

The Social Model: Disability As A Socially Constructed Phenomenon

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Abstract - Critical reflection on the importance of shaping disability-friendly – or disability-inclusive – congregations has enjoyed increasing attention in the field of practical theology in recent years. Moreover, the development of disability theology is a testament to the fact that practical theologians and the wider church community have taken serious notice of the realities and experiences of people with disabilities in our time. Nevertheless, even before the task of engaging in theological reflection from a disability perspective commences, it is necessary that theologians acquaint themselves with the various models of disability that shape people's perceptions and ideas about people with disabilities. Guided by the principles of the interpretive task of practical theological investigation and cognizant of the importance of models of disability in shaping perceptions regarding people with disabilities, this article seeks to provide a brief overview of social model of disability. The social model frames disability as a collective issue – caused by the physical environment, inappropriate or inaccessible services and attitudes, and a lack of understanding - rather than one that derives from the health of an individual.

Keywords - Disability, Theological Reflection, Inclusive, Social Model.

Introduction

Critical reflection on the importance of shaping disability-friendly – or disability-inclusive – congregations has enjoyed increasing attention in the field of practical theology in recent years (cf. Brock & Swinton 2012; Eiesland & Saliers 1998; Swinton 2000, 2001, 2011, 2012). Nevertheless, we would be mistaken to assume that practical theology has been alone in drawing attention to the needs and experiences of people with disabilities (hereafter PWDs). On the contrary, the nascent academic discipline commonly referred to as disability theology is very much a multidisciplinary affair, drawing on biblical studies, systematic theology, moral theology, church history and practical theology, as well as disciplines outside the field of theology, such as sociology, ethics, education, psychology and philosophy (Swinton 2011:275). Broadly defined, the term 'disability theology' denotes:

[The] attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability. (Swinton 2011:274)

The development of disability theology is testimony to the fact that practical theologians and the wider church community have taken serious notice of the realities and experiences of PWDs in our time. Even before the task of engaging in theological reflection from a disability perspective commences, it is necessary that theologians acquaint themselves with the various models of disability that shape people's perceptions and ideas about PWDs. Such a preliminary assessment of various models of disability is important, because, as Smart (2004:25–29) points out, such models serve a number of important purposes:

- Models of disability provide definitions of disability.
- Models of disability provide explanations of causal attribution and responsibility attributions.
- Models of disability are based on (perceived) needs.
- Models guide the formulation and implementation of policy.
- Models of disability are not value neutral.
- Models of disability determine which academic disciplines study and learn about PWDs.
- Models of disability shape the self-identity of PWDs.
- Models of disability can cause prejudice and discrimination.

Guided by the principles of the interpretive task of practical theological investigation and cognizant of the importance of models of disability in shaping perceptions regarding PWDs, this article seeks to provide a brief overview of The Social model of Disability of the most dominant models of disability that are prevalent in our time.

Social Model of Disability

The social model is generally the preferred model when thinking about disability. The social model has been adopted by most disabled people's organisations. In August 2014 the social model was endorsed by the Government Equalities Office who recommended the model for use by all government departments in the way they interact with disabled people.

The social model was created by disabled people themselves and looks at the barriers erected by society in terms of disabled people being able to participate fully in day to day life. The social model seeks to remove unnecessary barriers which prevent disabled people participating in society, accessing work and living independently.



Fig-1-Some societal factors responsible for Disability

The social model asks what can be done to remove barriers to inclusion. It also recognises that attitudes towards disabled people create unnecessary barriers to inclusion and requires people to take proactive action to remove these barriers. The social model identifies the problems faced by disabled people as a consequence of external factors. For example, in the way organisations produce information (not offering a variety of formats such as Braille, large text etc), or inaccessible venues.

The social model distinguishes between impairment and disability. Impairment is described as a characteristic or long term trait which may or may not result from an injury or health condition which may affect a person's appearance or functioning of their mind or body. The characteristic may cause pain, fatigue, affect communications or interfere with mental capacity. The social model in no way rejects the idea of a person seeking medical intervention to minimise the impact of their impairment as far as this is possible.

According to the social model a person does not 'have' a disability – disability is something a person experiences. The disability experienced is often caused by the approach taken by society/individuals which fails to take account of people with impairments and their associated needs. This can result in people with impairments being excluded them from mainstream society. For example; an individual is not prevented from reading a magazine because of blindness, but because of the absence of alternative formats. A person is not prevented from going to see a play because they are a wheelchair user rather it is the absence of accessible transport and access to venues that causes the disability and exclusion.

The social model of disability also focuses on people's attitudes towards disability and recognises that attitudes towards disability can present barriers for disabled people in the same way the physical environment can. These attitudes are many and varied, ranging from prejudice and stereotyping, to unnecessary inflexible organisational practices and procedures and seeing disabled people as objects of pity / charity.

Origins of the Social Model

Inspired by the activism of the British disability movement in the 1960s and the 1970s, the social model of disability developed in reaction to the limitations of the medical model of disability (D'Alessio 2011:44). However, the starting point for the social model was the publication of *The Fundamental Principles of Disability* by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1976. It stated that:

In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society (UPIAS 1976:14).

Oliver (1981:28), a disabled activist and lecturer, who also coined the phrase 'social model of disability', stresses the need to focus on the social aspects of disability, especially how 'the physical and social environment impose limitations upon certain categories of people'. This turned the understanding of disability completely on its head by arguing that it was not impairment that was the main cause of the social exclusion of disabled people but the way society responded to people with impairments.

Characteristics of Social Model

There are some characteristics of Social Model-

1. Social model explains the difference between impairment and disability.

2. Social model theorists argue that the term ‘people with disabilities’ is directly linked to the philosophy underlying the medical model and therefore insist that the term ‘disabled people’ better reflects the societal oppression that people with impairments are faced with every day.
3. The social model is especially concerned with addressing the ‘barriers to participation’ experienced by PWDs as a result of various ableist social and environmental factors in society.
4. The social model has played a crucial role in shaping social policy *vis-à-vis* PWDs, not only in national levels but also in international level.
5. The social model of disability encourages the concept of inclusion.

Criticism

There are five main criticisms of the social model that have come from within the Disability Movement and disability studies. The *first* of these is that the social model ignores or is unable to deal adequately with the realities of impairment. This is based upon a conceptual misunderstanding because the social model is not about the personal experience of impairment but the collective experience of disablement (Oliver 1996b).

At second, related criticism contends that our subjective experiences of the ‘pain’ of both impairment and disability are ignored by the social model.

The *third* criticism of the social model states that it is unable to incorporate other social divisions, e.g. ‘race’, gender, ageing, sexuality and so on.

At fourth, criticism centres on the issue of ‘otherness’. From this perspective, it is not the physical and environmental barriers that we face but the way our cultural values position disabled people as ‘other’. This viewpoint is buttressed by recent developments in the theory of postmodernism and ideas about representation being crucial to disabled people. It is wrong to assert that, in principle, the social model ignores cultural values. More importantly, at the present time most disabled people in the world live in abject poverty, and do not have enough food and drink, while the two main causes of impairment internationally are war and poverty. As a consequence of this, any attempt to try to move disability politics exclusively into the realm of representation is fundamentally misguided and inappropriate when so many disabled people continue to experience life threatening material deprivation.

The *final* criticism of the social model is that it is inadequate as a social theory of disablement.

Conclusion

The social model recognises that disability affects every aspect of our lives, not just our health. It shows the need for disability to be addressed at every level: social, economic and political. It must become the first key consideration when drafting plans and making decisions. Everyday things should not be a barrier or even a special accommodation. People with disabilities have the right to enjoy the same childhood as their non-disabled siblings and friends, to attend the local mainstream school, to use public services, like transport, and to take advantage of the same employment opportunities as everyone else.

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