

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

**THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF
PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY
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**QUESTIONS FOR THE CHURCH
CONCLUSION**

If, as has been argued, persons with intellectual disabilities embody a prophetic role in contemporary Christianity, the content of this prophetic message has potentially transformative repercussions not simply for the individual Christian but for individual ecclesial communities and for the Church as a whole. As hearers of the message respond to its truth it is possible that their relationships might be transformed, not just in terms of how they relate to themselves and to God but to fellow members of the ecclesial community, as those to whom they truly belong in Christ and whom they need in order to fully embrace all that they are called to be. Such transformation, however, will be neither instantaneous nor automatic and the journey towards it may involve confronting many challenging, if not disturbing questions in relation to spiritual, theological and ecclesiological understandings and practices. If, as Brueggemann insists, it is, in part at least, the responsibility of “*canonical* practice in ecclesial communities” to keep the text available,¹ we must examine the issues which might confront the Church as it responds to this obligation.

This response might begin by asking why these prophets are so noticeably and overwhelmingly absent from the life of the community. Following a lengthy history of inaccessibility, the issue of access has crept on to the Church’s agenda in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In order to fully address the underlying issues, though, it is pertinent to ask what has motivated this change in approach. Has the Church acted out of an internal repentant resolve to welcome those who have long been excluded on the basis of their physical impairments? Or are its actions a

¹ Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger*, p.1.

response to external pressure exerted by secular, legislative equality initiatives?² Perhaps the answer to such questions will provide an assessment of the degree of transformation required. Yet more fundamentally, is there still an assumption that access is primarily, if not exclusively, a matter of the physical environment in which ecclesial communities meet, when the reality is that the format and content of such gatherings have the potential to be equally exclusive to those whose capacities to understand and adapt to what is taking place are limited? Is it possible that intellectual high-jumps and narrow mindsets can contribute to a deeper inaccessibility than stairs and narrow doorways? The response of some, if not many disabled people to such questions can only be a resounding ‘yes.’ Monteith, for example, makes his views plain: “Disabled people are manifestly absent from the Church’s feasts and congregations respond by meeting some criteria of physical access whilst often treating disabled people as outsiders in a psychological sense.”³

Posing these questions will require the Church to demonstrate a level of courage and answering them, an honest and reflective openness which will allow it to genuinely subject its attitudes to the spotlight of truth and, where necessary, address its underlying prejudices towards persons with intellectual disabilities who, if they do make themselves present within communities of Christians, are commonly treated in ways which simply tolerate them as permanently and irreconcilably different, as tragic objects of pity. Speaking from 25 years of working with persons with intellectual disabilities in church contexts, McNair writes,

Christian interactions with individuals with disability are too often reflective of the negative examples of religious and secular interactions than they are of some God-inspired interaction. Many programs that do attempt to serve individuals with disabilities do so through an approach evidencing a lazy ethic of glassy-eyed pity. To individuals who work with the disabled, the constant refrain about the patience it takes to engage in such work ... are repeated to the point of being trite. If the disabled do indeed have worth, this should be evidenced in our religious practice.⁴

Approaching the issue from a biblical perspective, he asks why the prevalence of gospel narratives demonstrating Jesus’ attentiveness to persons with disabilities “has

² In the UK the 1998 Disability Discrimination Act (in Northern Ireland the 2001 Disability Discrimination Order) requires that all public buildings be physically accessible on an equal basis to all members of society.

³ Monteith, *Deconstructing Miracles*, p.13

⁴ Jeff McNair, “The Limits of our Practices.” In Swinton, *Critical Reflections* p.66

not resulted in more universal changes in church behaviour.”⁵ Why, indeed? McNair, though, is not alone. In issues relating to initiation, participation, sacrament and ministry, the church across the denominations has a long history of exclusion, inequality, misunderstanding, prejudice and neglect in relation to persons with disabilities, intellectual and physical. Eisland comments ironically, “For many disabled people the church has been a ‘city on a hill’ – physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.”⁶ In this sense, is the Church open to the accusation of having conformed to the values of the secular society in which it is called to be a radically contrasting and confronting presence,⁷ embodying the immanence of a very different Kingdom in which can be found love, dignity and welcome for all and particularly for the weak, poor and disabled.⁸ Reynolds argues that the “identity and mission of the church is rooted in welcoming and caring for those at the margins.”⁹ Webb-Mitchell concurs. “If the church is to be like the Kingdom of God, then it must invite, welcome and accept the presence of those who are considered poor – the ‘crippled, lame and blind’ in our world today.”¹⁰ Indeed the power of God is, Horne contends, manifest in the church “not merely through mutual concern, championing all members as indispensable but through privileging of those members who lack ability and respect.”¹¹

Despite the urgency expressed by the writers above, addressing these issues might involve a deep-rooted deconstruction of mindsets for the contemporary Church does not exist in a vacuum but carries the baggage of its own history whose narrative, formed over many centuries by its beliefs, hermeneutic and practices, has not contributed as it might have done to welcoming such persons. Furthermore it is also, perhaps sub-consciously, informed by the secular and cultural notions of normalcy previously discussed and subtly imparted by a media-controlled society whose messages differ radically from that of the prophetic embodiment of persons with

⁵ McNair, “The Limits of our Practices.” In Swinton, (ed.), *Critical Reflections*, p.67

⁶ Eisland, *The Disabled God*, p. 20. This history of inaccessibility is well-documented in disability theology and addressed, in addition to Eisland, by Moltmann, Hauerwas, Swinton and Yong, among others and is borne out by the absence in church communities of anything approaching a representative proportion of persons with intellectual disabilities.

⁷ Hence Jesus’ description of His followers as the light of the world and the salt of the earth and His anticipated possibility that this cutting-edge impact of the church might be lost. Matthew 5.13-16

⁸ Luke 14.15-23

⁹ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.238

¹⁰ Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guest at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p.26

¹¹ Simon Horne, “Those Who Are Blind, See.” In Eisland, and Saliers, *Human Disability and the Service of God*, p.96. One might, nonetheless, dispute on practical and biblical grounds a part of the statement above, since the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 is that no member of the body of Christ definitively lacks ability for each one is gifted by the Spirit for the sake of the whole

intellectual disabilities and of the gospel. Welcome within ecclesial communities implies recognition of worth practically embodied in mutual reciprocity of love and care. Unless churches are alive to the dangers of prevailing and pervasive secular attitudes, it is possible that, even in the extension of well-intentioned welcome they might replicate deeply-flawed societal values which contribute to the perception of persons with intellectual disabilities as problems to be rectified by normalizing direction and help towards enabling them to be present in the church's worship and fellowship gatherings in 'non-disruptive' ways rather than to consider "chang[ing] or rethink[ing] its theology or practice in response to [their] needs."¹² On the other hand a conscious ecclesial refusal to succumb to distorted secular values can be an equally powerful and deeply influential manifestation of the truth which liberates those who are blessed to experience it. Such an occurrence is poignantly illustrated by Hauerwas' recounting of his memory of a woman who attended his church during his youth. This woman, Dorothy, unbeknown to him and his classmates, was a woman with Down syndrome. She assisted his Sunday School teacher by taking charge of the pencils, keeping the roll and other small tasks. "It was much later, when we were nearly all grown up and adult, that the world told us that Dorothy had Down syndrome. At the church we were under the impression that Dorothy was the teacher's assistant."¹³ This idea that his church neither accepted nor passed on society's label for Dorothy, so as to define her first in relation to her disability rather than her personhood, had a profoundly motivating impact on Hauerwas's later work in the field of theology, ethics and disability.

Welcoming persons with intellectual disabilities is then, first and last to receive them as individual, unique and equal human beings. In the space between is where the church must ask itself how to receive from them what they have to give and how to give to them what they need to receive. This includes discovering for them and for all members of the ecclesial community a loving space for and a means of worshipping, participating and sharing their particular gifts as indispensable members of the ecclesial community. Responding appropriately to their presence and prophecy will mean honouring them in faithfulness to the breathtakingly radical statement in

¹² Swinton explains the practical outworking of such unchecked assimilation to secular values as it impacted his friend, Stephen: "If we reflect on Stephen's brief encounter with his local church, it is obvious that he was perceived by the representatives of that church community as someone with a specific problem that had to be dealt with/solved. The church felt under no obligation to commit itself to Stephen, or to change in response to his needs. Rather in the name of 'orthodoxy,' 'right worship' and 'fairness to other worshippers,' the church felt justified in excluding Stephen from the worshipping community." Swinton, 'Building a Church', p.35

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 93.

1Cor.12 that those whom society deems least presentable are those who, in Christ's church, deserve not merely equality of treatment but the lavishing of honour. In Swinton's words, "what we need is a form of community and a system of valuing human beings that will enable Stephen and others like him to find a respected and valid place ... a community that can offer a loving context for the necessary revalidation of a life that is frequently invalidated by stigmatising attitudes and ill-informed prejudices"¹⁴

How can the church instead enact the gospel imperative to welcome, affirm and value them as human beings, equal in God-given dignity and worth? What might such welcome mean in practical terms? Yong, for example, makes the case that "Christian worship should involve and engage all congregants."¹⁵ "For persons with intellectual disabilities, we have to find creative ways to meet them personally, remotely and even physically."¹⁶ Embarking on and implementing the outcomes of such a search will be difficult but unavoidable for a Church and churches which seek to respond faithfully to the re-utterance of God's design for human and inter-human behaviour in the power of His Spirit.

This leads us to even deeper questions for we are dealing here not only with the matter of the church addressing the exclusion, by various and subtle means, of its modern-day prophets but, additionally and intrinsically, the issue of how the Church lives and exists in conformity to its own identity as expressed in biblical and theological terms. Returning to the image of the Church as the 'body of Christ'¹⁷ as outlined by Paul in 1Cor.12¹⁸ and which has underpinned a sizeable proportion of the overall discussion of this work, the Church is inescapably confronted by the absolute necessity of the presence of those who are "weakest," and "least presentable"¹⁹ to the remainder of the body. The implications of this are, when fully considered, overwhelming. The thrust of the passage is not merely that the Church must afford a place to such people in a spirit of compassionate obedience to a God who loves and welcomes the marginalised. Rather the fact of their indispensability is to be directed towards the Church so that the Church is not the Church if they are absent. Such an implication rings resoundingly with the truth expounded by Jesus in Matt.25 that He

¹⁴ Swinton, "Building a Church", p.14

¹⁵ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.213

¹⁶ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, p.213

¹⁷ Once again it must be noted that this is not merely to be understood as a metaphor but an expression of the ecclesial reality.

¹⁸ The body imagery is also prevalent in Rom.12.

¹⁹ 1Cor.12.23

is in some way mysteriously present to, in and with such persons. If, as has been argued, the “least of these”²⁰ are to be understood as “the unrepresentable”²¹; if the hungry, thirsty, poor, lonely, imprisoned and sick²² and “the weaker parts” of the body are one and the same, then their absence implies the absence of Christ. The disturbing, if not terrifying, question that then arises is: if Christ is not present in His Church, His body, in what sense can it be the Church at all? Swinton highlights a possible response:

When Stephen is excluded from worship in the name of ‘peace,’ we cease to be the Body of Christ in any kind of meaningful sense. Instead Jesus finds himself sitting with Stephen outside the walls of the church as we continue to praise, oblivious of his absence.²³

Furthermore, if Christ’s presence is to be found with and for the poor and the outcast, then His body must surely be constructed on paradigms of weakness, vulnerability and humility rather on secularly valued foundations of strength, independence and power. How true is this of the hierarchical structures of our ecclesial communities and institutions? If this perpetual orientation towards the marginalised was the direction of Christ’s incarnated human body, why should His ecclesial body choose a different path? Is this not the meaning of the body image - that the interconnectedness of Christ as Head²⁴ and the body members creates the mutual indwelling which is the ultimate expression of love, welcome and acceptance as well as the sharing of all experiences whether joyful or painful,²⁵ as if the experience of one were the experience of all? As each part shares in the suffering of the other, then the condition of any individual who has intellectual disabilities cannot be a ‘personal tragedy,’ but a shared experience. Thus the walls of division built by the misunderstanding of difference, crumble under the weight of interdependent body membership. Unity within the body²⁶ means something – it is not an abstract concept but ought to be a visible and practical reality. In 1Cor.12.25 the presumed absence of discord exhibits itself, not in apathy or ambivalence but in caring for one another. Finally, at some point in time the body assembles together. It ‘re-members’ to remember its Head who died to bring it into being. No part can be excluded here.

²⁰ Matt.25.40

²¹ 1Cor.12.22

²² Matt.25.45

²³ Swinton, ‘Building a Church’, p.15

²⁴ Col.1.18

²⁵ 1Cor.12.26

²⁶ For which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night prior to His betrayal, John 17.

Has the contemporary Church, apart from in some of its localized, most radical and often controversial expressions,²⁷ seriously engaged with the type of inclusive ‘body theology’ presented above? Why does the Christian community on the whole cling so unconcernedly to the types of exclusionary attitudes and practices which serve to alienate and stigmatize people with disabilities of all types? Has the Church been deaf to its obligation to live as a loving community in which the marginalised can find a place to belong and the stranger can be transformed by and into a friend? Such questions must not remain at the level of negative criticism but require serious theological reflection. An absence of love is not most often due to the presence of hate but of fear. In fact love is presented as the biblical antidote to fear for “perfect love casts out fear.”²⁸ Perhaps what is needed is an admission within the individual and corporate lives of believers that often the deepest need is also the greatest source of fear. For a human being to know that she is loved, forgiven and totally accepted may be her most fundamental longing yet the fear that this may not be so may prevent her from reaching out to receive fully the love for which she yearns and which ultimately can be found only in God. Living in this fear builds barriers to the reception and thus the sharing of this love, particularly with those whose very difference makes them appear frightening or alienating. Paradoxically, though, the absence of such fear in the lives of many persons with intellectual disabilities is at the heart of their being and thus of the prophetic gift to the Church. Lovingly receiving and welcoming them unlocks the possibility that their gift may be shared with the whole church community.

The biblical and theological imperatives uncovered here can never be perceived as matters for reflection alone. They are intensely and unwaveringly practical and churches which take them seriously will find that seeking to implement their truth in the lives of their communities raises ever more questions for when spiritual truth dawns practical wisdom does not always immediately accompany it. How do attitudes change in advance of listening to the prophetic voice of persons with intellectual disabilities to enable churches to be in a position to hear from them? How then are churches to receive and give the care that is appropriate to those from whom they currently feel so estranged when there are already so many challenges to providing care to those with whom they naturally feel a close affinity? What would

²⁷ As in, for example, the *comunidades de base* in Latin America.

²⁸ 1John 4.18

appropriate pastoral care to persons with intellectual disabilities entail? How much effort might need to be exerted to grapple with these issues at a sufficiently deep level to exact real understanding of their lives? What impact might taking the time needed to properly get to know these individuals, their gifts and needs have on the frantic pace of church community life? What will it mean practically and pastorally to offer care to their families? What demands will it make on those ecclesial members who respond to this need? What support will there be for them?

How do worship and sacrament and become accessible to persons with intellectual disabilities as participants, not merely spectators? The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II advocates that “all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, active participation in the celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.”²⁹ Such expressions are to be welcomed but how are they to be realised? What are the forms and qualities of authentic participation? How do we encourage the bringing to God of all that human beings are in ways that are meaningful for all? Are “time, space, sound, the visual, movement and gesture, taste and touch”³⁰ effective tools of response to God alongside more classical verbally-based articulations of worship? How important is the sermon during worship? At what intellectual level should it be pitched? How can biblical truth be effectively communicated to those whose intellectual capacity is limited or profoundly limited? How important is quietness when some crave it and others cannot conceive of it? Who decides what compromises are to be made? What is the place of intellectual assent in relation to the sacraments? Is ‘consciousness’ as significant as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy implies? How do we assess or measure it among those who do not communicate verbally? How else might faith and spiritual life be recognised? What is the place of the community’s faith in the life of a member of the community who is perceived to be incapable of making a cognitive faith response? How does a leadership which believes it has a responsibility to respond to these challenges convince its congregation of the importance of the issue? How can conflict be handled sensitively?

²⁹ “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.” *Sacrosanctum Concilium in Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal and Curial Texts* (Minneapolis: The Liturgical Press, 1982), p.8

³⁰ Don E. Saliers, “Towards a Spirituality of Inclusiveness.” In Eisland and Saliers, *Human Disability in the Service of God*, p.24.

These are just a few of the questions to be addressed by a church in which the intellectually disabled will no longer be, at best, undervalued or pitied, at worst, stifled or shunned but instead joyfully and gratefully recognised as fellow members whose weakness is one aspect of the common humanity of all and whose vulnerability is an expression of the freedom with which they inhabit their humanness. In such a church community, as Christ is present by His Spirit, the prophetic message of persons with intellectual disabilities may be heard more and more and the church may be ushered into a new experience of life together in Christ. As Christians respond to the call of these prophets to break free from the bonds of secular values which cause them to deny their true humanity, they will instead become ever more open to God and to one another. Listening to these prophetic voices urging them towards a deeper understanding of what it is to live towards each other by the currency of love, they will reflect more closely the character of the One who calls them individually and together in love and whose every thought of and act towards them is shaped by the same transformative love. Thus this church community will have within its reach the capacity to receive from God the transformative grace and power to authentically be, in its ministry, life and being, the body of Christ on earth.

CONCLUSION

Wolfensberger's, Vanier's and Yong's common identification of the prophetic voice of persons with intellectual disabilities has been the catalyst for a biblical and theological exploration of the place of such persons in the Church today. Given the particular background of this exploration, outlined initially in terms of the historically difficult relationship between theology and disability, it is unsurprising that significant challenges have been encountered during this process. It is, perhaps, the range and diversity of theological issues uncovered that has been unexpected. The exploration has necessarily strayed into the area of how a person might be recognised as a prophet and how a message might be heard as a prophecy across the biblical narrative and in a contemporary theological and ecclesiological context. Assessing the possibility that persons with intellectual disabilities might embody such a prophetic role and be heard delivering such a prophetic message has further required not simply a focus on them as human beings *per se* but as potential members of the soteriological people of God and indispensable members of His ecclesial community.

The breadth of ground on to which this exploration has intruded has inevitably resulted in a predominance of raising rather than answering questions. The few ‘certainties’ that have emerged are not matters of factual irrefutability but matters for inspired, faith-dependent perception. Such issues of paradoxical truth are, as Luz writes, “incapable of being recognised by human eyes, that in a fundamental sense [are] so surprising that [they] can come to people only from outside themselves.”³¹ Thus eyes that can see and ears that can hear will recognise that persons with intellectual disabilities are human beings created in the image of a loving God. Their humanness is not prejudiced by their difference, nor their value by their vulnerability. On the contrary, difference and diversity, vulnerability and dependence are among the unmistakable hallmarks of their humanity and worth in the design of God. A society which seeks to ascribe to any other reality by means of futile displays of independence, self-sufficiency and unassailability is destined to fail. A Church which attempts the same is less than it was meant to be and in danger of permanent estrangement from its Source and Head who designs for intimacy, not independence; for community, not isolation; for honesty, not pretence; for need, not sufficiency. Human weakness and vulnerability are not rejected by an omnipotent God but embraced by Him as the paradoxical means of displaying His power and grace. He “can accomplish his will in weakness as well as strength, by sacrificing himself as well as asserting himself.”³² With thunderclouds at His command, this God speaks in a still small voice – a voice uttered by persons with intellectual disabilities in the silence of their wordlessness and the smallness of their place in the hierarchy of the Church. In this voice they call the Church towards new understandings of who God is and truer ways to be His people. Thus they ask the Church for welcome and inclusion, not only because they are needy but because they are needed. They remind the Church that it is “finite and contingent” and, in a finite and contingent world, can only live by “continuing dynamic dependence on its Creator.”³³

In many respects, therefore, this exploration has touched upon the most profound mysteries woven into the texture of the Christian faith. Focussing on the subject of intellectual disability has led to an appreciation of the reality that understanding and knowledge in the area of Christian theology, ecclesiology and spirituality are less easily attained than might be assumed by those considered intellectually competent,

³¹ Luz, *Hermeneia, Matthew. 21-28*, p.284.

³² Alistair McGrath, in Sung Wook Chung. (ed.), *Christ the One and Only: A Global Affirmation of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p.18.

³³ Gunton, C & Hardy, D, *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989, p.67.

for they find their source in the God who, unfathomably, “though knowing all things, is not ashamed to allot Himself the ignorance which belongs to humanity.”³⁴ What can be known, then, at the conclusion of this exploration, is so much about what cannot be understood by means of rational human intelligence. Yet lack of understanding does not have to lead to the wastelands of confusion or frustration but may paradoxically again lead to the fertile grounds of wonder, awe and humble appreciation of the foolish wisdom of God. A strange logic reveals that persons with intellectual disabilities are the ideal divinely-placed guides to these grounds. This exploration of who they are in the heart of their Creator and the importance of their role in His purposes and in His Church, might leads Christians to recognise, above all, that over-reliance on human wisdom, understanding and intellect will leave them individually and corporately far short of a true appreciation of all that belonging to God really means.

³⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Answers to Tiberias*, 4.