

# การทำพันธกิจกับคนพิการจำเป็นสำหรับคริสตจักร

## The Essentiality of Disability Ministry for the Church.

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### ข้อมูลบทความ

\* รับบทความ 7 พฤษภาคม 2563

\* แก้ไข 23 มิถุนายน 2563

\* ตอรับบทความ 29 มิถุนายน 2563

## บทคัดย่อ

ความทุกข์ยากลำบากของคนพิการและครอบครัวของคนพิการในประเทศไทยผลักดันคริสตชนไทยให้ประเมินการตอบสนองของเราต่อความจริงเรื่องความพิการว่าเหมาะสมเพียงใด อย่างไรก็ตาม คริสตจักรโปรเตสแตนต์ในประเทศไทยมักไม่ได้กำหนดให้พันธกิจกับคนพิการเป็นพันธกิจหลักของคริสตจักรและไม่ได้มุ่งทำพันธกิจกับคนพิการและครอบครัวของพวกเขา ด้วยเหตุนี้ คริสตชนไทยจำเป็นต้องมีความเข้าใจที่ชัดเจนยิ่งขึ้นเกี่ยวกับการทำพันธกิจกับคนพิการ

บทความนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อนำเสนอว่า หลักคำสอนของพระคริสต์ธรรมคัมภีร์และเทววิทยายืนยันว่าการทำพันธกิจกับคนพิการจำเป็นสำหรับคริสตจักรเนื่องจากเหตุผลสำคัญ 3 ประการ ดังนี้ (1) พันธกิจกับคนพิการช่วยคริสตจักรให้ตอบสนองต่อความทุกข์ของคนพิการได้อย่างเหมาะสม (2) พันธกิจกับคนพิการเสริมสร้างคริสตจักรให้เป็นชุมชนแบบมีส่วนร่วมที่ให้เกียรติคนพิการ และ (3) พันธกิจกับคนพิการเสริมพลังคนพิการให้บรรลุบทบาทสำคัญของพวกเขาเพื่ออาณาจักรของพระเจ้า ด้วยเหตุนี้ พันธกิจกับคนพิการควรเป็นหนึ่งในพันธกิจหลักของคริสตจักร

**คำสำคัญ:** พันธกิจกับคนพิการ; คริสตจักร; บริบทไทย

## Abstract

The suffering of Thai people with disabilities and their families compels Thai Christians to examine our response to the reality of disability in the Thai context. Unfortunately, disability ministry is often regarded as “optional” in the Thai Protestant churches. As a result, many Protestant churches do not intentionally minister to people with disabilities and their families. Therefore, it is crucial to help Thai Christians to gain a clearer understanding of disability ministry.

This article aims to present the essentiality of disability ministry for the church from a biblical and theological standpoint. I will propose that disability ministry is essential for the church for three main reasons: First, disability ministry equips the church for a constructive response to the suffering of people with disabilities. Second, disability ministry enables the church to become an inclusive community that honors people with disabilities. Third, disability ministry empowers people with disabilities to fulfill their important roles in God’s kingdom. Therefore, disability ministry should be one of the core ministries of the church.

**Keywords:** Disability Ministry; The Church; Thai Context

## Introduction

In Thailand, the current disability prevalence is approximately 3% (1.9 million people) (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2019). Over the past few decades, the Thai government, foundations and non-governmental organizations have assisted and empowered Thai people with disabilities in many ways. Unfortunately, Thai people with disabilities are still neglected and marginalized. They are among the poorest people in Thailand. Their opportunities for education and work are far from being equal with others. Moreover, they have to endure the negative attitudes of society and the lack of accessibility within the community. Generally, they are taken care of and assisted by their family members or relatives. Therefore, Thai people with disabilities and their families are facing great hardship in Thai society.

This painful situation compels Thai Christians to examine our response to the reality of disability in the Thai

context. Unfortunately, disability ministry is often regarded as “optional” in the Thai Protestant churches. As a result, many Protestant churches do not intentionally minister to people with disabilities and their families. Therefore, it is crucial to help Thai Christians to gain a clearer understanding of disability ministry.

This article aims to present the essentiality of disability ministry for the church from a biblical and theological standpoint. I will propose that disability ministry is essential for the church for three main reasons: First, disability ministry equips the church for a constructive response to the suffering of people with disabilities. Second, disability ministry enables the church to become an inclusive community that honors people with disabilities. Third, disability ministry empowers people with disabilities to fulfill their important roles in God’s kingdom.

## 1. Disability ministry equips the church for a constructive response to the suffering of people with disabilities

Disability ministry has an important role in the church because it equips believers for a constructive response to the suffering of people with disabilities. A Christian theology of suffering affirms that suffering is a complex reality. Different causes of suffering demand different kinds of responses. For suffering caused by oppression and injustice, believers should respond by being in solidarity with the afflicted (Boonyakiat, 2009). People with disabilities experience great suffering in many ways, most of which are caused by attitudes and actions of others, rather than by their disability per se.

Jeff and Kathi McNair succinctly describe this reality in Wolfensberger's 18 Wounds of Disability (McNair, 2011: 1-7):

1. Bodily or intellectual impairment
2. Functional limitation
3. Relegation to low social status /deviancy
4. Disproportionate and relentless attitude of rejection
5. Cast into one or more historic deviancy roles; devalued social status causes devalued roles or vice versa.
6. Symbolic stigmatizing, "marking, deviancy imaging, branding"
7. Being multiply jeopardized/scapegoated
8. Distanciation: usually via segregation and also congregation
9. Absence or loss of natural, freely given relationships and substitution with artificial/bought ones
10. Loss of control, perhaps even loss of autonomy and freedom
11. Discontinuity with the physical environment and objects, ("physical discontinuation")
12. Social and relational discontinuity, even abandonment

13. Deindividuation, “mortification,” reducing humanness

14. Involuntary material poverty, material/financial exploitation

15. Impoverishment of experience, especially that of the typical valued world

16. Exclusion from knowledge and participation in higher-order value systems (e.g., religion) that give meaning and direction to life and provide community

17. Having one’s life “wasted”; mindsets contributing to life-wasting

18. Being the object of brutalization, killing thoughts and death making

Based on the fact that people with disabilities often suffer from attitudes and actions of others, Steve Bundy concludes, “We simply cannot deny that suffering exists in the disability community, nor can we deny that a great deal of this suffering comes about not as a result of their disability, but because of the world we live in... a world of exclusion, oppression and rejection” (Bundy, 2011: 1).

Therefore, the painful situations of people with disabilities and their families call for believers’ participation in their suffering through concrete actions.

This response is in accordance with Christ’s ministry of being an advocate or paraclete. The word “advocate” comes from the Greek word “paraclete” which literally means “called to the side.” This word signifies “a role of comforting, exhorting and encouraging” (Anderson, 2001: 195). In his earthly ministry, Christ’s role as an advocate—especially an advocate for people with disabilities—is apparent. He healed many people who were affected by disabilities; for example, the paralyzed (e.g. Mt. 4:24, 8:5-12, 9:2), the blind (e.g. Mt. 9:27-30, Mk. 8:22-26), the mute (e.g. Mt. 9:32-33), the deaf and mute (e.g. Mk. 7:31-37). More importantly, in John 9, Jesus is an advocate for a man blind from birth. He rejected the traditional prejudice against the blind man, and declared, “Neither this man nor his

parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Jn. 9:3).

At present, Christ continues his role as our advocate in our contemporary concrete circumstances through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. To participate in the suffering of others, consequently, is to be their advocate and to enable them to experience the presence and power of Christ alongside them in their needs and struggles (Anderson, 1997). However, this response is not just the imitation of Christ’s ministry in the past, but it is also the continuation of his ministry in this world. It is not asking the question, “What would Jesus do in this situation?” which implies his absence from our present situation, but it is to ask, “What is Jesus doing in this situation and what am I to do as a Christian?” After his resurrection, Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit upon his followers as a continuation of his ministry on earth. Therefore, Christ’s redemp-

tive work still continues in the present situations through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (Anderson, 2001).

For this reason, disability ministry has a crucial role in equipping the church for a constructive response to the suffering of people with disabilities. It helps believers understand more about disabilities and how to minister to people with disabilities and their families. Indeed, disability ministry should be one of the core ministries of the church. However, this understanding implies neither that people with disabilities are inferior, nor that they are merely objects of disability ministry. People with and without disabilities are equally created in the image of God. Each person is called to be part of God’s community, and each person has unique roles in building up the community. This brings us to the remaining reasons that disability ministry is essential for the church.

## 2. Disability ministry enables the church to become an inclusive community that honors people with disabilities

A proper theological understanding of the church reveals that the church is designed to be an inclusive community, in which all are equally called to be people of God, parts of the body of Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, each member is valued and honored, especially those who are weak and despised. Amos Yong says, “The church is constituted first and foremost of the weak, not the strong; people with disabilities are thus at the center rather than at the margins of what it means to be the people of God” (Yong, 2011: 95).

This understanding is supported by the nature of Christ’s new community. In his earthly ministry, Jesus always welcomed and included the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in his community. Special attention was given to people with disabilities. As mentioned earlier, the Scripture high-

lights many people with disabilities that were accepted and healed by Jesus. More importantly, people with disabilities were important for Jesus’ ministry and teaching in Luke 13-14, particularly in Luke 14:1-24.

Jesus healed two persons with disabilities on the Sabbath, and he used those opportunities to teach others (Lk.13:10-17; 14:1-6). Jesus told a Pharisee who invited him into his house to welcome people with disabilities. He said,

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Lk. 14:12-14)

In the parable of the great banquet, the host specifically commanded his servants to search for the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, and to compel them to come to the banquet so that his house would be full (Lk. 14:15-24). This parable clearly shows that people with disabilities are central to God’s heart and his kingdom (Bundy, 2011).

Moreover, the inclusive nature of Christ’s community is clearly illustrated by the image of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul indicates that all believers are indispensable parts of the body of Christ. They should have equal concern for each other. Each believer has important roles in the community. Paul says,

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the

parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12: 21-26)

Grounded in this understanding, the church will realize that people with disabilities, who are usually perceived as weaker and less honorable than others, are indispensable and should be treated with special honor. Therefore, the church must be an inclusive community that rejects the traditional notion that people with disabilities are weaker, less worthy, less necessary, or have fewer contributions. In contrast, as Amos Yong puts it, “People with disabilities are by

definition embraced as central and essential to a fully healthy and functioning congregation in particular, and to the ecclesial body in general” (Yong, 2011: 95).

Therefore, disability ministry exists to remind the church to constantly and intentionally resist the temptation to be exclusive, but rather to become an inclusive community, especially for people with disabilities. Moreover, disability ministry provides opportunities for people with disabilities to utilize their gifts for God’s kingdom. This leads to the third reason for the importance of disability ministry.

### **3. Disability ministry empowers people with disabilities to fulfill their important roles in God’s kingdom**

Disability ministry not only enables the church to include people with disabilities, but also empowers people with disabilities to respond to God’s calling on their lives. In *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Yong

proposes an inclusive theology of the church that each person with disability contributes to the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than being just a recipient of others’ ministries. As a result, the church should minister inclusively to people with disabilities and be blessed by people with disabilities. In turn, the church should not be divided between people with disabilities and people without disabilities; rather it should be viewed as a community in which each person, with or without disabilities, equally and uniquely contributes to the whole (Yong, 2011).

When the church truly includes people with disabilities, the church will be known as an inclusive and hospitable community that not only cares for people with disabilities but also values their contributions. As a result, the church will clearly manifest God’s love to people with disabilities, their families, service agencies, and the wider communities at large (Reynolds, 2008). This is extremely important for sharing Christ in Thailand, a Buddhist

country where the number of Christians is only about one percent of the population (according to the latest census in 2010). Cultural and religious background may prevent the Thai people from listening to the gospel message, but an inclusive and hospitable Christian community will enable the Thai people to experience the gospel in tangible ways.

Similarly, Thai people with disabilities who come to faith in Christ are called to be ambassadors for Christ to other Thai people, with or without disabilities. Each Thai believer with a disability witnesses for Christ in his or her own specific ways. Therefore, disability ministry helps Thai Christians with disabilities recognize their crucial roles and empowers them to use their gifts to bless others in the church and society.

## Conclusion

In summary, disability ministry is essential for the church because of three main reasons: First, disability ministry equips the church for a con-

structive response to the suffering of people with disabilities. Second, disability ministry enables the church to become an inclusive community that honors people with disabilities. Third, disability ministry empowers people with disabilities to fulfill their important roles in God's kingdom. Therefore, it is clear that the church needs disability ministry. It should be one of the main ministries of the church. Disability ministry enables the church to reach out to people with disabilities. Disability ministry empowers the church to integrate people with disabilities into the community so that they can contribute to others (Eareckson et al., 2011).

This brief discussion simply highlights the essentiality of disability ministry for the church. Thai Christians should seek a better understanding of disability and disability ministry in the Thai context. As a result, Thai churches will be able to respond to the reality of disability in the Thai context in a more faithful and fruitful manner.

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