

Further, pneumatologically exploring the spirituality of those with intellectual disability presents another dimension for theological reflection, namely the weight put on the rational knowing and confessing of doctrine versus the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those in the church with intellectual disability. Shurley (2017:142) gives an account for the veneration of rationality, while situating rational thinking as only one domain of being human:

Historically, religion is highly focused on rationality and cognition. At least, from an enlightened and reformed protestant tradition, thinking and reflecting on faith, God, and humans is deeply rooted in religious communities. Yet, our ability to think is only one part of our existence. Much more, as human beings, we are embedded in a community in which we seek for emotional encouragement, we aim to develop our own selves and to follow various dreams and needs. Therefore, the issue of inclusion is important in contemporary theology—most of all in practical theology and pastoral care.

A community of faith that relies on intellectual capacity for spiritual formation excludes both the spirituality of those with intellectual disability, and what the community of faith can learn from those who may not express their faith in

typical ways. Richie (2015:73) presents a theology (from 2 Tm. 3:15, Psalm 8:2, and Mt. 21:16) of knowing God that is not intellectually bound:

Timothy's faith community taught him before he could understand. God initiates rejoicing from those who are unable to cognitively grasp absolute truth for His own glory.

Spiritual connection transcends the intellectual ability to understand doctrine (2 Tm. 3:15). The Spirit of God engages with mankind pre-birth (Jr. 1:5), infants are ordained for praise (Psalm 8:2; Mt. 21:6), and the Kingdom belongs to children (Mt. 18, 19:14; Mk. 10:13-16). Disability theologians who have a relationship with a disabled child experience this spirituality as a result of this child (Young 2014; Yong 2007; Swinton 2001a). Parents in the focus group interviews testified to the spirituality of children with intellectual disability. A parent shares this anecdote of her son with Down syndrome and autism:

My son's faith is actually quite important to him. He talks to God all the time. He talks to Jesus all the time. Yesterday, he had a long conversation about how I must talk to Jesus in the car (FFG3).

5. SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILIES IN SOUTH AFRICA WEIGH IN ON THE ROLE OF FAITH AND CHURCH

Parents and children interviewed in focus groups held that a personal decision for Christ should be presented. A parent of a non-speaking child with autism realised her child's spiritual vocation:

And, in the end, once we found the communication method and we realized everything that was going on, like dad said, you know, we actually need to ask her what she believes. I think, don't presume there's not enough understanding to make that decision. They need to be given the exact same opportunity to accept Christ ... I think we desperately need to hear the preaching of the hope that is in Christ for families with special needs. For God's purpose, and his hand, and the things, and his provision. I think, very important (FFG1).

A research participant with non-speaking autism expresses the significance of experiencing a community of belonging in a local church:

Having a place where parents are accepted makes all the difference in the world. Missing out on easy relationships with other families is one of the hardest parts of being a family with a child with special needs. To find a community where I gather with my family, where others are willing

to engage with us and even socialize with us, changes the way we feel about ourselves. Since arriving at (church name) where we go, we have felt accepted, deemed worthy, like all others. Shame is a big struggle, since I cannot always control my body. It is much easier on my family if they are surrounded by people who understand us (FFG1).

The parents and siblings, who were interviewed, presented their faith as a central pillar of their lives:

For me, I mean, my faith is like the air that I breathe. I like certainly couldn't, um, face any of this without faith in a God who has a plan for us, um, has a path planned for us. That he's going to equip us, and sustain us, and finish the work that he started (FFG1).

So, faith has been a huge thing. And I needed to be able to go to church. Even if it hasn't been 100% open to me and my special needs kids (FFG2).

(about faith) Yeah, I think it's just having something I could control, in an uncontrollable. It's like it's a constant (FFG2).

I think for me faith is, it's knowing that there's a plan. In everything. That nothing's going to happen by accident. That God's there and He knows what He's doing, even if we don't know what we're doing. Which is a lot of the time (FFG3).

A visually impaired child exclaims: "My faith means everything!" (FFG4).

The church can learn from the faith of special needs family members. Christians who are impacted by a disability testify to their theological assumptions being disrupted by disability (Zyllah 2016:704; Young 2014). Deep reflection on ideas about God, suffering, and normalcy come under scrutiny as the family reinterprets age-old theological foundations through a disability lens (Banja 2013:48-50). Their lived experiences have broad relevance:

Disabled people face unique spiritual challenges and can provide a body of expertise from which we could all benefit – churches, health services, communities and society (McColl & Ascough 2009:11).

A church that receives shallow answers to the difficult dimensions of life misses out on the insights special needs families bring with their tested faith.

6. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

This article highlights the significance of incorporating theological reflection into the discourse on disability and calls for a reconsideration of how churches understand and engage with children with disabilities and their families. The article presents disability theology of special needs families, in order to explore an embodied disability theology for churches in South Africa. It presents expressions of faith by special needs family members as a window into their unique contribution to the community of faith. These express personal faith in Christ, the value of belonging to a community of faith, and the central role of their faith in God's plan for their lives.

A theological inquiry in South Africa considers the impact of the prosperity doctrine on the perception of disability. Disability can inform and enrich Pentecostal theology, challenging the notion of a normative body as the right of the converted, and promoting a more holistic understanding of wholeness that includes the experiences of individuals with disabilities (Kabue 2021:xi). Neo-Pentecostalism, particularly in Africa, tends to inflate the concept of divine healing. Individuals with disabilities are often viewed primarily as needing healing or deliverance, which can lead to a superstitious understanding of disability (Palm 2023:17; Tagwirei 2024:3). Negative religious perspectives result in marginalising persons with disabilities, as they may be regarded as lacking faith if they do not manifest physical healing. This critical engagement equips theologians with a robust theology of suffering and limitation, aligning more closely with the complexities of human experience. Disability should, however, not be viewed exclusively from a paradigm of suffering. The church has a role in liberating individuals with disabilities to use their gifts (Tagwirei 2024).

Key disability theologies are presented next, emphasising the dignity and inclusion of individuals with disabilities within the Christian church. These theologies align with the views of the special needs families interviewed.

6.1 Dignity theology (the gift of life)

A theological foundation for dignity is pursued. Dignity is the leading mandate of the human rights agenda, though lacking clear reason (Bennet 2016). A theology of dignity supersedes the ambiguity of this and clarifies the reason for inherent worth. Theologians present a dignity charter deriving from the *imago Dei* (Bennet 2016; Okola & Kilonzo 2024; Maliszewska 2019; Clifton 2020; Chisale 2023:67). Dignity theology is grounded in the *imago Dei* as a diverse representation of God's image, promoting a theology of the gift of life (Okola & Kilonzo 2024). This theology posits that life should not be measured

by prosperity or ability (Yong 2011; Young 2014). Instead, it recognises the inherent value of every individual, including those with disabilities, as a gift from God.

An emphasis on the inherent worth or personhood of all individuals, including those with disabilities, shifts perspectives to view individuals not as deficient, but as essential to the body of Christ (Swinton 2012:183). Human dignity is undermined when an individual is defined by economic value:

Humanity, based on meritocratic values, does little to build our sense of the common good as we compete for status, power, and resources at the expense of others. Rather, meritocratic values economize the individual and set their worth based solely on contribution to society instead of more theologically oriented values that express and embody the dignity and worth of humanity as created persons in relationship with one another (Whitehead 2016:259).

Whitehead (2016:259) highlights that dignity is realised and embodied when persons of all abilities live in communion with God and with one another.

6.2 Disability liberation theology

Disability theology is likened to liberation theology, addressing the challenges imposed by ableism in society and within the church. It critiques doctrines of healing and prosperity that can further isolate individuals with disabilities and their families. It rereads Scripture from the perspective of the disabled to gain insight into the Jesus, who is followed by disabled Christians and their caregivers (Eiesland 2002; Banja 2013; Gould 2019; Yong 2007; Yong 2010). Individuals with disabilities are emerging to write theological works and auto-ethnographies, showcasing the potential for disability theology to liberate church communities from ableism (Jacobs 2023; Waldock 2023; Kabue 2021; Okola & Kilonzo 2024; Clifton 2020).

Leading voices in disability liberation theology are Creamer (2008) and Eiesland (1994). Creamer (2008:123) challenges the notion that disability is a consequence of sin, or results from a curse. Her model of embodied limits counteracts the transhuman ideology of modernity, which upholds ableism. She discusses the body of Christ imagery of 1 Corinthians 12 to counteract ableism, by establishing that various gifts and limitations “fit together to constitute a community” (Creamer 2008:95). This promotes an ecclesiology inclusive of diverse abilities and injured without the lived experiences of those impacted by disability.

The limits model highlights the fact that all people are limited to varying degrees and offers this perspective as a foundation for theological reflection. When understood as part of what it means to be human,

limits are no longer something to be overcome in search of perfection or something that is experienced as a punishment for sinfulness. From the limit's perspective, sin might now be redefined as an inappropriate attitude toward limits as we both exaggerate and also reject our own limits and the limits of others (Creamer 2008:33).

Nancy Eiesland, a sociologist and wheelchair user, is infamous to disability liberation theology. In *The disabled God: Toward a liberation theology of disability* (1994), she reflects as follows:

The primary problem for the church is not how to 'accommodate' disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God's children.

Eiesland's "disabled God" grapples with the way in which Christ took on deformity, relating in this way to the experience of disability. This work opines that disability is not eradicated in heaven; it remains part of the identity of the resurrected person with a disability. Several disability theologians agree. Michaelson *et al.* (2020:385) call on theologians to contextualise a liberating theology of the *imago Dei* for children, including children with disabilities:

Theologically, all children (indeed, all people) of any ability are made in God's Image (Genesis 1:26). And yet, as Swinton has argued elsewhere, as we develop and construct our understanding of God's Image, we are inclined to project images of ourselves and of the things that we value and desire onto God, and claim them as divine (Swinton, 2001b; Cooper, 1992). Because of this, many people will be most comfortable embracing the Image of a God who is a strong, powerful, intelligent and able-bodied adult. With this in mind, we wonder if children with disabilities are in fact encouraged to see an able-bodied adult image as the norm that they would hold in mind as they are imagining the future in terms of explications and visions of heaven. Our concern is that if this were the case, there may not be room in this vision for children who live with disabilities to understand their own authentic selves as fully compatible with the Image of God.

Theologies presented by scholars such as Eiesland (1994; 2002) and Creamer (2008) emphasise that spirituality and human experience are inherently tied to our embodied existence, suggesting that all individuals, regardless of ability, share the experience of limitation. Pastoral leaders can draw upon this resource to craft profound and compassionate embodied theologies that offer strength and guidance to congregants navigating seasons of limitation.

Swinton (2011:287) and Creamer (2008:30, 95) highlight a critique that most of the disability liberation theologies follow the model of disability studies, which creates a binary, namely the abled and the non-abled, or the persecutor

(abled) and the persecuted (impaired). At this juncture, child theology extends to disability theology a hermeneutical tool for confronting ableism, while also transcending binary categories – functioning as a mediating paradigm amid the polarities present within liberation theologies (Young 2019:8).

6.3 Child theology as a type of disability theology

This article contributes to the field of child theology, using child theology's Christocentric hermeneutic to strengthen a transformative Christopraxis of inclusion in communities of faith. Smith (2012) and Mahlaola (2016) advocate for a Christological lens as a cohesive framework for interpreting Scripture and understanding God's redemptive plan through Christ as the overarching theme of the Scriptures. They build upon Peppler's (2007) assertion that the Old Testament provides essential context for Christ's words and actions, while the New Testament applies Christ's life to various contexts (Smith 2012:159-160; Mahlaola 2016:19). A Christocentric approach serves as a hermeneutical compass, guiding believers in their theological reflections and practical applications centred on Jesus' life and teachings (Smith 2012:160; Mahlaola 2016:1).

However, both Smith and Mahlaola, who have surveyed the historical use of this approach, caution against potential pitfalls in applying the Christological hermeneutic. Smith (2012:162-166) warns of the risk of creating a "canon within a canon", where the Gospels are viewed as superior to other biblical texts, potentially distorting the view of Christ across Scripture. Mahlaola (2016:7-12, 40) critiques the misuse of allegorical interpretations and typologies that overreach, which can lead to subjective readings. He emphasises the need to maintain the authorial intent of Scripture to avoid misinterpretations. Cognisant of the boundaries required when using the Christological hermeneutic, this article adopts it to interpret Scripture in light of the revealed person of Christ. His character, values, principles, and priorities inform doctrinal understanding (Peppler 2012:i). The premise of Dames (2017:10) is applied, stating that practical theology is at core Christopraxis, as "the continuing ministry of Jesus in the world".

In this context, the Christological lens of child theology emerges as a promising framework for an embodied theology concerning children with disabilities. It underscores Christ's perspective on individuals with disabilities, emphasising their inherent worth rather than their abilities or contributions. This approach receives children as signs of the kingdom of God, where the least are considered the greatest, and welcoming them is akin to welcoming Christ (Lk. 9:48; Mt. 18:1-6). This perspective sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how child theology can inform and enrich disability theology.

The Child Theology Movement presents child theology as a paradigm shift, where children are viewed as central figures in the kingdom of God (Haddon & White 2013; Bunge 2021; White 2012). Child theologians put a child in the midst of theological discourse, as Jesus did in Matthew 18:2. Disability theologian, Frances Young (2019) investigates child theology in light of liberation theology and suggests that child theology transcends binary distinctions.

Contextual theologies create binaries: poor/rich, black/white, men/women, able/disabled, etc. So child/adult? The very debates about 'receiving' and 'becoming' imply a transcending of the binary ... I suggest that Jean Vanier's theological reflections on the L'Arche experience² (ibid: see footnote) have led him not into disability theology, but into theological anthropology. That surely is where CT also leads. It is not just about the child. It is a clue to things that are absolutely fundamental to understanding humankind in Christian theology, namely complementarity, mutuality and solidarity – community and communion ... the dependency of both child and vulnerable adult is a sharp reminder of the fundamental need for community and of the potential even for 'power relations' to be transformed by mutual giving and receiving. That this is fundamental to the Gospel is an insight potentially reinforced by CT (Young 2019:8).

Child theology's paradigm removes intellectual criteria for faith and implements relationality as criterium for the development of faith.

This paradigm matches novel contemplations on the *imago Dei*, which are being constructed by disability theologians who place the *imago Dei* outside previous limitations such as the image of God as man's intellect (Maliszewska 2019; Yong 2007). Society is thus reordered, placing the child and individuals with disabilities into the centre of theological interpretation (Young 2019:10). The upside-down nature of the kingdom is revealed, as child theology opens

2 According to her biography in *The Anvil Journal of Theology and Mission* 35(1):12), "Frances Young is Emeritus Professor of Theology, University of Birmingham, where she held the Edward Cadbury Chair from 1986 to 2005. For 45 years she and her husband cared for a son born with profound learning disabilities, now aged 50; Jean Vanier and the L'Arche Communities have been an important influence." Young (2019:8) states: "The L'Arche Communities were founded by Jean Vanier in the 1960s. People commit themselves to living in community with those with learning disabilities. Rooted in the Christian faith, these communities are now worldwide, ecumenical and multifaith. Jean Vanier's writings, too many to list, are regarded as spiritual classics by his readers". While globally, L'Arche communities are still making a remarkable impact as communities of belonging, it was reported post the death of Jean Vanier that he sexually violated several women (none of these with disability). See <https://www.larche.org.uk/larche-study-commission-in-the-news> [24 October 2024].

up the idea of the kingdom belonging to the vulnerable, dependent, and limited (Young 2019:10).

Child theology presents as a theological anthropology, more so than it being a liberation theology such as feminist theology or disability theology. Rather than positioning children primarily as subjects of liberation (as liberation theology might), child theology situates children as theological symbols and participants in the divine narrative. In liberation theology, the kingdom of God is often linked with justice and liberation from oppression. In child theology, the kingdom is understood through the lens of the child, with children embodying the vulnerability and humility necessary to enter and experience it. This translates into an enabling hermeneutic for individuals with disabilities, who hold a unique space to lead the theological discourse about a kingdom that “belongs to such as these” (Lk. 18:16 NIV).

6.4 Employing a Christocentric hermeneutic

A previous study (Manuel 2024) integrates practical theology with a Christocentric hermeneutic, culminating as “Christo-praxis” (Root 2014; Dames 2017). This emphasises the ongoing ministry of Jesus in the world and the church’s role in advocating for and including individuals with disabilities. A Christocentric hermeneutic, particularly in the context of disability, focuses on interpreting Scripture through the lens of Christ’s life, teachings, and redemptive work (Peppler 2012:i). This approach is rooted in the belief that all biblical texts should be understood in relation to the person of Christ, who serves as both the model and the interpreter of Scripture (Peppler 2012:121). Adopting a Christocentric approach, this article suggests that Christ’s embodied experiences of limitation and suffering are central to the redemptive process that reconciles humanity with God.

The Christocentric hermeneutic posits that Christ’s own suffering and humanity provide a model for understanding the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Pastoral leaders become better equipped to accompany congregants through the shared journey of life, embracing both its moments of celebration and its seasons of grief. Pastoral leaders will gain tools from disability theology for ministry with special needs families, as well as ministry with any church member seeking deeper theological answers as people wrestle with life’s difficult questions. A theology of suffering, with examples from Seo and Meylahn (2021) and Antombikums (2024b), introduces reforms to the notions that suffering is due to sin or witchcraft. Antombikums (2024b:6) offers a perspective on Christian suffering as sharing in the suffering of Christ, giving access to a “mystical union”:

[O]ur suffering with Christ could ignite a form of divine intimacy that is not received outside of suffering with Christ.

A Christocentric lens derives from the redemptive-historical movement, which views the Bible as a unified narrative of God's redemptive plan through Christ (Peppler 2012; Seo & Meylahn 2021; Trout 2021). This perspective encourages a holistic reading of Scripture, where the overarching theme is God's intent to restore and redeem all of creation. Several Old Testament passages that appear derogatory towards disability ought not to have universal application and can be reconstructed redemptively (Manikam & Mbali 2023:335; White 2017:124-125).

A Christopraxis model emphasises the role of pastoral leaders who actively engage with and support marginalised individuals, including individuals with disabilities. It calls for pastoral leaders to exemplify care and compassion, building a community that values all members. According to Tagwirei (2024:7), "the Church becomes Christ-like when it embraces inclusivity". This includes a social justice prerogative, supporting the agency of the marginalised and the role of the church to take action against injustice. This article emphasises the need for a practical theology that integrates these theological reflections into actionable practices within the church. This includes creating inclusive and enabling environments and addressing the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

7. CONCLUSION

The theology presented in this article makes some useful contributions to disability theology in South Africa. The voices of children with disabilities and their families are presented at the forefront of a theological reflection that advocates for an embodied theology with individuals with disabilities. A child theology is integrated with leading disability liberation theologies, emphasising the shared experiences of limitation and, therefore, vulnerability and dependence. This approach challenges traditional binaries such as able/disabled and persecutor/victim, providing a more inclusive understanding of community that values all individuals, regardless of age or ability. This perspective is especially significant in South Africa, where children aged under 14 years comprise a third of the population (Statistics South Africa 2019). A disability theology, informed by child theology, thus becomes crucial in representing children with disabilities in South Africa, advocating for a more holistic and inclusive approach to faith and community.

An examination of harmful religious-cultural narrative offers a critical view of how ableism and societal constructs devalue individuals with disabilities.

It challenges harmful Neo-Pentecostal prosperity doctrines that portray disability as a deficiency or punishment, advocating for a more affirming and inclusive understanding of disability within the church. This has a bearing on practical implications for ministry, culminating into Christopraxis as a ministry model that is in solidarity with children with disabilities and their families. A Christocentric approach promotes a holistic understanding of human experience that embodies limitations and vulnerabilities as integral aspects of life and tools for drawing closer to Christ. This perspective encourages a deeper theological embodiment of suffering and community, manifesting the *imago Dei* in Christian fellowship and communion. This results in communities where the dignity of all is present.

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Keywords

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Children with disabilities

Christocentric

Trefwoorde

Gestremdheidsteologie

Kinder teologie

Beliggaamde teologie

Kinders met gestremdhede

Christosentries