

## **The Role of the Church in Caring for the People with Disabilities: Lessons from 2 Samuel 9:1-10**

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### **Abstract**

Disability refers to a physical, sensory or mental limitation that interferes with a person's ability to move, see, hear or learn. Disability is a phenomenon that can be witnessed by anyone and can be found in every nation of the world. The seemingly awful neglect of the ministry to People with Disabilities (PWDs) by some churches in Africa and Nigeria in particular is a pertinent issue which must not be glossed over. This is the concern of this paper. The Church and Christians at large need to arise to the responsibility of seeing to the welfare of PWDs. However, some churches see the ministry as worthwhile; others look at it with disdain based on misunderstanding of some scriptural passages. Nevertheless, as exemplified by David in 2 Samuel 9:1-10 and, mandated in Matthew 28:19-20, the Church (apart from the government) and Christians all over the world have roles to play in caring for PWDs. This study therefore, examines the roles of the church in caring for the people with disabilities with a view to challenging and encouraging the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church to be mindful of the physically challenged people in all their programmes and activities. The study employs historical and textual approaches. It is discovered that many churches are yet to come to term that ministry in a properly defined context is not for a selected few members of the church, but to all and sundry. It is recommended that the Church should avoid the temptation of discriminating against people with disabilities but rather accept them just as Jesus did to all irrespective of status during his earthly ministry.

**Keywords:** Church and Disabilities, 2 Samuel 9:1-10, Mephibosheth, David, People with disabilities in the Bible

### **Introduction**

Ministry, in a well-defined context includes everyone, people with disabilities inclusive. Unfortunately, the Church and the society seem to neglect or pay lip service to this important aspect of ministry. The vision of the Church across various denominations appears to revolve around ministry to only those that are well off, people of influence and the mentally balanced than those with disabilities. The above scenario, regrettably, negates the principles of the great commission as recorded in the Gospel:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

(Matthew 28: 19-20)

The phrase ‘all nations’ as explained in the above passage includes, among others, those with disabilities which consciously or unconsciously seem to be forgotten in the ministry of the church and the society of this generation. Classified as people with disabilities are: the visually impaired (the blind), the deaf and dumb, the crippled amputees, those with spinal cord injuries, the mentally retarded, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Equal opportunities for all citizens without recourse to disabling condition is a major preoccupation of law. Every citizen is expected to have equal access to services, facilities and opportunities regardless of whether they live with or without disabilities. Expectedly, persons with disabilities are found in every

society, they should also enjoy unrestricted access to available social facilities. This is because their conditions do not imply that they are less eligible than their able-bodied counterparts in accessing and enjoying social provisions in their communities. So, what the law does is to facilitate equal treatments for all persons in the provision of social amenities.<sup>ii</sup> However, this study is a sociological probe into the challenges facing people with disabilities as highlighted in the Bible, and the role of the Church as spelt out in the great commission.

### **The concepts of disability**

Disability is defined as an impairment that limits major life functions such as seeing, hearing, walking, and mental retardation, inability to perform school work, carry objects or work at a job. Some disabilities or physical challenges came about as a result of disease, trials and aging, while others are congenital disorders.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, it is part of human existence and experience. Disability may occur during a person's lifetime or may be present from birth; it reflects an interaction between features of a person's body and that of the society in which he/she lives. WHO defines disability as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions.<sup>iv</sup>

Hobbs states that the lack of attention to 'disability' or 'impairment' in general may have a simple explanation; that there were no such concepts to attend to until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>v</sup> Scientific thinking puts variations in human functions and forms them into categories of abnormality and deviance. Social Philosophers began to see disability as a source, both of discrimination and oppression, and of group identity, similar to race or sex in this respect.<sup>vi</sup> Historically, according to Boorse, 'disability' has been used either as a synonym for 'inability' or as a reference to legally imposed limitations on rights and powers.<sup>vii</sup> Beaudry has a different view to this; he states that many different characteristics are considered disabilities. Paraplegia, deafness, blindness, diabetes, autism, epilepsy, depression and HIV have all been classified as disabilities<sup>viii</sup>. There seems to be little about functional or experiential states of people with these various conditions to justify a common concept. When any of these conditions is happening to an individual, the person is termed disabled and this is because of the malfunctioning nature of the person.<sup>ix</sup>

Bickenbach avers that UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) claims that society excludes people with impairment or disability, it brings to mind the view of the minority group model, which sees people with disability as a minority subject to stigmatization and exclusion.<sup>x</sup> It can be inferred from this, the main reason why people with impairment encounter hardships, because they suffer discrimination along the same line as racial or ethnic minorities. In lieu of this, civil rights' protections and anti-discrimination laws are the proper responses to disability. Perhaps the most familiar expression of the minority-group model is found in the preamble to the Americans with disabilities Act, which describes people with disabilities as "a discrete and insular minority" an explicit invocation of the legal characterization of racial minorities. Of a truth, people with disabilities suffer segregation like that of sex and race in most societies.

Ponten claims that in certain regions of the world, the people with impairment cases are seen as taboos and curses. She further states that Christians must recognize that disability is not a "curse from the devil" or "bad omen" as claimed by those regions.<sup>xi</sup> For "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. (Gal.3:13, RSV). Disability is a human condition through which God's power can be displayed in a life. Like the man born blind in the Bible, the disciples of Jesus asked Him, who sinned, the fellow or the parents? Jesus made it clear to them that it was not the fellow who sinned or his parents but that God wanted to glorify Himself in that life.

*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth.  
2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man  
or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It  
was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of  
God might be made manifest in him. (John 9:1-3).*

The World Health Organization (WHO) views disability as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.”<sup>xii</sup> From this, one could see that in most cases, once there is a restriction of any kind for which an individual cannot meet up with activities, it is considered a disability. Meanwhile, the European Commission categorizes disabilities into physical, sensory, mental and others.<sup>xiii</sup>

Mohapatra states that following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) coming into force, development institutions and professionals have recognized disability as a key issue inevitably linked to poverty, in the recognition of human rights and citizenship.<sup>xiv</sup> Disability, therefore, refers to physical, speech, mental, intellectual or any other form of impairment which hinders a person from carrying out his/her normal duties independently. These disabilities could be congenital (occurring before birth) or adventitious (occurring after birth).<sup>xv</sup>

### **Causes of Disability**

There are different causes of disabilities: illness, diseases, accidents, environmental hazards, criminal victimization, involvement in war and problems associated with parental development or birth, some are caused by evil powers and some can be as a result of the diet of the mother during pregnancy. People with disabilities are in different categories to which they are limited. Some have only one way they are disabled; others have multiple ways. And people differ in the degree to which their disability is readily visible to others. Some, not until one is told, one may not know they are disabled.<sup>xvi</sup> The United Nations reports that poor nutrient, dangerous working and living conditions, including road accidents, limited access to vaccination programmes, limited access to health and maternity care, poor hygiene, bad sanitation, inadequate information about the cause of impairments, war, conflict and natural disasters cause disability.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Models of Disability**

Models of disability reveal the ways the society provides or limits access to work, goods, services, economic influence and political power for PWDs. These models are influenced by two fundamental philosophies: the first looks at PWDs as dependent upon society which, in any case, can result in segregation and discrimination because they are seen as nuisance in the society. The second perceives PWDs as customers of what the society has to offer. This leads to choice, empowerment, equality of human rights, and integration.<sup>xviii</sup> There are several models of disability.

#### **The Medical Model**

Oliver argues that the medical model is associated with negative ideas of permanency, dependency and passivity and focuses on deficit rather than talent.<sup>xix</sup> Furthermore, it ignores basic needs and rights such as education, employment, housing and the role of society in disabling the people. The medical model of disability has long been associated with disability and has been the focus of much criticism. Its focus is the individual and the underlying approach has been to use medicine to treat disability and to disregard the legal capacity of PWDs through the use of medical care. The medical model of disability looks at disability as a bane that belongs to the person thereby relegating the problem to a defect within the individual. It is not seen as an issue to concern anyone other than the individual affected. If an individual has a visual, mobility or hearing impairment, for example - their inability to see, walk or hear is understood as their disability.<sup>xx</sup>

#### **The Social Model**

The social model on the other hand would rather recommend that a ramp or a stair-lift be fitted. If a person with visual impairment is unable to read written information, the solution is to provide the information in an alternative format such as audio or Braille. By providing satisfactory reasonable adjustment, barriers can be overcome hence; it will have a positive impact on PWDs. This offers the hope that discrimination can be eliminated by eliminating these barriers with support from the society.<sup>xxi</sup>

### **History on Deprivations of PWDs**

Oliver avers that historically disability has been considered to be a personal condition residing in an individual or as an individual defect.<sup>xxii</sup> The status of "being disabled" has been viewed as the natural cause for some people being unable to attend regular schools, get jobs or participate in social life. When disability is perceived this way, society's responses are restricted to only one of two paths: individuals can be "fixed" through medicine of rehabilitation (medical approach) or they can be cared for through charity or welfare programs (charity approach). This is where the Church can fit in so easily to carry out such responsibilities using medical approach such as allowing some medical experts who belong to the Church to use their God given gift to care for the PWDs. Again, through charity, the Church can easily reach out to the PWDs by showing care and empowering them.

PWDs have too often been denied the right to equal recognition before the law simply because of the existence of a disability (UN). They are routinely denied their basic rights such as receiving an education, moving around freely, living independently in the community, getting jobs (even when well qualified), accessing information, obtaining proper healthcare, exercising political rights, such as voting and making personal decisions. Persons with hearing and speech disability suffer violation of their freedom of expression when there are no sign language interpretations and other accessible formats of communication. Where the environment is not accessible, the freedom of movement of persons with disabilities is jeopardized.<sup>xxiii</sup> Although the Church in her own little way is trying to carry people with speech and hearing impairment along during Church services and programmes.

Davis explains that persons with various forms of disabilities which include children, women and men are relegated to the background and often seen and treated as outcasts.<sup>xxiv</sup> They are perceived as "objects" of charity, rather than "subjects" with rights. Likewise, they are exempted from enjoying their invaluable rights and privileges which other members of the society benefit from. This is contrary to international human rights legislations which are against discrimination in all its forms.

### **The United Nation Convention on the rights of Persons with disabilities (UNCRCPS)**

The United Nation Convention on the rights of Persons with disabilities (UNCRCPS) categorizes persons with disabilities to 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. The convention was based on the social model of disabilities that focuses on equal access and treatment; social opportunities; health; education; employment; political; economic and social development as well as eradication of legal and social barriers.<sup>xxv</sup> Viewing disability from human rights perspective involves a revolutionary thinking and acting by states and all sectors of society so that PWDs are no longer considered to be recipients of charity or objects of others' decision, but holders of rights (United Nations). Protecting and promoting PWD rights is not only about providing disability-related services, it is also about adopting measures required to change attitudes and behaviours that stigmatize and marginalize them. It is also about putting in place policies, laws and programmes that will remove barriers and guarantee the exercise of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of people with disabilities.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Most PWDs often do not have equal access to basic needs, including education, employment, healthcare, public places and other opportunities. For these reasons, effective legal system is necessary for preserving the rights of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. Persons with disabilities encounter difficulties as a result of factors that hinder them access to gainful employment, public buildings, public transport, medical care and quality education. Access to employment opportunities and equal treatment in the employment process is not guaranteed for PWDs. Many job environments are not accessible in terms of mobility and job demands. This makes PWDs go through difficult times searching for where they can fit in even when they are qualified for better jobs. Some employers on the other hand have misconceptions that PWDs are less productive than their able bodied counterparts. These employers, who may not have knowledge of available adjustments to work arrangements, limit employment opportunities for PWDs. Mobility has a major impact on the lives of many PWDs.<sup>xxvii</sup> It is therefore a

necessity for them to access education, employment, health services, social activities and personal affairs.

Bordelon opines that all of us know that those suffering from mental illness are the most marginalized members of the society, the stigma can be as distressing as the illness itself.<sup>xxviii</sup> It can entail rejection by family and friends, losing jobs, being ostracized or worse still, physical violence and abuse. Many of them have been rejected, shackled, beaten, flogged, sexually abused, stoned and verbally abused, tortured or made mockery of them. Eaton, showcases the personality of PWDs as people who wander about in the markets- dirty, confused and begging with torn clothes and melted hairs'. Their homes are the streets and gutter of our towns and the likes; it is not surprising that people avoid and pity them. It is easy to think it is not our responsibility to care for them.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **The emergence of Human Rights and a Rights- Based Approach to Disability**

According to Nweke, the human rights model includes disability within a paradigm of rights that has been emerging since the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.<sup>xxx</sup> This declaration recognized that all people have certain civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and development rights, despite differences between individuals. From this perspective, a right model of disability perceives variation in human characteristics associated with disability, whether in cognitive, sensory or motor ability, as inherent to the human condition. Such variations do not limit potential contributions to society, but rather diversify the range of potential contributions and the range of mechanism to ensure individual potential is realized. Thus, a rights' approach presumes that society is obliged to provide whatever mechanisms that are necessary for individuals to realize their rights. In the case of people with disabilities, this may involve the provision of supports, services, and aids to enable social and economic integration, self-determination, and the enjoyment of legal and social rights.<sup>xxxi</sup> Underlying this presumption is the principle that all people have the right to participate and to exercise self-determination as equals in society. The human rights perspective means viewing people with disabilities as subjects and not as objects.

### **The Place of the Physically Challenged People in the Society**

Onuoha agrees that in conditions where a challenged person is not able to cope with the society, it results in stereotyping, derogatory labeling and depersonalization.<sup>xxxii</sup> This opinion was formed when noted that most PWDs suffer rejection, isolation and maltreatment from other members of their immediate society. He said that PWDs are shown negative attitudes and in the traditional Yorùbá society, terms such as *Abirìn* which means Handicapped, *Dìndìnrìn* meaning Imbecile, *Abàmì* which means a strange person and *Aláwòkù* which means mentally imbalanced are terms used to address them. The effect is seen more when the society is not all inclusive. This in turn leads to an unhealthy society because some are being marginalized and segregated. If the PWDs are given their rightful place in the society, the society will be more conducive as a place to live for the PWDs.

Eaton submits that in every society, there are those who are considered by the population at large to be less than equal and they are not treated with the same dignity as others in the society through no fault of their own.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The mentally ill have long suffered this fate. Most of us are able to enjoy the fact that we can communicate effectively with others; friends, family, colleagues and so on. Those who suffer from the various types of mental illnesses are unable to carry out some or all of these things we take for granted and as such the PWD are rejected by their communities. Bordelon asserts that the society is a strong factor in the problems of the PWD.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Some people with disabilities are capable enough to contribute towards natural development but are denied such opportunities to develop due to the social beliefs ascribed to disabilities. Therefore, since the society created the difficulties for the PWDs, the onus for change is on the society.

### Old Testament Basis for Ministering to People with Disabilities

The Old Testament Bible is full of narratives that support ministry to people with disabilities, although a misinterpretation of some Old Testament scriptures may seem not to be in support. The study thus takes a closer look at the input of the Old Testament in ministering to people with disabilities and tries to strike a balance in the areas where certain Old Testament comments appear to be against this noble ministry of the church. Some speculations are based on the misinterpretation of Old Testament scriptures that God does not recognize or value PWDs. That God does not particularly want PWDs to be in position of leadership most especially in the priesthood. This erroneous interpretation is drawn from the passage below;

*17 "Say to Aaron, none of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. 18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame. 19 or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, 20 or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles; 21 no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish... 22 He may eat the bread of his God...23 but he shall not come near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord who sanctify them." (Lev. 21:17-23)*

The above scripture explains extensively that, the Aaronic priesthood anticipated the perfect sinless high priest because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

God loves and cares for all without exception. God is also seen as participating in His peoples' sufferings including PWDs in all their distresses. He was also distressed (Isaiah 63:9) and throughout Isaiah 53 the picture of Jesus' suffering is seen as one who suffered on behalf of His people and bore their suffering Himself. Therefore, the Church should follow the part of the God in whom we proclaim as Lord of all by seeing to the Welfare of the PWD as mandatory ministry.

We find God assuring the remnant of His people, Israel in Babylon, that the land of their captivity would be restored back to them and that they would return back to Jerusalem,

*"Behold, I will bring them from north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame... I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted; and the lame I will make the remnant; and those who were cast off, a strong nation..."*

*(Micah 4:6-7) RSV.*

This is the will and wish of God and the Church as Christ Ambassador should adhere strictly to care and love of the disable among them. The PWD must be searched for and their salvation and general welfare that will make them one in the body of Christ. The eternal kingdom which God will establish will include the weak, the lame and the outcasts. They are God's chosen ones.

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...*

*(Isaiah 35:5-6, RSV)*

This passage shows God's plan in healing His people which the church should imbibe as a ministry in the lives of people with disabilities

*In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book,  
and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.*

*(Isa 29:18 RSV).*

This is another passage that shows that God includes the PWDs in His scheme of salvation. In Isaiah 33:23-24, the word of God says the abundance of spoils will be divided and even the lame carries off plunder. However, it is important to note that there is a suggestion that physical ailment may be due to

moral guilt (v 24). From the texts above, it is clear that in the restoration of the remnant of the people of Israel, God ensured that people with disabilities would be brought back. God did not want the blind and the lame to be left behind. God wants all of them restored, showing the concern for them. This suggests that impairment should not be an excuse for not integrating them into the Church. God did not leave them behind as liabilities during the restoration of the remnant of Israel to Jerusalem and neither should Christians.

Moses is another example of a person who, at a point, was frightened to speak to Pharaoh because he had speech defect (Ex. 4:10-16). God however, provided support for him in the form of his brother Aaron who was sent along to be his spokesman. This is a form of assistance to the person who is targeted to be disabled due to speech impairment.

In 2 Kings 7 there is a story of four disabled men. They were forbidden to enter the camp because of their ailment, some form of skin disease or 'leprosy'. The king of Aram had laid siege on Jerusalem such that none could go in or come out. Consequently, there was starvation in the land to the point that a donkey head changes hands for an exorbitant price. This led to cannibalism. God supernaturally made the Syrian army to hear the sound of an army and thus fled, leaving everything. The four men with leprosy, who had been forbidden to enter the city because of their contagious skin disease discovered that they were left with two options i.e. to die slowly from starvation, or to surrender to the Aramean army who might kill them. They decided that taking risk was better than facing the certainty of starvation. Surprisingly, on arrival at the Aramean camp they found the place deserted and all the Aramean's possessions and food abandoned. They ate to their satisfaction and then realized that they could not keep the good news to themselves. Thus, they broke protocols by returning to the city of Samaria from which they were banned to share the good news of their discovery. The food was distributed and the Samaritans were saved from starvation by the intervention of these four lepers. This is a striking and living example that those regarded as outcasts and stigmatized can contribute to the life and health of God's people.

Isaac at old age became blind and was too confused to be able to distinguish between his sons, or to discern the trick of Jacob and Rebecca on him. Yet, the blessings which he pronounced on his younger son Jacob did not lose any of its spiritual power, and the things Isaac foresaw for his sons came to pass. In the same vein, Jacob was too weak to get out of bed but he crossed his hands and was able to place his right hand on the younger son and gave the blessing he intended for the first born on the younger of his two grandsons. Joseph, the boys' father, tried to correct him, but he made it clear to him that this was not a mistake. Despite his disability he did not allow God's plans for the younger boy to be changed.

### **New Testament Basis for Ministering to People with Disabilities**

One thing that is common both in the Old and New Testaments about people with disabilities is that it is presumed that their impairment is as a result of sins committed by them or their parents. When Jesus healed the man with disability by the pool of Bethesda, he said to him; "see, you are well again, stop sinning or something worse will happen to you" (John 5: 14). The fact of likening impairment with sin is again illustrated in John 9: 1-3. The disciples anticipated a connection between disability and sin with the question they asked the Lord, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This question shows that the blindness was a punishment for some unspecified sin. Similarly, when Jesus healed the paralytic man lowered through the roof (Mark 2: 1-12) Jesus said to him "son your sins are forgiven"(v-5). The implication is that issue of sin should be addressed before the impairment could be healed. The fact remains that the ministry to people with disabilities is pertinent in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. The parable of the great banquet (Luke 14) defines the more the place of the PWDs. When the affluent and the well to do gave excuses why they could not attend, the house holder was angry, asked his servants to go out into the highways and byways to bring in the poor and the maimed. Jesus said to the Pharisees who invited him to celebrate Sabbath in his house, "When you organise a banquet, do not invite friends, brothers, relatives or rich neighbours... rather invite the poor, crippled, lame, blind, you will be blessed" (Vs. 12-14).

Rayan in his view, believes that the parable of the great banquet shows that Jesus Christ, in word and action set people with disabilities within the circle of unity of the Church. The kingdom of God is not complete without them.<sup>xxxv</sup> This is clearly seen in Matt 12:12-14. After the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, a disabled man came to him at the temple, and he healed him, Matt 24:14. In Mark 16:15 *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"* This includes the handicapped (PWDs). This implies restoration of people with disabilities into their rightful place and ministry as part of the "Body of Christ". When John sent his disciples to find out from the Lord Jesus thus: "Are you He who is to come or do we look for another?" "Jesus responded thus to them recalling the prophecies of Isaiah, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."(Matt 11:3-5). In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announced his mission as follows: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. He was full of compassion for humans with or without impairment. When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, "Matt 9:36.

In the healing stories, Jesus primarily removes societal barriers in order to create accessible and accepting communities. Jesus created an inclusive community where no one was excluded on the basis of ability or disability. Likewise, the mission of the Church should be like that of Christ to remove the existing walls of discrimination in the society.

#### **Historical Background to 2 Samuel 9:1-10**

Mephibosheth, grandson of king Saul, son of Jonathan. In 2 Sam 4:4, Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan was 5 years old when his father and grandfather were slain. He was living in charge of a nurse, possibly because his mother was dead. Tidings of the disaster at Jezreel and the on sweep of the Philistines terrified the nurse. She fled with her charge in such haste that a fall lamed the little prince in both feet for life. His life is a series of disasters, disappointments and anxieties. It is a weary, broken, dispirited soul that speaks in all his utterances. The nurse carried him to Lo-debar among the mountains of Gilead, where he was brought up by Machir, son of Ammiel (2 Sam 9:4).

There he evidently married for he had a son Mica when he returned later at David's request. When David had settled his own affairs and subdued his enemies, he turned his inquiries to Saul's household to see whether there were any survivors to whom he might show kindness for Jonathan's sake (2 Sam 9:1). The search caused the appearance of Ziba, a servant of Saul's house (2 Sam 9:2), who had meanwhile grown prosperous by some rapid process which can only be guessed at (2 Sam 9:9, 10). From him David learned about Mephibosheth, who was sent for. His humble bearing was consistent with his chronically broken spirit. David put Ziba's property (which had belonged to Saul) at Mephibosheth's disposal and made Ziba steward thereof. Mephibosheth was also to be a daily guest at David's table (2 Sam 9). Mephibosheth seems to be recognized first by his name and second by his disability. Instead of stigmatization, his condition earned him recognition before King David. The only thing recorded in this chapter is the kindness David showed to Jonathan's seed for his sake. Firstly, the kind enquiry he made after the remains of the house of Saul, and his discovery of Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9: 1-4). Secondly, the kind reception he gave to Mephibosheth, when he was brought to him (2Sam. 9:5-8). Thirdly, the kind provision he made for him and all his (2 Sam. 9: 9-13).

#### **David's Pattern in 2 Sam. 9:1-10: a lesson for the Church in Caring for the PWDs**

Osiogu notes that the church has a key role to play in supporting people with disabilities. He posits that the Church has played down on serious issues that affect people with disabilities; hence, the Church has become part of the very problem of the PWDs.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Church seems not to have embraced disability and the concern for the PWDs in its human rights crusade and agenda with the same vigor, even though disability issues are human right issues as well. He likens this attitude to the negative portrayal of the PWDs in the Bible, as persons who lack or as sinners who must be cleansed and healed.



On the other hand, “Early Christian doctrine introduced the view that disease is neither a disgrace nor punishment for sin but on the contrary, a means of purification and a way of grace.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Esomoru reacting to the old use of antiquated religious belief of the consequences of the interpretation of disability to denote sin, disobedience, ignorance and unbelief that made some Christians adopting a discriminatory attitude towards people with disabilities that disability continues to be seen as a misfortune. The linking of disability to the “imperfect body image” that is found in the Bible has contributed in viewing people with disabilities negatively.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Biblically, marginalizing the PWDs through denial to self-development through education, learning of one skill or the other for functional living is against God’s plan for them. Hobbs explains that rejection of PWD is very detrimental to their enthusiastic pursuit for an improved living. Discrimination and ill-treatment often meted to them may lead them into living lives of isolation from the public and at the long run might lead to regrets, suicide, depression, termination of productive lives and personal goals.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The ministry to people with disabilities is seen in the story of Mephibosheth which this study is centered on in 2 Sam.9:1-10. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, King David’s great friend. He had become lame on both legs as a result of being dropped by a fleeing nursemaid when he was young. The world looked at him as a failure, useless, handicapped and good for nothing. Being lame, he could not go out and be a warrior, neither could he go to the field to till the soil for his own household. His servant Ziba being reluctant to present him to David when he wanted to show his friend’s son kindness, when King David was running for his life from his son Absalom, displayed this attitude.

The experience of today’s people with disabilities are very similar in term of discrimination, stigmatisation and rejection. To King David, all that appeared as the disadvantages of a lame person were inconsequential at the time. Mephiboseth was summoned to the king, he wondered why the king would to see a lame person like him. When he finally got to the king’s palace, King David said to him “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of Jonathan your father”. I will restore to you all that belonged to king Saul, your grandfather, and you will always eat at the king’s table (v 7), the Bible Records that “And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem because he always ate at the king’s table, and he was crippled at both feet” (2 Sam. 9:13), King David’s act is seen as a reflection of Jesus Christ’s compassion and serves as an example of complete restoration of a person with disability to a normal life. This acts of kindness is expected of the Church for the PWDs.

Rayan highlights three things David did to restore Mephibosheth:

- (1) The restoration of self-esteem; all the time Mephibosheth had experienced an attitude of rejection but now David showed him kindness.
- (2) The restoration of his identity; after having lived at the mercy of a generous man, Mephibosheth now has his rightful inheritance restored to him. Not only was his material possessions restored to him but also his title. He was restored to the status of a prince.
- (3) Restoration to the society- He, who was rejected by his own grandfather’s servants now had the opportunity to be among the king’s family.

### **Recommendations**

- (1) The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church should come to term that, ministry in a properly defined context is not for a selected few, as it is the case in most churches across denominations but to all and sundry.
- (2) Church ministers and leaders of the Church should avoid using the immunity of the pulpit to despise people with disabilities.
- (3) People with disabilities should be included in the yearly budget of the Church.
- (4) The Church should avoid the temptation of discriminating against people with disabilities but rather accept them just as Jesus did to all irrespective of status during his earthly ministry.
- (5) Also, the Church should pursue the spiritual, moral, physical and all round development of all members, especially, the PWDs. The Church should not reduce persons with disability to begging to earn a living.

- (6) Besides, people with disabilities should be empowered by the Church in order to be productive to fend for themselves and be useful in the Society.
- (7) The architectural designs of church buildings should be made accessible to people with disabilities.
- (8) The wealthy and well-meaning members of the Church should be encouraged to invest in the welfare and ministry to people with disabilities.

### Conclusion

Discrimination and the stigma of being disabled have long been experienced by PWDs. Studies have shown that it is not impairment that deters PWDs from enjoying an equivalent lifestyle to that of their non-disabled counterparts, rather it is the “restrictive environments and disabling barriers”. The need for the church and state to get involved in the ministry of people with disability cannot be overstated. This article, therefore exposes the significance of the church and society on the need and urgency of social welfare of PWDs as king David did to Mephiboseth in 2Samuel 9: 1-10.

The wild neglect of the ministry to people with disability is associated with a misinterpretation of certain scriptures that appear to suggest that impairment is a by-product of sin and disobedience to God. While this may be true in few cases, it should not be generalized. Ministry to people with disability is part of the arrangement of God to the world. People with disability are also included in the command of the great mission and as such should not be neglected or isolated. David received Mephiboseth with kindness and gave him all the land of Saul, his grandfather. For Jonathan's sake, he takes him to be a constant guest at his own table. Though, Mephiboseth was lame and unsightly and does not appear to have had any great fitness for business, yet, for his father's sake, David took him to be one of his family. This is a model for contemporary church and Christians to emulate in caring for people with disabilities.

### Endnotes

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