



Lausanne Movement

Connecting influencers and ideas for global mission

Developing Young Leaders with Disabilities

lausanne.org/content/lga/2016-01/developing-young-leaders-disabilities

1/18/2016

At the climax of redemption history, when people from every tribe and nation come to worship the Lord on His holy mountain, persons with disabilities will be among them, singing praises with the rest. As preparation, our Lord Himself will make the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Perhaps for the first time, those unable to speak will sing, and those who are immobile will leap for joy. And they all will teach the redeemed to praise God for the hard-earned lessons of suffering.



Who are people with disabilities? Roughly one in seven people across the globe are unable to see, hear, move about, speak, or think clearly. People with disabilities are much like anyone else except that, by God's design, they have impairments. There is a disappointingly small number of leaders with disabilities in local churches and other Christian organizations. However, there is hope and we can rejoice in the progress that they have made.

The Lausanne Movement addresses this challenge in *The Cape Town Commitment*:

We encourage church and mission leaders to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognize, affirm, and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves as part of the body of Christ.

Indeed, Lausanne is committed to encouraging and facilitating people with disabilities in leadership roles in which they can serve according to their calling and gifts.

God has prepared and gifted some people with disabilities for leadership roles in local churches and Christian organizations. This will unquestionably strengthen the body of Christ, for all parts of Christ's body will be serving.

People with disabilities have become leaders within disability networks and in disability organizations. Some also have successfully started their own organizations. These are signs of progress, but they rarely serve as leaders of local churches.

The church needs to learn from the wisdom gained through suffering that people with disabilities possess. They can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church desperately needs to hear.

We need to remove obstacles holding back young leaders with disabilities. While obstacles may be physical, such as the need for a ramp or a rail, some of the most stubborn obstacles are conceptual. These include biblical misinterpretations and theological misunderstandings.

Social misunderstandings are another obstacle. In some regions of the world, there are those who still believe that people with disabilities are contagious and must be isolated. Others believe that demons cause disabilities.

Another type of obstacle is ideological, arising from the cultures in which we live. One ideological assumption says that people with disabilities cannot care for themselves. However, not only is this incorrect, but it holds them back. In caring for them, we should strive to respect disability cultures, which are as diverse and complex as those found in any other cross-cultural ministry context.

We—the current leaders of churches and organizations—are the only ones who can remove these obstacles. Colleagues around the world should consider the following suggestions that will help to open doors for young people with disabilities to become local church leaders:

- Encourage a young person with a disability to use their gifts in church and to find their calling or vocation.
- Invite a young person with a disability to work alongside you in a leadership role, providing mentorship and assistance as (and only when) needed.
- Lead the way in placing called, gifted, and trained people with disabilities in local church and Christian organizational and leadership roles.

In doing so, the church will discover that many are gifted deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries. They will also have the insights, empathy, access, and relationships essential to reach into the disability communities to evangelize, equip, and train the next generation of effective disability leaders.

Finally, other people with disabilities will see leaders with disabilities in their effective roles, be encouraged, and respond by moving from passive to active. Opening doors for young leaders with disabilities will be a ministry beyond our wildest dreams and bring us irresistible joy.

At the climax of redemption history, when people from every tribe and nation come to worship the Lord on His holy mountain, persons with disabilities will be among them, singing praises with the rest. As preparation, our Lord Himself will make the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Perhaps for the first time, those unable to speak will sing, and those who are immobile will leap for joy. And they all will teach the redeemed to praise God for the hard-earned lessons of suffering.

Developing young leaders is a biblically sustainable missions strategy¹

In the harvest years of John Stott's ministry when the fullness of life's service brought serious reflection, he sought a better way forward. Stott concluded that training the next generation of young leaders should receive the highest priority.² This was more than golden-years sentiment. He came to understand that developing young leaders would be one of the most strategic endeavors in missions.³ After all, our commission from the risen Christ is to evangelize, disciple, and plant indigenous local churches. A biblically strategic approach to all aspects of Jesus' commission is to train nationals, particularly young leaders.⁴ This strategy would be even more effective if it included young leaders with disabilities, with a view toward reaching the one billion people with disabilities globally.⁵

10 FACTS ON DISABILITY

World Health Organization

1. Over a billion people live with some form of disability.
2. Disability disproportionately affects vulnerable populations.
3. People with disabilities often do not receive needed health care.
4. Children with disabilities are less likely to attend school than non-disabled children.
5. People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people.
6. People with disabilities are vulnerable to poverty.
7. Rehabilitation helps to maximize functioning and support independence.
8. People with disabilities can live and participate in the community.
9. Disability barriers can be overcome.
10. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) promotes, protects and ensures the human rights for all people with disabilities.

Who are people with disabilities? Roughly one in seven people across the globe are unable to see, hear, move about, speak, or think clearly.⁶ People with disabilities are much like anyone else except that, by God's design, they have impairments. Most of us will experience disability at some point in our lives, particularly in our latter years. That said, the challenges facing

people with disabilities sometimes seem insurmountable. The World Health Organization lists ‘10 facts on disability’ that address just some of those challenges.⁷ No wonder there is such a disappointingly small number of leaders with disabilities in local churches and other Christian organizations. The obstacles seem impassable. However, there is hope.

Addressing the challenge

We can rejoice in the progress that people with disabilities have made:

- Just several decades ago, we spoke about ministry *to* people with disabilities, where they were seen as merely passive recipients of our care.
- In response to the recognized need for mutual participation in ministry, we eventually began to talk about ministry *with* persons with disabilities.
- Today, we might comfortably discuss ministry *by*, even *under*, but especially *from* leaders with disabilities.

Our choice of prepositions—*to*, *with*, and *by*—tells a beautiful story that is not finished. We have come a long way. And we continue to progress.

The Lausanne Movement addresses this challenge. With creedal force, *The Cape Town Commitment* states:

*We encourage church and mission leaders to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognize, affirm, and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves as part of the body of Christ.*⁸

Indeed, Lausanne is committed to encouraging and facilitating people with disabilities in leadership roles in which they can serve according to their calling and gifts.⁹ The Movement’s vision statement is:

*The Lausanne Movement connects influencers and ideas for global mission, with a vision of the gospel for every person, an evangelical church for every people, Christ-like leaders for every church, and kingdom impact in every sphere of society’.*¹⁰

People with disabilities can participate in connecting influencers and ideas for global mission, particularly within their sphere of influence in society.¹¹ However, there are other benefits.

Selecting people with disabilities as church leaders will strengthen the suffering

church

At least two considerations point in this direction:

1. Gifting

God has *prepared and gifted* some people with disabilities for leadership roles in local churches and Christian organizations. This will unquestionably strengthen the body of Christ, for all parts of Christ's body will be serving. Scripture says that every member of the body is gifted to do some form of service. Consequently, if we do not encourage spiritual growth and ministry effectiveness for people with disabilities, we are dis-abling the body of Christ.

There are already people with disabilities serving in leadership roles, but they are comparatively few in number. Furthermore, people with disabilities have become leaders within disability networks and in disability organizations. People with disabilities also have successfully started their own organizations. These are signs of progress, but people with disabilities rarely serve as leaders of local churches.

This problem plagues the church in every country including the United States. It may be an even greater problem in countries where government and non-governmental programs are not easily available to support access and other forms of assistance. However, until the global church recognizes the great potential that people with disabilities offer our evangelism, discipleship, and commissioning for local church leadership roles, they will continue to fall between the cracks in leadership.¹²

2. Learning

The Church needs to *learn from the wisdom* gained through suffering that people with disabilities possess. People with disabilities can offer spiritual insights into physical, emotional, and social suffering that the church desperately needs to hear. Martin Luther described these insights as gifts to the body of Christ without which the church would become spiritually anemic.¹³ Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: 'We must learn to regard people less in light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.'¹⁴ Suffering is everyone's greatest challenge in life. So, what do we need to do?

Preparing young leaders with disabilities requires current leaders to act

1. Remove obstacles holding back young leaders with disabilities

Scripture paints for us a beautiful picture of what it means to assist people with disabilities. In Israel's law, the Lord says, '*Do not . . . put a stumbling block in front of the blind*' (Lev 19:14). The passage describes people with disabilities as moving along on the path of life. Stumbling blocks or obstacles get in their way and hold them back. God's gracious law bids all of us to remove those obstacles for them. Without obstacles barring their way, people with disabilities can move along the path of life toward success just like anyone else. Crucially, the verse also tells us that assisting is one way that we Christian leaders fear the Lord. As Job said, '*I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame*' (Job 29:15).

While it is true that obstacles may be physical, such as the need for a ramp or a rail, some of the most stubborn obstacles are conceptual. These include *biblical misinterpretations* and theological misunderstandings. For example, some people think that a Leviticus passage (Lev 21:18) forbidding God's people from having priests with disabilities means that Christian leaders cannot have disabilities. However, the passage in fact applies to qualifications for the Aaronic line of priests for the nation of Israel in temple worship, not leaders in the church.

Social misunderstandings are another obstacle. In some regions of the world, there are those who still believe that people with disabilities are contagious and must be isolated. Others believe that demons cause disabilities. Consequently, people with disabilities must receive spiritual deliverance through painful or debilitating rituals. These taboos, and others like them, destroy personal relationships for a group of people that may already be isolated due to the nature of their disability. Blindness, lack of hearing, or inability to speak or move without assistance all cut off people from the relationships they need.

A third type of obstacle is *ideological* in nature. These tend to arise from the cultures in which we live. Because they are so deeply embedded in our worldviews, that is, our assumptions about reality, these are some of the most difficult obstacles to recognize. They can be even harder to remove. We just take them as givens of society.

One ideological assumption says that people with disabilities cannot care for themselves. However, not only is this incorrect, but it holds people with disabilities back from succeeding, destroys their self-confidence, and causes them to doubt that they could ever achieve their goals in life. This assumption prevents people with disabilities from becoming leaders in local churches. The best that they can hope for is to receive charity.

Unfortunately, this mistaken thinking is difficult to correct because those who care for them find fulfillment in so doing. Pastors and other church people must be cautious in their caring,

for they can easily undermine the dignity of persons with disabilities by fostering overdependence on others. In caring for people with disabilities, we should strive to respect disability cultures, which are as diverse and complex as those found in any other cross-cultural ministry context.¹⁵

2. Open doors of opportunity for young leaders with disabilities

What do people with disabilities need in order to become local church and Christian organizational leaders? They need training and experience to develop their spiritual gifts; someone to widen opportunities for them; assistance in extending their influence; and promotion by other leaders.¹⁶

Then those people with disabilities whom God has called and gifted can assume their God-given leadership roles to evangelize (Matt 28:18-20), equip (Eph 4:10-12), and entrust the gospel (2 Tim 2:1-2) into the hands of other qualified leaders, ideally others with disabilities.



Who will lead the way? Who will remove the obstacles standing in the way of the growth in ministry of people with disabilities and open doors of opportunity, so that those who are appropriately gifted and called can fulfill their God-given mission? We—the current leaders of churches and organizations—are the only ones who can do this. Only we can nurture, train, and invite young people with disabilities into leadership roles, and consequently, change the local church and Christian leadership culture.

This message is for colleagues all around the world who lead the church of this age with God-given skill and compassion. Please consider the following suggestions that will help to open doors for young people with disabilities to become local church leaders:

- Encourage a young person with a disability to use their gifts in church and to find their calling or vocation.
- Invite a young person with a disability to work alongside you in a leadership role, providing mentorship and assistance as (and only when) needed.
- Lead the way in placing called, gifted, and trained people with disabilities in local church and Christian organizational and leadership roles.

Conclusion

What will leaders with disabilities accomplish? Far more than we might think. By removing obstacles and opening doors of opportunity for people with disabilities to seek leadership roles, the church will discover that many people with disabilities are gifted deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries.¹⁷

What is more, these individuals with disabilities will have the insights, empathy, access, and relationships essential to reach into the disability communities to evangelize, equip, and train the next generation of effective disability leaders.

Finally, other people with disabilities will see leaders with disabilities in their effective roles, be encouraged, and respond by moving from passive to active, as served one to server, watcher to worker, and maybe even lay person to church leader. Opening doors for young leaders with disabilities will be a ministry beyond our wildest dreams and bring us irresistible joy.¹⁸

Endnotes

¹*Editor's Note:* See article by Michael Oh and Justin Schell entitled [Lausanne's Renewed Engagement in Global Mission: the impact of Cape Town 2010](#) in the November 2015 issue of *Lausanne Global Analysis*.

² Of John Stott's desire, Alister Chapman says, 'As he neared the end of his own life, his ambitions focused more and more on others, on making them more useful in the kingdom of God.' Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 151.

³ Former Lausanne Executive Chairman Doug Birdsall says, 'Lausanne has a history of younger leader development. . . . That investment is producing very significant dividends for the cause of world evangelization as they have brought a surge of energy and creativity into the Movement.' Doug Birdsall, 'Lausanne Movement Leadership Transition Underway', Lausanne Movement, 27 Nov 2012, <https://www.lausanne.org/about/blog/lausanne-movement-leadership-transition-underway-2>.

⁴ ‘Leadership development is the crucial bottleneck to Church growth. . . . Those who accurately and effectively expound the Scriptures are few, especially in areas where the churches are growing rapidly. New methods and means of multiplying well-trained, godly, effective leaders must be developed.’ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation* (Denver, Colorado: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 17. Equipping people with disabilities to reach their spheres of influence fulfills every detail of this proposal.

⁵ The Lausanne Movement has committed to ‘encourage the development of emerging leaders within that focus area, especially younger leaders and women leaders, mentoring one or two for leadership within the network’ (Catalyst role description). This commitment includes people with disabilities.

⁶ Some estimates are as high as 15%, although the number varies from one region to another. Laura M Stough and Donghyun Kang, ‘The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and Persons with Disabilities’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 6 (2015), 140. This group includes people with cognitive disabilities and mental illness.

⁷ See sidebar for ‘10 facts on disability’ by the World Health Organization. Accessed at <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/disability/facts/en/>.

⁸ *The Cape Town Commitment*, II-B-4.

⁹ Disability Concerns Issue Group, ‘Hidden and Forgotten People: Ministry among People with Disabilities: Lausanne Occasional Paper No 35-B’ (Pattaya, Thailand: Lausanne Movement, 2004). Accessible online at https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP35B_IG6B.pdf.

¹⁰ *Lausanne Movement Editorial Style Guide*, updated 16 December 2014, p 6.

¹¹ Regarding disability suffering, Michael Oh underscores suffering’s role in the proclamation of the gospel. Michael Oh, ‘The Individual’s Suffering and the Salvation of the World’, in *God’s Love Compels Us: Taking the Gospel to the World*, eds D A Carson and Kathleen Nielson (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 113.

¹² Although people with disabilities do not fit the pattern of unreached people groups, Lausanne has proposed the more inclusive term ‘unengaged peoples’. Lars Dahle, ‘Missions in 3D: A Key Lausanne III Theme’, in *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives*,

Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series #22, eds Lars Dahle, Margunn Serigstad Dahle, and Knud Jorgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 373.

¹³ See people with disabilities as teachers in Stefan Heuser, 'The Human Condition as Seen from the Cross: Luther and Disability', in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 191-197.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1971), 10. Contextually Bonhoeffer is speaking more generally of what people have experienced in life.

¹⁵ John Piper reminds us, 'We don't own culture, and we don't rule it. We serve it with joy and mercy, for the good of man and the glory of Jesus Christ.' John Piper, 'Brokenhearted Joy', *World Magazine*, 13 December 2003, 51.

¹⁶ Chapman, *Godly Ambition*, 157.

¹⁷ See the recent study conducted by Oliver Merz: 'Inklusion Als Herausforderung: Eine Empirisch-Theologische Studie Zu Behinderung Und Leitungsverantwortung in Langes-Und Freikirchen Der Schweiz' ('The Challenge of Inclusion: An Empirical-Theological Study of Disability and Leadership in State and Free Churches in Switzerland'), a thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Doctor of Theology (ThD) for the University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2014.

¹⁸ Joni Eareckson Tada has said, 'Disability ministry is not disability ministry unless the disabled are ministering' at Ministry Access: The Lausanne Consultation on Disability Concerns, conducted at the International Disability Center of Joni and Friends in Agoura Hills, California, on 21 February 2015. This event followed the 2015 Global Access Conference and served as preparation for the Lausanne Younger Leaders Conference (YLG2016) to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 3-10 August 2016.

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First image 'Luke 14 Banquet' ©Hyatt Moore is used with permission. The dimensions of the original painting are 17 ft x 6.5 ft. It is owned by Joni and Friends and is featured centrally in their headquarters in California, USA.

Second image entitled 'The Welcome Door' ©Hyatt Moore is also used with permission. This

painting illustrates the door of opportunity awaiting young leaders with disabilities called and gifted for local church leadership.

Hyatt Moore was also invited as an artist to the third Lausanne Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa, 2010, and painted during and for the Congress.