
Reaching: The imperative for Christ's church to address disability in post-colonial humanitarian and development work

Matt Hackworth, MDiv candidate

Chicago Theological Seminary and candidate for ordination, PC(USA)

Catherine Anthony knew something was wrong soon after her son, Abraham Angelo, was born near Movermo, Tanzania. A series of hospital visits brought a diagnosis of hydrocephalus, for which doctors told her there was only one potential cure: a special surgery, available in India, and she would have to pay for it. "The only thing I could do was to come home," Catherine said. Cerebral and spinal fluid does not circulate normally in Abraham's body, resulting in developmental delays and neuromuscular problems. His right foot twitches continuously, his eyes flit about as if searching for something. He spends his days lying on a rubber mat in the brick hut or propped up in a modified metal chair. "Abraham needs my total care," she says of not being able to work. "There is no other option."

Catherine Anthony's story is all too common and reflects a significant growing edge in international relief and development. The last thirty years, approximately, have evidenced a proliferation of development organizations, all chasing larger awards, funded primarily by governments, which use, as levers of diplomacy, support for programs addressing basic human needs as levers of diplomacy.¹

Accordingly, Christian missionary culture has contributed significantly to stilt economies and policies that prop up Global North (and largely white) power, at the expense of those in the Global South (who are largely people of color). The progressive church's voice has advocated for a more just society; yet the prophetic call fades away quickly where injustice is arguably at its heaviest—in the mud, misery, and suffering found in post-colonial contexts.

Working in places where roads are often impassable and

1. Zachariah Mampilly and Jason Stearns. "A New Direction for U.S. Foreign Policy in Africa." *Dissent* (00123846), 2020 67(4), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2020.0079>, 107.

Author note: Matt Hackworth serves as Director of Communications and Development for L'Arche USA, following an extensive career working in the faith-based relief and development space. He offers this independent of any organization and has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

The breach between the drive for profit and the moral call to act is the space faith-based development organizations must fill, reaching for the most vulnerable—which I contend includes those with disabilities living in the post-colonial world. The size of investments, the volatility of the aid marketplace, and the scale of need to be addressed, often mean that people who are hidden deep in the margins are overlooked in programming and in funding. This is particularly true for people living with disabilities.

rebels—not a government—control much of the territory, requires jaw-dropping budgets, even to provide the most basic of human services. A range of for-profit, nonprofit, and faith-based actors all reach for the same large contracts. The aid and development marketplace has seen larger organizations, many of them for-profit firms, take an increasingly larger share. The breach between the drive for profit and the moral call to act is the space faith-based development organizations must fill, reaching for the most vulnerable—which I contend includes those with disabilities living in the post-colonial world.

The size of investments, the volatility of the aid marketplace, and the scale of need to be addressed, often mean that people who are hidden deep in the margins are overlooked in programming and in funding. This is particularly true for people living with disabilities. The United Nations estimates 1 billion people in the

world live with some sort of disability.² Poor health conditions mean the Global South bears considerable burden in the number of cases of disability, which often remain beyond the reach of traditional relief and development programming.

They are out of reach because people living with disabilities are often hidden from view. It is common for the person with a disability to be the object of familial and community shame. I have seen disabled people held in chains and forced to live in barns with livestock, often at the hands of “caregiving” families who are more interested in saving face before others than in recognizing their relative’s divine right to exist. Human rights observers regularly document the practice of “faith healing,” where people living with disabilities in developing countries are sent to religious facilities for “treatments” that can include electric shock, beatings, rape, and other atrocities.

The experiences of people living with disabilities, especially those with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, keep them hidden from view and likely result in their absence from programs. Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) programs in Tanzania have saved thousands, if not millions, of lives. This debilitating suite of diseases thrives in poorer countries and fosters generational poverty. In response, aggressive funding has been invested in mass drug administration, diagnosis, and treatment. Part of my seminary field placement has been to serve as a resource and connection for a local NGO serving children living with disabilities in Morogoro, Tanzania. Although aid groups and local health officials map NTD treatment areas using GPS precision, points of programming completely surround and omit two orphanages for disabled children and their sisters.³ Abraham Angelo’s family lives a short walk from the orphanage, which is surrounded by what seems to be a greater than normal concentration of families caring for disabled loved ones. In August 2021, a local colleague in the NTD program told me, “I didn’t know this place was here. Thank you for showing me.”

This phenomenon reflects the “othering” of people living with disabilities, as Todorov might put it.⁴ Henry Nouwen unpacks this phenomenon well. Excluding people with disabilities from the life of community is driven by fear. Nouwen writes, “Prisons, mental hospitals, and refugee camps are often built far away from the places where ‘normal’ people live, to keep the fear-provoking strangers at a safe distance.”⁵ Nouwen’s observation

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that marginalization is made manifest by physical placement is basic, but critical. Generations of “othering” those living with disabilities are reflected in struggling communities that marginalize people with disabilities. Even if unintentionally, humanitarian and development actors inadvertently reinforce the marginalizing of people with disabilities when programs that provide relief and opportunity exclude them.

The work to change a cultural norm of exclusion requires years of investment, sustained engagement with local faith communities, and a commitment to accompany communities, beyond the point at which relief and development projects are completed. Relief and development actors segment and categorize people in crisis and in chronic poverty as one means of ensuring service delivery against incredible odds. Yet, little data exists on the degree to which people with disabilities are actually served by relief and development programs. Segmenting and separating are critical tools for managing chaotic humanitarian situations and the seemingly depthless sea of chronic poverty. Yet, the phenomenon of “othering” also reflects behaviors that keep people with disabilities hidden, compounded by the perception that disability is a punishment for sin. It is a theological phenomenon that flourishes without a theological response, a response that faith-based development groups are uniquely poised to address.

He’s seven years old and has an infectious smile, yet he cannot speak. Qwaghdi’s eyes flit from one stimulus to another—a child’s shriek here, a call from an adult there. Forced to flee during an airstrike near Taiz, Yemen, Qwaghdi suffers from some sort of neuromuscular and developmental disability. His father, Ali, does not know which, or why—only that he was born this way, and his family is convinced Qwaghdi’s disability is God’s punishment for some sin. After Qwaghdi’s mother was killed in an airstrike, it took Ali’s family more than four days to walk to this barren camp at the edge of Aden,

2. United Nations (n.d.). “Factsheet on persons with disabilities” <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

3. Girls are often seen as expendable in East and Central African cultures, among others. When a family faces the challenge of caring for a disabled child, girls are frequently married off even as children. Therefore, the Erick Memorial Foundation for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Disabled also welcomes girls who accompany their disabled siblings. For many, it is their only choice to achieve education as an alternative to child marriage and pregnancy.

4. Tzvetan Todorov. *The Conquest of America: the question of the other*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 53.

5. Henri J. Nouwen. *Lifesigns: Intimacy, fecundity, and ecstasy in Christian perspective*. (Image Books/Doubleday, 2003), 23.

with only the clothing on their backs. As the family searches for food, Qwaghdi is left alone for hours in the makeshift tent that is tantamount to a baking jail cell. He lies unattended, but for the gaze of his two possessions the family could carry as they fled, with bombs falling behind them: Qwaghdi's favorite threadbare doll and a blue dinosaur.

Marginalizing people living with disabilities keeps them away from humanitarian and development services—what I envision theologically as God's table of welcome. James Cone describes sin as "community recognition that some have lost their identity for being."⁶ But for their restricted movement or neurological complications, people with disabilities would be able to participate fully in traditional development programs that aim to protect, foster resilience, engender livelihoods, and promote dignity. Yet, integrating such services requires more investment and human work in the already challenging practice of providing protection, food, clean water, safe space, and opportunity. As a colleague once put it to me in personal correspondence, "Why on earth would you want to do that "disability" work? That's the work no one else wants to do."

"Persons with disabilities are among the most neglected during flight, displacement and return."⁷ Disasters, such as the war in Yemen, drive the relief and development continuum, forcing humanitarian organizations into acts of triage to determine how to help the largest number of people in need. Shivji notes that people with disabilities frequently fall well beyond needs assessments, a phenomenon compounded by the tendency to hide or segregate disabled people beyond reach.

The question then becomes, at what point do people living with disabilities have enough value to warrant identifying and extending services to them? Or, to borrow Cone's words, "Sin... is a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe."⁸ The provision of assistance in post-colonial countries is often a life-sustaining act. Therefore, even the inadvertent denial of services that afford survival and basic human dignity to people living with disabilities is tantamount to denying their right to exist.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development places the total value of relief and development services in 2020 at more than \$160 billion. The for-profit relief and development world looks to this as potential profit on contracts for services, while the nonprofit actors consider such funding is the surest way to keep the lights on, the doors open, and the mission alive. Faith-based organizations have the added imperative of pursuing large awards, to effectively enact programming that serves the most

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vulnerable. If relief and development actors are to claim Christ's mandate as the impetus for providing services, they must do so while continuously reaching for the margins.

Fulfilling contract requirements cannot be the sole objective of faith-based aid groups for two primary reasons. The first reason may be found in Christ's example of reaching past the status quo. Christ never stopped reaching for the marginalized—reaching for lost sheep (Luke 15), for those in peril (Matthew 14) and others living with disability, all of whom Christ deemed worthy of his touch (Matthew 8). The act of reaching for the most marginalized, including people with disabilities in post-colonial contexts, is not a one-time event. It is, rather, a kinetic, intentional act to which the church is called, beyond achieving performance benchmarks, contractual obligations, and funding streams.

Disability-inclusive development practices channel their origins from a human rights approach to relief and development work. Yet even the idea of designing relief and development programming from the human rights, disability-inclusion approach is not a universally held practice. In Henderson et al.'s 2017 analysis of forty-two development practices from three different organizations, all claiming to use disability-inclusive development models, barely half of the program practices modeled core concepts of disability-inclusive development.⁹ Most (55%) were focused on issues of access, the area frequently addressed by ramps and wheelchairs. Ramp and wheelchair availability can be critical solutions to disability programming, but they are not a panacea. When I visited the camp in which Qwaghdi found shelter, it had one latrine shared among forty families. Even if the

9. Cheryl Henderson, Hasheem Mannan, and Jessica Power. "Disability inclusive development good practices: Level of commitment to core concepts of human rights." in *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 2017 28(3):32–55. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5463/doi.v28i3.608/>.

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6. James H. Cone et al. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (Orbis Books, 1970), 57.

7. Aleema A. Shivji. "Disability in displacement" in *Forced Migration Review* (July 2020). <https://www.fmreview.org/disability/shivji>, para. 1. accessed December 6, 2021.

8. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 100.

latrine had a ramp, what and who will ensure Qwaghdi is able to use the latrine while his father and sister venture out for hours each day to beg for food? Christ's model of reaching beyond the status quo for solutions that heal, rather than what we think may heal, is the imperative for faith-based relief and development ministry.

The second reason why it is not enough for faith-based organizations to rest on the history of enacting good work alone, is tied to the concept of *diakonia*, and its role in building community. Ritchie considers the dynamics of power: "Diakonia in the New Testament church is not an activity undertaken by a wealthier and more privileged group to help the needy group. Rather, it is the poorest whom God raises up to play a leading role in this ministry."¹⁰ This active participation of raising up the poor is theology of liberation, for which Ritchie argues the goal is transformational change of community, rather than mere assistance.

Viewed through a disability-inclusion lens, true diakonia must be something beyond basic adaptations in programming that ensure simple access to services. Progressive church development organizations fortunately have modeled this form of community accompaniment well, in evolving from traditional missionary operations to applying the kinds of development methodologies that open space for local leadership. Local partnership and other progressive development models recognize that even the most disaster-prone and poverty-beleaguered communities have resources to offer, reflecting the transformational lens of validating human worth and value, above pity and powerlessness.

Recognizing potential and possibility despite challenges is a solid predicate for acknowledging that those living with disabilities can contribute to the community. True diakonia can be achieved by following Christ's model in reaching people living with disabilities in the developing world, and then involving them in program design and leadership from the outset. Such an expression of diakonia is also the only measure that can address the theological aberration that views disability as a punishment for sin. In such a community, people who are marginalized and who have disabilities serve, and are served. Ministry becomes the act of pursuing such a beloved community. Such a transformational

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shift positions the church as the community of radical inclusion. It also offers a competitive advantage to faith-based organizations in reaching for even more marginalized people, in contrast to those organizations without such a moral imperative.

The tables of power, where large-scale relief and development-funding decisions are made, foster an ultra-competitive environment that draws interest from all quarters. Only faith-based organizations bring a primary moral imperative to the seats of power, with a mandate to speak for the most marginalized and a call to flip the table altogether. In following Christ's model of reaching continuously for the most marginalized, the church speaks truth to this power, which is often a tool of international diplomacy and far from inclusive. Ministry, the act of radical inclusion by the church, must always reach for the vulnerable such as Abraham and Qwaghdi, those whose voices are not heard, and who may be hidden, despite our own efforts to do good work.

10. Angus Ritchie. "Beyond Help: Diakonia in the contemporary church." in *Political Theology*, 2019 20(8): 631–642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2019.1695404>, 635.