

(Dis)Abling church spaces: Walking the talk of inclusivity in Zimbabwe

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Since time immemorial, the Church has had much to say about people living with disabilities in and beyond its walls. Commendably, in Zimbabwe, the Church has established and supported schools for people with hearing, visual, physical and psychological impairments. A lot has been said and published about the Church and disabilities, especially concerning church-driven empowerment and inclusion. However, in reality, and hypocritically, infrastructural, liturgical, leadership, ministerial and related spaces of the Church have remained inaccessible and exclusive. Transforming Church spaces is crucial to ensure comprehensive inclusivity in Zimbabwe. In view of unwelcoming ecclesial spaces in the Zimbabwean context, this article applied Osmer's practical theological methodology of observing, interpreting, assessing and strategic problem-solving to review the Church's talk and deeds of inclusivity. It argued that exclusivity is self-defeating, because it contradicts the inclusive *missio dei*, *missio ecclesiae*, and neglects the vulnerability of everyone to disabilities. While appreciating past and present utterances and contributions of the Church to achieve inclusion, this article contends that real inclusivity will be realised only when the Church lives out its inclusionary words by realising accessibility for everyone, regardless of impairments and diversities.

Contribution: Reconciling the talk and walk of the Church on (dis)abilities by reviewing church spaces makes a crucial contribution towards transforming African ecclesiologies, theology of disability, missiology and development.

Keywords: impairments; disability; church; words; deeds; spaces; exclusivity; inclusivity.

Introduction

It is encouraging that, since time immemorial, churches and ecumenical bodies have talked about and contributed to accommodating and empowering people with disabilities (PWDs) in and beyond its walls (Chiketo 2021; Gumbwanda 2024; Kumuterera 2018; Lupande 2020; Mukucha n.d.; Pembere 2024; Sibindi 2023). Paradoxically, and hypocritically, architectural, liturgical, leadership and ministerial spaces of many churches in Zimbabwe are unwelcoming and inaccessible to physically, visually and psychologically impaired people. While churches preach love and inclusion, they retain a variety of physical obstacles to impede PWDs' access to church and cause frustration, such as open drainage ditches, rough pathways, high pavement and entrance steps. Some churches have small, too high or constricted ablution facilities, narrow church hall corridors, impractical seating and excessively high stages, which are inaccessible to people with diverse mobility, physical or spatial access needs.

Sande (2019), Munemo (2024), Nyathi (2022), Peta (2017), Chateta (2013) say that the majority of churches in Zimbabwe, whether African initiated churches, mainline, evangelical, classical and neo-Pentecostal, support PWDs in social, political and economic spheres, while keeping ecclesial spaces exclusive. Correspondingly, this article fills gaps in physical, leadership, liturgical and ministerial spaces. It reviews the discourse on the Church and inclusivity, and troubleshoots exclusive spaces to enhance practical inclusion in Zimbabwe. It redefines inclusivity to embody more than mere acceptance and empowerment. It employs Osmer's (2008) practical theological observation, interpretation, assessment and problem-solving methodology to address ecclesiological inclusivity. It recommends solutions to practical needs that enhance belonging, involvement and inclusive facilitation to be instituted in Church spaces. All in all, this article argues that real inclusivity will only be realised when PWDs are involved in the talk and walk of creating inclusive church spaces.

Overviewing Osmer's methodology

This article employed Richard Osmer's (2008) theological interpretive methodology. I agree with Root (2014) and Kiekintveld (2019:28) that, although Richard Osmer is based in the

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United States of America (US), his methodology is internationally applicable. This is why Pieterse (2017) and Woodbridge (2014) concur that Osmer's methodology is extensively utilised in practical theology research. Osmer's (2008) methodology suggests that practical theological, ministerial and academic work should engage with four practical theology tasks through descriptive, interpretive, normative and pragmatic approaches. His descriptive-empirical proposal seeks to unravel what is going on. It suggests that researchers should explore what is happening in the lives of people and contexts that are being researched. Osmer (2008) proposes applying the interpretative task of asking 'why is it going on?' This exploration enhances thoughtfulness, theoretical and practical assessment and interpretation. Furthermore, Osmer (2008) recommends undertaking a normative task of asking 'what ought to be going on?' The question demands that we interrogate theological, ethical and related normative issues in a quest for comprehensive understanding and problem-solving. Then, Osmer (2008) suggests questioning 'how we might respond'. Consequently, such a question could cause researchers to make contextually befitting efforts to finding solutions to problems that are identified. I agree with Osmer (2011) that his methodology is a reflective practice. Indeed, observing, assessing and addressing issues is reflective. In view of that, this article reviews the inclusivity of the Church in Zimbabwe. Commenting about the suitability of Osmer's approach for academic research engagement, Fox (n.d.:3) argues that 'Osmer's book is informative, practical, and applicable in aiding pastors, ecclesiastical leaders, and Christian educators in practical theology. Its strengths are a good outline and instructive repetition of thought'. This is why Poppleton (2017:12) says that Osmer's (2008) methodology is reformist. Probing questions on what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to be going on and how we must respond could be thought-provoking, reflective and informative. Accordingly, this article explores what is happening, the reasons behind the present predicament and what should have been, and considers solutions to what is going on with the Church and PWDs in relation to physical, liturgical, leadership and ministerial spaces.

Redefining inclusivity

Inclusivity is a broad concept that has been conceptualised differently in different contexts. According to the World Report on Disability (2011:3), 'disability is complex, dynamic, multidimensional and contested'. The report overviews disability sociologically as being disabled by one's society rather than body, medically as functioning problems from health conditions, conceptually as interactions between persons with impairments and attitudinal as well as environmental barriers that obstruct their total and active participation in society on equal grounds with others. Likewise, Hodkinson (2011) says that inclusivity is a complex ideological construct that can cause the subordination and domination of vulnerable groups in society. For Hodkinson, inclusion is often executed as tolerance, yet it should be absolute equality, presence, belonging, rights and

responsibility. In the education sphere, Jansen et al. (2014) describe inclusivity as satisfaction of individual needs, accommodation and promotion of belonging and uniqueness within groups. Organisationally, Thompson (2017) says that inclusivity refers to the provision of equal opportunities, participation, respect and value. For Thompson, inclusivity involves 'fostering an environment that allows people with different backgrounds, characteristics, and ways of thinking, to work effectively together and fulfil their potential' (Thompson 2017:2). Similarly, Sunkler (2024:8) defines inclusion as 'a feeling of respect and belonging with equity to create a sense of engagement, social justice, and transformation'. Ecclesiastically, Paul teaches that the Church should involve people gathering to worship God as the body of Christ, which comprises different parts (Cor 12:27). This is why Ölmann (2016:13) says that 'the church must be recognisable as God's residential address in this world' by serving as a second home for all people, regardless of their differences. Jesus Christ exemplified inclusivity by inviting traditionally excluded people:

¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (NIV Online BibleGateway:n.p)

Besides the above-mentioned, the Bible presents many references to inclusivity. For example, Galatians 3:28 conveys a universally applicable teaching that Christians must treat each other with equality and oneness. Romans 15:7 instructs believers to accept one another as Jesus Christ accepted everyone. Thus, it is godly to recognise, welcome and worship God with each other without any form of discrimination. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 teach that followers of Jesus Christ must unite in diversity with love and understanding they are all children of God. Motte (2016) adds that Jesus Christ modelled inclusivity in several ways, such as reaching out and touching a leper – someone who was regarded as an outcast and stigmatised (Mt 8:1–4) – demonstrating compassion for the hungry and insecure (Mk 8:1–9; Mt 14:13–21) and being hospitable and generous towards strangers (Mt 25:31–46). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke present an inclusive 'God who reaches out to this world by identifying with those who may be excluded from our societies, but are his brothers. He includes them in his communion' (Motte 2016:28). Furthermore, Motte (2016:28) distinguishes inclusivity from the doctrine of trinity. He argues that the trinity reflects God, who accommodates and works with his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to demonstrate inclusivity. Advancing godly inclusivity further, Motte argues that Jesus Christ overcomes exclusion, rejection and death by standing at the side of people who are called 'the least of these my brothers' (Mt 25:40). In this context, this submission refers inclusivity to love, hospitality, belonging, involvement, equality, rights and responsibilities for and of all people, regardless of having or having no impairments. Applying Osmer's (2008) methodology, the following sub-section observes, interprets and assesses disabilities in Zimbabwe.

Understanding disabilities in Zimbabwe

Globally, disability is conceptualised as multifaceted impairment that problematises body and/or mental functioning. According to online Merriam-Webster.com (n.d), disability refers to 'a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions'. The World Health Organization (WHO 2001:3) says that disability is not always a biological or social construct but results from interactions between health conditions, contextual and personal factors. A report on disability by the WHO (2012) Secretariat explains that:

[D]isability can occur at three levels: an impairment in body function or structure; a limitation in activity, such as the inability to read or move around; a restriction in participation, such as exclusion from school or work. (p. 3)

Correspondingly, PWDs include people who use wheelchairs, crutches, spectacles, and hearing aids. In Zimbabwe, the National Disability Policy (Zimbabwe 2021:21) adopts the meaning of disability from Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which states that:

[P]ersons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (National Disability Policy 2021:21)

With the aforementioned definitions in mind, there is no statistically precise, nationally accepted and reliable data on disabilities in Zimbabwe. According to the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022), the disability prevalence in Zimbabwe is between 9% and 15% of the national population. According to the National Disability Policy (Zimbabwe 2021):

[I]t is estimated that approximately 15% of Zimbabwe's population of about 15 million people encompasses persons with disabilities (about 2 250 000) and more than half of that proportion are women. (p. 20)

Furthermore, the National Disability Policy reports that the causes of disabilities in Zimbabwe are 'congenital (23.2%), illness/disease (47.4%), injury/accident (11.2%) and violence including domestic violence (5.5%)'. In a study that investigated models and case studies of managing disability in Zimbabwe, Mthethwa (2019) explains the causes of disabilities as:

[T]raumatic – e.g. due to injuries caused by accidents, burns, war or occupational hazards. Congenital e.g. related to birth defects. Genetical e.g. caused by inherited genes, although the prevalence is low ... Unknown causes. (Mthethwa 2019:2)

Just like in other countries, forms and statistics about the types of disabilities in Zimbabwe vary. The National Disability Policy (Zimbabwe 2021:20) reports that 'the most prevalent types of disability in Zimbabwe are; physical (31%), visual (24%), multiple (13%), hearing (11%), intellectual (8%)

and mental (6%)'. According to the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022:7), 'the most prevalent disabilities in Zimbabwe are physical (31 percent), visual (26 percent), multiple (13 percent), hearing (12 percent) and intellectual (8 percent)'.

Regardless of the variances in data, the Bill Watch 15 (2024:n.p) states that 'persons with disabilities (PWDs) are a significant portion of the total population and they must not be excluded from participating fully in society'. It should be borne in mind that there are uncounted PWDs in some geographical places, and several factors lead to an increase in the number of PWDs in Zimbabwe; thus, the number of PWDs is likely to be higher than the number reported:

[T]he prevalence of disability is growing because of ageing populations and the global increase in chronic health conditions. National patterns of disability are influenced by trends in health conditions and environmental and other factors – such as road traffic crashes, natural disasters, conflict, diet and substance abuse. (Bill Watch 15 2024:n.p)

Zimbabwe has, for decades, been bedevilled by all the above-listed causes. The nation has been hard-pressed by economic crises (Agrawal 2023; Bushu & Kufakurinani 2024), natural disasters (Mhlanga, Muzingili & Mpambela 2019) and turbulent, tragic and disabling political conflicts (Macheka 2022). Zimbabwe's healthcare system has been deteriorating for decades (Mandura 2025; Meldrum 2008), and roads and other national infrastructure are falling apart (Bonga & Sithole 2020; Musande 2025). Consequently, citizens are, at worst, losing their lives, and others are seriously harmed and acquiring different types of disabilities.

With this understanding, excluding PWDs from church spaces disregards their increasing numbers. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that some of the present church leaders and members will join the group of PWDs in the future. Unless inclusivity is realised, they will also eventually be excluded by the same denominations that they currently lead and belong to. To expand our understanding of the predicament in view of Osmer's (2008) methodological recommendation for observation, interpretation and assessment, the following subsection reviews the discourse of church and inclusivity in Zimbabwe.

Reviewing the church and inclusivity discourse in Zimbabwe

Stories about the Church and inclusivity in Zimbabwe are paradoxically inspiring, disturbing, pleasant and saddening. Aspects that are inspiring and pleasant include ways that ecumenical bodies of the Church in Zimbabwe have been promoting togetherness, hospitality, equality and cooperation in and beyond the Church. For example, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches adopted an inclusivity policy based on recommendations of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, which calls for churches to embrace PWDs and facilitate their participation and leadership. Tagwirei (2024) says that the Church reaches

out and showcases care for PWDs by sharing the gospel, establishing vocational schools and investigating strategic ways to foster inclusivity. However, the leadership and followership of the Church have remained exclusive, primarily owing to discriminatory traditions, hermeneutics and theologies (Tagwirei 2024:7). Yet, preaching the gospel of an inclusive Jesus Christ without showcasing his unconditional love is hypocritical. Sadly, the walk and talk of Christians, denominations and PWDs in Zimbabwe involve a mixed exposure of contradicting experiences.

In a positive sense, the Church has facilitated various PWDs and State engagements for national inclusion. For example, Pembere (2024) reports that the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, in partnership with the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations, facilitated dialogue in cities in Zimbabwe that gave PWDs the opportunity to express their concerns, share experiences and contribute to the ongoing review of the national PWD bill: 'the Church is doing wonderful work in making sure that we are given a platform to freely air out our issues ... said one of the participants' (Pembere 2024).

Moreover, the Church has accomplished a variety of empowerment projects for PWDs in Zimbabwe. According to Baloyi (2024), the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe founded special institutions, such as the Henry Murray School for the Deaf and the Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind, to educate and provide PWDs with empowering skills, courses and qualifications. According to Ncube (2017:n.p), 'Seventh Day Adventists, in partnership with SSLA (Sunrise Sign Language Academy), opened some services for deaf people'. Tagwirei (2021:4) narrates that 'Jehovah's Witnesses have established services for deaf people and recently released the first Sign Language Bible book of Matthew'. Various churches donate groceries, wheelchairs and clothes to PWDs across Zimbabwe (Ndlovu 2024; Sibanda 2022, 2023) and facilitate enlightening and empowering engagements between the State and society stakeholders and PWDs (Chiketo 2021; Pembere 2024; Muzerengwa 2016). However, Sande (2023) argues that some of the inclusive church projects are not fully Zimbabwean, but were inherited from the missionaries who originally established them. Indeed, some ecclesial establishments, such as the schools for people with hearing and vision disabilities mentioned earlier on, were established by white missionaries. Nevertheless, the continued operation of all these initiatives is commendable and the local church should be credited for sustaining inclusivity initiatives.

Unfortunately, some of the same people of God – the Church – have exhibited disturbing attitudes towards PWDs. The Church in Zimbabwe has promoted exclusive and denigrating hermeneutics, theologies and ecclesiologies. Tagwirei (2024) argues that church leaders in Africa have a tendency to believe that disability is the result of disobedience, sin, curses and witchcraft. Sande (2023) posits that the Church struggles to interpret particular scriptures, such as John 9:4, about a man who was born blind and healed, and 2 Samuel 5:8b and

Leviticus 21:17–23, which state that PWDs are unfit to enter the temple. Although the Bible is authoritative and forms the basis of the Christian faith, Sande (2023) argues that the Church misinterprets scriptures and develops exclusive theologies and ecclesiologies. According to Sande (2023), the majority of African initiated and Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe today still exclude PWDs by over-spiritualising and mistaking disabilities as cases in need of healing and deliverance. In his study of the Church and inclusivity in Africa in the Zimbabwean context, Tagwirei (2024:4) argues that 'accommodating and including each other in ecclesiological affairs has been problematic since time immemorial'. In the same vein, Zimbabwean pastor and disability theologian Neuso (2022:4) says that 'from *kerygma*, *leitourgia* to *koinonia* and *diakonia*, PWDs are generally pitied, and isolated as if they cannot participate like everyone else'. After investigating the experiences of PWDs in Zimbabwean churches, public health care practitioner Peta (2017) chronicles that PWDs experience awful misjudgement and labelling in churches in Zimbabwe. She reports that PWDs have been judged and labelled as either sinful, cursed, demon-possessed, sick and in need of deliverance and healing:

If healing does not take place, people with disabilities may be blamed by the prophet for lacking faith in God, thereby fostering misery and anguish among the very people that the prophet is trying to assist. (Peta 2017:n.p)

Persons with disabilities should not be viewed as needy, but equal members of the body of Christ who can and should actively participate with others in liturgy, *kerygma*, *koinonia* and *diakonia*:

Christians should refrain from perpetuating prejudice, distress, confusion, inequality, discrimination and marginalization of people with disabilities ... in any case, the emancipatory promises of God towards disabled people show that the kingdom of God is not complete without people with disabilities. (Peta 2017:n.p)

Regrettably, as reported by Maxwell (2020), in United States, some families of PWDs and PWDs themselves choose to forgo attending church because they have had enough of exclusivity:

We fight all week long to advocate and care for our children only to reach Sunday and find that the place that should offer solace is often the hardest place to go. For those who have children in wheelchairs, churches are often inaccessible. (Maxwell 2020:n.p)

The same is happening in the Zimbabwean context. *Ecclesia Today* (2021) reports a story about a man who lost his hearing in an accident and, in dramatic fashion, found himself excluded from the hearing Church, mainly because of language and related barriers:

I was born hearing. When I got three years old, a fruit seed fell into my right ear. I tried to remove it and unfortunately pushed it down. I was living with my aunt and did not inform her. I feared that she would beat me. Eventually my ear got infected and that deafened it ... and I became totally deaf. My family eventually observed that I had become deaf, but could not do

anything about it. There was no money to get me some medical attention. Deafness stopped me from hearing the spoken gospel. When I became deaf, I was attending Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM). Like most hearing churches in Zimbabwe, AFM does not use Sign language in everything. My sister used to write down what was being preached so that I could read, but that was not fully effective because she could only summarize. That means I would get some distorted information. I could not interact with other brethren or participate in the hearing church. Eventually I felt that deafness had excluded and dismissed me from Church. (*Ecclesia Today* 2021:5)

This story is only one of many similar sad cases. Considering this and other forms of ecclesiastic exclusivity and the need for inclusivity, the following sub-section troubleshoots ecclesial spaces.

Troubleshooting spaces of the church in Zimbabwe

Reviews of and observations in different churches across Zimbabwe have exposed that, while the Church appreciates and talks inclusivity, it is still exclusive to PWDs because of its inaccessible physical, liturgical, leadership and ministerial spaces. In view of this situation, it is imperative to troubleshoot church spaces.

Troubleshooting physical spaces

The majority of churches in Zimbabwe have narrow pathways and parking spaces, high steps at their entrances, constricted and too smoothly tiled ablution facilities and closely arranged chairs that are inaccessible to wheelchair, crutches users and visually impaired people. A few accessible facilities that have been identified in some ecclesial buildings are in a dilapidated state. The lack of accessibility at churches problematises the welcome, inclusion and belonging of PWDs. Inaccessibility means ecclesial talk of inclusivity is hypocritical.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Church in Zimbabwe establishes clearly marked, safe and functioning ramps at its entrances for wheelchair users, clear signage that provide directions for people with limited or partial sight, as well as braille signage for people with visual impairments. Churches that offer transport for congregants should ensure that the mode of transport is accessible for PWDs. For example, the doors and seats of church-owned vehicles can be modified to accommodate wheelchairs and white canes.

As stated by Carter et al. (2022), Sele and Wanjiku (2024) and Enyinnaya (2020), physical accessibility reflects the Church's commitment to inclusive love, hospitality, accommodation, belonging, equality, respect and participation. Thus, the church environment, its pathways, entrances, seating arrangements, ablutions, signage, ventilation, parking and related places and facilities should be accessible to everyone. The Church should also provide extra space for wheelchairs to rest and wheelchair-accessible routes throughout church buildings, and ensure that hallway spaces and doors are wide enough to accommodate PWDs. Other accommodations

would be wheelchair-level drinking fountains, wide bathroom stalls, comfortable seating options such as chairs with armrests, and good lighting for people with partial sight. While these suggestions are not comprehensive, they represent a start to addressing the major issues churches should address in their different contexts.

Troubleshooting liturgical spaces

Liturgy is the primary characteristic of Christianity, and one of the integral dimensions of *missio ecclesiae*. That is why Benson (2020) defines it as being Christian, engaging with God, spending time in the temple, breaking bread together and sharing things in common as the Early Church exemplified. Miller (n.d) adds that liturgy means public worship, which involves mass prayers and praises to God. According to Marinis (2010), liturgy predominantly involves sacramental rituals such as baptism and the Eucharist. Although liturgy is primarily theological because of its full submission to God and scriptural references, it is indispensably cultural (Omolo 2022). This is arguably so because the common activities of worship, such as singing, dancing, clapping hands, playing musical instruments, praying and celebrating God are done in ways that people view, and collectively promote as acceptable in their particular places, times and circumstances. Considerately, as God wants all his people to worship him (Ps 29, 1 Chron 16:7-30, Jn 4:24), the Church should be enabling everyone who wants to worship him, to do so as they can in view of their diverse abilities. Theiss (2024) argues:

[I]nclusion begins with recognizing that every person, regardless of ability, is created in the image of God and has gifts to offer the church community. Rather than viewing individuals with disabilities as needing charity, we are called to recognize their full humanity and the ways they contribute to our collective worship. Galatians 3:28 reminds us that in Christ, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (ESV). This unity includes people of all abilities. (Theiss 2024:n.p)

Sadly, while some PWDs are accommodated in Zimbabwe, many of them are indirectly, and sometimes even directly, excluded from liturgical activities. Related studies and reports suggest that the presence of PWDs in worship is often exclusively mistaken as a desire for deliverance and healing. Sande (2019, 2023), Tagwirei (2021), Makamure (2017) and Peta (2017) say that few churches have hearing aids and sign language interpreters to accommodate people with hearing impairments, braille hymn books for those with visual impairments and accessible stages and pulpits to accommodate those with physical disabilities. These shortcomings imply that, when worship spaces are inaccessible to PWDs, talk of inclusivity is insincere. Churches should be taught that being unable to read the printed word does not mean someone is unable to read the Bible, hymns or related worship material. Similarly, using a wheelchair, crutches, white canes or sign language should not disqualify someone from participating in singing, praying and praising God. Some people with physical impairments can sing, play musical instruments, dance, praise and worship.

People with hearing impairments can sing songs, pray, praise and dance when God and the Church accommodate them. People with visual impairments can read hymns in braille and participate in worship fully, like everyone else. Worship does not, and should not, demand vocal, visual and/or physical excellence! While worship is holistic, involving the heart, mind and body (Thomas 2013), it remains submission, adoration and expression of reverence to God regardless of one's (dis)abilities. Thus, PWDs should be accommodated to worship as they can. This is why Hoeksema (1990) argues that the Church should:

[R]emove barriers to sight, sound, and understanding. Interior modifications may include making available such resources as braille and large-print bulletins, amplification equipment, sign language interpreters, and spaces in the pews for wheelchairs. A congregation that believes involving persons who have disabilities is important will do an assessment of barriers and seek to eliminate them. (Hoeksema 1990:n.p.)

Troubleshooting leadership spaces

Tagwirei (2024) observes that, although the Church showcases care for PWDs by reaching out to them with the gospel, establishing vocational schools and talking about strategic ways to foster inclusivity, its leadership has remained exclusive primarily by reserving discriminatory traditions, hermeneutics and theologies. According to Spies (2020), the Church has been obstructing the participation of PWDs in ecclesial leadership because, 'for countless years, people with disabilities have been understood to be the recipients of ministry – not ministry leaders' (Spies 2020). While she generalises her submission from a continental perspective, it is true that, in Zimbabwe, the Church has been an obstacle, rather than a nurturer of the ministry of leadership. Ministering without demonstrating the gospel of an all-embracing Jesus Christ is hypocritical. Instead of promoting the tendency of Church leaders and followers to misunderstand disabilities as repercussions of disobedience, sin, curses and witchcraft, the Church should embody inclusion as exemplified by Jesus Christ. The Bible calls believers to advance the gospel across all creation (Mt 28:18–20) and remember that human bodies are transitory (1 Cor 15:40–54). Therefore, to foster tangible inclusivity in and beyond ecclesiological walls, the Church should grow a differently abled leadership. As Wolfe (2024) observes, including PWDs in ecclesiastic leadership would be advantageous to the Church because it reflects the diversity of God's Kingdom, challenges stereotypes and prejudices, inspires resilience and faith, promotes a culture of inclusion and broadens perspectives on worship. 'Ultimately, having leaders with disabilities in church worship and leadership strengthens the body of Christ, making it a more compassionate, inclusive, and Christ-centred community' (Wolfe 2024).

Arguably, taking this initiative will enable Christians to advance a mutually inclusionary integral mission in the marketplace, society and wherever they go. While we commend churches that have already included PWDs in their governance structures and enhanced their capabilities,

it remains necessary for every church to continuously detect and address (dis)abilities, fill policy gaps and cultivate an all-encompassing ecclesiology.

Troubleshooting ministerial spaces

In Zimbabwe, it is rare to find PWDs leading and/or participating in ecclesial ministry. Worship, preaching, teaching and related ministerial activities are usually done by others, while PWDs are restricted to the back benches. There are few churches like the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) that have accepted, equipped, ordained and deployed PWDs 'to fully participate in the evangelisation of the Word of God' (Baloyi 2024:16). Such churches should be commended.

However, as Masango (2019) observes, in the case of South Africa, efforts by the Church to open the space for PWDs have sometimes ended up in over-caring and imposing its own agenda on PWDs:

In other words, they take over their [PDWs'] lives by over-caring. Because of guilt, they want to do everything for them, as if they are not capable of functioning within that community. (Masango 2019:1)

In the Zimbabwean context, as reflected in previous subsections, most churches are architecturally exclusive. A few churches that have PWDs among their congregants assign wheelchair-accessible spaces at the back of their buildings, and pathways to their stages and pulpit remain inaccessible. That means PWDs have no way to access, lead or participate in choir, preaching, teaching and related ministries. Sande (2018) declares that PWDs are usually viewed as objects instead of ministers who can serve with the rest of the church. Architectural and attitudinal barriers often block PWDs from participating in ministerial activities of the Church in Zimbabwe. Yet, PWDs also:

[W]ant to lead and share their prayer requests with the church, similar to the non-disabled ... Such opinions can only make sense in a context where the community removes conventional thinking that PWD are useless. (Sande 2018:185)

Mbao (2020:159) reports that, in Tanzania, PWDs 'are not taken as a serious concern of the church in as far as participation in church matters is concerned'. Yet, when the Church in Zimbabwe, somewhat, cares by facilitating education and life skills (Tagwirei 2021), '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'.

To troubleshoot the ministerial space, the Church should remove physical, emotional and spiritual barriers to effect inclusivity. Overall, welcoming and enabling PWDs will demonstrate the love and inclusiveness of God.

Conclusions and recommendations

This article uncovered and addressed the exclusive physical, liturgical, leadership and ministerial spaces of the Church in Zimbabwe. It commends the Church for talking and

caring about including PWDs in correspondence with biblical teachings of love and inclusivity. However, it argues that conversations and facilitation of inclusivity will remain exclusive unless and until the Church walks the talk, by opening up its spaces to welcome and include PWDs in all ecclesial life. When PWDs are involved in talk, spaces and the walk of inclusion, the Church will become fully inclusive, Christ-like and transformational. Therefore, the physical spaces of the Church in Zimbabwe should be modified to include wheelchair-accessible parking, pathways, entrances, corridors, chairs, ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms and related designated areas for PWDs. Sensory accommodation and communication aids, such as sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, large-print signage, and braille literature should be provided, and other PWDs' accessibility needs should be considered and accommodated to accomplish total ecclesiastical inclusivity.

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K.T. is the sole author of this research article.

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