

Being a Disability-Inclusive Church

By Rev. Leow Wen Pin

Summary

The article begins by defining a vision for a disability-inclusive church, one which he describes as a destination for churches to head towards.

The author goes on to explain how this vision can be achieved through three smaller steps which a framework called the “ABCs of Inclusion”, namely, (i) create access, and (ii) foster belonging, and (iii) enable contribution.

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Introduction

In the previous article in this journal,¹ I emphasised that our “why” shapes our “how”. I shared that disability inclusion is a missional care issue, not just a pastoral care issue only. Then, I went on to show how a missional perspective changes how we see people with special needs and how we include them.

In this second article, I want to give even more concrete handles, more practical ways to help you nurture a mission-centric, disability-inclusive church. I will do so in two ways as follows.

1. Defining a Disability-Inclusive Church

Let us first define what a disability-inclusive church is.

Such a definition is important, because we need to know what we are aiming for. After all, if you are rowing a boat but don’t know where you want to go, you can row with all your might and exhaust yourself in the process, but you will still never get to the right place. In the same way, when we undertake the journey of disability inclusion, we must have a clear destination in mind.

So here is our destination, that is, our definition of a disability-inclusive church. It is:

a church where Christians with and without special needs enable each other to flourish as disciples and disciplermakers

Let me now discuss the two major statements contained within it.

¹ See *Koinonia Journal*, 1.2 (2025): 1–7.

The first statement in the definition is “flourish as disciples and disciplemakers”. This spells out the goal of a disability-inclusive church. In the previous article, we noted that disability inclusion is part of the Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples. Likewise, a disability-inclusive church must aim to empower people with special needs to “flourish as disciples and disciplemakers”. Disability-inclusive churches are disciple-making churches, and they must take the discipleship of people with special needs very seriously.

The second statement contained in our definition is “Christians with and without special needs enable each other”. Notice how this statement refers to both Christians with and without special needs: “enable each other”. In other words, inclusion is about mutuality. It is about Christians with special needs giving to Christians without special needs and vice versa. Inclusion goes both directions. It is about giving and receiving, whoever you are in the church.

2. A Framework for Enablement

The preceding definition of a disability-inclusive church is our destination for us to aim toward.

So how can we get to that destination? Let us now turn our attention to a roadmap that we can use to journey towards that destination. This roadmap is a framework that Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN) has developed. We call this framework “the ABCs of inclusion”.

The ABCs of inclusion give us three key ways that we can grow towards becoming a disability-inclusive church. They are:

A: Accessibility

B: Belonging

C: Contribution

Let me explain this ABC framework:

a. Create Access

The first way is “A” for accessibility. We must **create access** for people with special needs in our churches. Relative to other church members, they should have equal access to physical areas, ministry programmes, and faith communities within the church.

i. Physical accessibility. Such access begins with our environment and physical accessibility. If people with special needs can’t even be physically present with us, then there is little that they can do to participate in our churches.

In this respect, the Singapore government has done us a favour by mandating certain inclusive building codes that all new church buildings have to follow. If you need a quick overview of this topic, please refer to KIN’s book, *Enabling Hearts*.² Written by Ms Chia Yong Yong, a national disability advocate and our former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP), her chapter provides a helpful primer on accessibility for church venues.

In particular, older churches that were built before existing inclusive building codes may wish to use information like this to review their existing facilities to see what updates can be

² See Leow Wen Pin (ed.) *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches. Disability Ministry in Asia*

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made to ensure that their venues become more accessible.

ii. Cognitive accessibility. At the same time, it is important for us to recognise that accessibility is not just about infrastructure. Our churches should also be cognitively accessible.

It has been said that our age is one that is “hyper-cognitive”, that our society over-privileges the life of the mind. This is reflected in many churches in Singapore that present spirituality in a very cognitively-heavy way.

This manifests itself even in the little things that we do. Let me give you a simple example. Many churches (including my own) like to use the English Standard Version (ESV) translation as the church’s default translation. Personally, as a biblical scholar, I quite like the ESV. I think it does a good job on many fronts.

But what we might not realise is that the ESV is designed for a Grade 10 reading level, or, in Singapore terms, the equivalent of a student at a Secondary 4 level.³ So, if the ESV is your church’s default Bible, it may be an obstacle for those with intellectual disabilities, for younger children, or even those in the congregation who are less literate.

Instead, when people with special needs are present, we might want to use a translation like the Easy English Bible instead. Known simply as “the EASY”, this translation was designed for a Primary 3 reading level, that is, for 9-year olds. The EASY would be much more cognitively accessible to many more people in our congregation.

Beyond Bible translations, the way we present information in our churches can also be a

cognitive obstacle. Compare the two diagrams that follow.

Discipling the Differently-Abled into Disciplemakers: A Preliminary Exploration¹

BY JACQUELINE WOO

Drawing on her own experiences as a differently-abled person² with generalised dystonia, Jacqueline Woo takes us on a thoughtful exploration of helping differently-abled Christians to become disciples and disciplemakers. This article is adapted from a chapter that Jacqueline wrote for “Enabling Hearts: A Handbook for Disability-Inclusive Churches” (to be published by the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia in 2021).

1. INTRODUCTION

Christian discipleship is central to following God in our personal spiritual walk with Jesus. Since God remains resolutely the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, discipleship has been at the very heart of Christianity from ages past to the present day. We live as disciples of Jesus because God loves us and desires to shape our everyday lives.

Unfortunately, in churches in Singapore, differently-abled Christians are usually only present in churches, rather than being actively discipled or taking on the role of a disciplemaker. While disability ministries are making headway into Singaporean churches, even in churches with such ministries, these ministries are often conducted separately from mainstream services, resulting in the continued alienation of Christians with disabilities from the wider congregational community. Sadly, it is also not uncommon to hear skeptics opining that it is impossible to meet the needs of the differently-abled, which can be rather discouraging to differently-abled Christians who love God and wish to be part of the faith community.

¹ This paper was also published in an Easy Read version entitled “Discipling Christians with Disabilities into Disciplemakers”.

² The author recognises that there are different conventions for referring to people with disabilities, e.g. person-first language. In this article, she has chosen to use the expression “differently-abled” to highlight the Holy Spirit’s gifting of all Christians with a diversity of abilities to build up the Church.

1 Introduction



Christian discipleship is an important part of our personal spiritual walk with Jesus. Jesus loves us and wants to shape our daily lives.



However, Christians with disabilities are usually only present in church. They often do not play an active role.

³ According to BibleGateway.com.

The first diagram is a typical, written explanation on discipleship (taken from *Enabling Hearts*). Now, compare this with the second diagram. It has the same content, but it is communicated in what is known as the EasyRead format. Notice, for example, how much more visual and pictorial it is. It is a lot more cognitively-accessible.

(Both versions were authored by the gifted writer Ms Jacqueline Woo, who is herself a sister with special needs.)

iii. Process accessibility. Going beyond infrastructure and information, we need to also think further about what access means in terms of our processes.

Consider, for example, the process of ushering people into the sanctuary. Where should ushers invite wheelchair users to go? Should we set aside space for them at the back of the sanctuary like many churches do? Is that what “access” means? What happens when the whole congregation is asked to stand to sing—can the wheelchair user still see the lyrics of the worship songs on the screens?

And what happens if the wheelchair user would like to sit instead with their family and friends? Can they do so? Remember: access is about giving equal access, relative to other members of the church. We don’t want to implicitly tell people with special needs that they are second-class citizens in their own church.

This example is not ultimately about infrastructure but about our processes, our policies, and our culture. For instance, in my church—which is a small church so we don’t have a lot of money to make alterations—whenever we have wheelchair users join us, we ask them where in the sanctuary they

would like to sit. We explain to them the pros and cons of the different positions. We recommend what we think is the best seat where they can see even when everyone is standing, but ultimately, they can make his own choice. Whichever spot they choose, we move the chair already positioned there away so that their wheelchair can enter and use that space. After some time, that space becomes their special space. When I don’t see them there, as their pastor, I know to ask after them, to let them know they are missed. This is what I mean by process accessibility.

Accessibility is a choice that churches have to proactively make. Churches should take the initiative to be accessible.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Once, I was speaking to the lead pastor of a church about making his Sunday service accessible for Deaf people. At one point in our conversation, he said this to me:

“Wen Pin, I think it would be very strange for me to arrange for sign language interpreters to be in our church services when we don’t have Deaf people in our church. But I assure you that, once there are, I will make sure that there are sign language interpreters.”

But immediately after saying this, he suddenly stopped and thought about what he had just said. Then he laughed and said, “Wait a minute. Why would Deaf people come to my church if I didn’t have interpreters in the first place? I need to rethink what I am saying.” And that was the start of a very productive discussion with him that led his church to become more disability-inclusive.

I thank God for pastors like that! At the same time, sadly, some church leaders have also

said to me: “we don’t want to start an inclusive ministry because we don’t have many people with special needs. Only one or two.”

And to them I say the same thing I now say to you: churches have to take the initiative to be accessible. If you don’t proactively make your church accessible, you have already implicitly decided to exclude people with special needs. This is because people with special needs can only come if the church is accessible to start with!

b. Foster Belonging

Let us now consider a second way to journey towards disability inclusion. We must foster (B)elonging for people with special needs in our churches.

Having access without belonging is like being invited to a party where you know very few people. Have you ever been to an event like that? I recently had. It is awkward. Maybe you only know the host—that’s why you were invited—but the host is usually busy entertaining people, and so you have no one to talk to. Yes, you were invited, and, yes, you can help yourself to the food. But who wants to go to a party like that?

Churches can sometimes be like that too for people with special needs. While they can access the programmes and the ministry, they don’t feel a real sense of belonging to the community. That is tragic, because the Church is our spiritual family in Christ.

Spending a lot of effort on creating access without fostering belonging is like building a

road to nowhere. You can access, but where is this access leading to?

i. Ten dimensions of belonging. Prof. Erik Carter has a helpful way to think about belonging. He observes that there are ten dimensions of belonging, and these are: to be present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved. Prof. Carter recommends that churches evaluate themselves on all ten dimensions.

You can easily find this framework online, if you want to explore it more deeply.⁴ But for now, I want to highlight those dimensions that churches in Singapore find more challenging and these are based on my experience working with them.

Generally speaking, Singapore churches that try to be disability inclusive are often quite good at ensuring that people with special needs are “present”, “invited”, and “welcomed”. This is because they are focused on being hospitable towards people with special needs.

Likewise, churches with pastoral care ministries towards people with special needs are often very good at the dimensions of making persons with special needs feel “supported” and “cared for”. Their pastoral care efforts extend to and bear the fruits of loving care and support for special families. Just to clarify: pastoral care is very important in disability inclusion but it shouldn’t stand as the only reason for disability inclusion.

ii. Belonging as spiritual friendship. Notably, where churches tend to struggle is with the dimensions of helping those with special

⁴An example is: <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html>.

needs be “known”, “accepted”, “befriended” and “loved”. We might summarise these four dimensions with the phrase “belonging as spiritual friendship”. Spiritual friendship is being known, accepted, befriended, and loved.

Spiritual friendship is not optional to disability inclusion. It is at the heart of all disability-inclusive ministries. For instance, when I ask parents of children with special needs “what is your biggest hope for your child, especially when you have passed on?”, do you know what their answer is?

Their answer is not “a home for my child”, not “a job for my child”, not even “a rich financial legacy for my child”. What they tell me is this: “someone to love my child as much as I do.”

Now perhaps I am a little cynical, but I do not think that love is something that society-at-large is very good at. In my own experience, the only organisation I know, beyond the family, that can give selfless and enduring love to people with special needs is the Church!

After all, Jesus says that the way that the world will know that we are His disciples is if we love each other! And we can only properly love people with special needs when we know them, accept them, and befriend them.

Unfortunately, rather than focus on relationships, sometimes our disability ministries can be rigidly programmatic. We see ministry as people with special needs coming for a session where they sing some worship songs, hear some teaching, and do some activities. But when you ask the ministry volunteers “what relationship do you have with people with special needs?”, they struggle to answer.

In those cases, belonging as spiritual friendship is lacking.

So, if we truly want people with special needs to belong, then we must plan our ministries to facilitate deeper spiritual friendships. For example, many inclusive Sunday school classes make the effort to use different activities, different strategies to teach people with special needs about God. That is good.

But some churches go a step further to foster friendships. They assign a fixed group of volunteers to persons with special needs. The volunteers are trained, not just to facilitate the activities, but to befriend that specific person with special needs. Over time, during the regular activities, a lasting friendship is developed between them. The volunteers are then further trained and encouraged to visit the persons with special needs and their families at home, or even go on an outing together. All this is meant to reinforce their spiritual friendships.

For churches that have done this, I saw their efforts really pay off during the Covid-19 period. Because while their programmes could not continue, their ministries still flourished because volunteers continued to visit their special friends regularly at home. Their spiritual friendships continued despite Covid-19 restrictions.

So we must go beyond a programme-centric approach. Instead, we must anchor ourselves on nurturing spiritual friendships. That is the only way we can develop true belonging for our brothers and sisters with special needs.

c. Enable Contribution

Let us now consider the last of the ten dimensions of belonging, and that is the dimension of “being needed”. According to Prof. Carter, when people with special needs are needed by others, they develop a greater sense of belonging.

This is critically important, for it leads us into the third aspect of our ABCs of an inclusive church: C for contribution. Indeed, people often only feel “needed” if they are contributing so we must enable contribution for people with special needs in our churches.

Indeed, forcing ourselves to think about the possible contribution of people with special needs ensures that we do not fall back into a pastoral-care-only mindset. Instead, it focuses our minds on our missional call to enable them to flourish as disciples and disciplemakers. Since service is part and parcel of discipleship, our ministries must make a concerted effort to help our members with special needs serve and contribute.

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. The biggest challenge that stands in the way of enabling people with special needs to contribute, is our own mindset, our own assumptions about what people with special needs can or cannot do.

Autistic people have often been deemed to have “rigid thinking”—that they are cognitively inflexible. To be candid, sometimes I wonder whether it is the rest of us who have “rigid thinking” towards people with special needs!

For some Christians, “service” only rigidly means teaching, or worship, or leading a Bible study. And because people with special

needs often find it challenging to serve in these rigid ministry boxes, we conclude that they cannot serve in church. But that is not true.

For example, KIN recently organised a session for disability ministry leaders and volunteers to learn about ministry for autistic people. During that session, we purposefully planned a panel dialogue led entirely by autistic people, where even the moderator was autistic. Based on the feedback, the dialogue was very well received.

Why did we do this? It was because we wanted to give a very visible reminder to all our participants that people with special needs have so much to give us and teach us—if we let them!

So I often wonder whether the reason that we can’t see their gifts is really because of our own theological blindness. Do we truly know what God wants from His church?

For example, which do you think God prefers, if He had to choose one? A harmonised, musically-complex, choral presentation, or one with simple singing, where children with special needs can sing with all their hearts, even if they sing out of tune? Which is more pleasing to our God who declares: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”⁵

There is no way that we can grasp the gifts of a person with special needs unless we truly know them. Unlike typical individuals, their gifts are often unconventional and hard to spot. You need to know them well to be able to see past their disability to look into their hearts.

⁵ Matthew 9:1, quoting from Hosea 6:6.

To elaborate, I have a friend with special needs who is a superb prayer warrior. I know because he tells me that he prays for me daily! Even I don't even pray for myself daily! I have two other friends with special needs who have the gift of encouragement. I remember two very low points in my life where I was struggling with the dark night of the soul. In both instances, it was the two of them who knew exactly what to say, exactly what to do, to help me up out of the pit.

But we cannot identify such gifts unless we embrace the spiritual friendship that I had mentioned earlier. Spiritual friendship allows us to know each other deeply, to see the Holy Spirit working in each one of us. Spiritual friendship enables us to help each other contribute, serve, and flourish.

Conclusion

To conclude, I began this article by defining a vision for a disability-inclusive church: a destination. I said that a disability-inclusive church is one that allows everyone, with or without special needs, to flourish together as disciples and disciplemakers.

And then, in order to make a journey towards that destination, I argued that we can take three smaller steps through the ABCs of Inclusion:

- *Create Access*
- *Foster Belonging*
- *Enable Contribution*

Now because it is a journey, let me say that becoming a disability-inclusive church takes time. It will not happen overnight. Like any journey, it requires effort and backbone. But because inclusion is missional, we do not turn back and we press on without wavering.

Also, because it is a journey, there is no such thing as a one-size fits-all model of ministry. As I have told many church leaders, "it depends". It depends on your context, your convictions, and your congregation. Every church is different; everyone has a different road to take.

For some of your churches, you have the blessing of a clean slate, substantial resources, and convicted leaders, so you can progress to a fully-inclusive church community quickly. For others, you face cultural inertia, the weight of history, and have many systemic challenges to overcome. In those situations, you would be wise to start small and win some confidence first, before proposing more sweeping changes.

Whatever kind of church we have, what we must do regardless is to always keep an eye on our destination, on what a disability-inclusive church is truly about. Focus on our God-given mission to make disciples of all peoples, including people with special needs. When we focus on that mission, each step we take, however small, will bring us closer to God's vision for His people.

May we be found faithful in making disciples of people of all abilities.

This article is an edited version of the second keynote address delivered by Rev. Leow Wen Pin at the inaugural Special Needs Ministry Conference jointly organised on 31 May 2025 by the Chinese Annual Conference of The Methodist Church in Singapore and the Koinonia Inclusion Network at Bukit Panjang Methodist Church. This keynote address and the conference were also reported in a news article that can be accessed [here](#).

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About the Author



Rev. Leow Wen Pin is the founder and board chairman of the Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN), a mission organisation that enables churches to include and disciple people with special needs. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Koinonia Journal* and the book review editor of the *Journal of Disability & Religion* (the leading journal in disability theology and ministry). He is also an advisor to the research-focused Centre for Autism and Theology of the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, where he also serves as an editorial board member for the centre's *Neurodiversity and Faith* series. Find out more about Rev. Leow at www.leowwenpin.com.

About the Journal

The *Koinonia Journal* is a publication of the Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia of the **Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN)**, a disability mission organisation that enables the Church to welcome and disciple people of all abilities.

The *Koinonia Journal* is an occasional journal that publishes theological writing from an evangelical Christian perspective on matters concerning disability ministry, missions, and theology from an Asian perspective. If you would like to receive future articles from the *Koinonia Journal*, please sign up to KIN's mailing list here: kin.org.sg/get-started/.

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