Conclusions regarding the experiences of people with disabilities and church leaders

Theme one: The lived experience of a person with disability: born with a disability or becoming disabled

The lived experiences of people with disabilities in coping with their disability include their emotional responses to the onset of the disability, trying to make meaning in the journey and facing daily challenges on a practical level.

The range of emotional responses like shock and depression need to be born in mind when the inclusion process in churches is pursued. These emotions may influence their readiness to feel included in the church. The creative ways in which people with disabilities make meaning on their journey with disability, need to be acknowledged with appropriate support by their church. They are often in a process of defining an alternative identity and renewed purpose in life, they fluctuate between hope and despair, deal with “why” questions and journey on a continuum of acceptance. These are profound experiences in their personhood.

Furthermore, their challenges of daily living, may leave them vulnerable to be regarded as ‘different’ because of their limitations. However, these limitations do not mean a complete inability of doing things, as is often the perception of others.

When churches understand these background realities of people with disabilities, it may help to develop a disability-friendly environment in the church.

Theme two: The experiences of significant others in relation to living with a person with disability

Having a family member who is disabled, often determine household routines and major decisions in the family. This can have a huge impact on the emotional and physical well-being of the family. Some families respond by hiding the disabled person and denying him/her a respectful life with others. This in turn has an impact on the self-esteem of the disabled person. It is in this situation that the church needs to respond in order to be inclusive and a support for people with disabilities.

Theme three: The person with disability’s experience of the physical environment of the faith community.

No accessible transport to church, buildings not designed for people with disabilities, and procedures in worship services not considering the needs of people with disabilities, all contribute to the experience of inaccessibility for people with disabilities. Furthermore, the
experience that this is not a priority for church leadership, leaves them to believe that they are actually not important enough for the church to make the necessary structural changes. For them, this confirms their experience of exclusion.

National Building Regulations that indicate requirements for accessibility of people with disabilities, are simply ignored by church authorities and not enforced by regulatory bodies.

While church leaders report that many churches are made accessible, people with disabilities still feel that the struggle for an accessible environment is ongoing.

**Theme four**: How people with disabilities in faith communities experience others’ perceptions of disability and healing

Others’ perceptions of disability have a severe impact in the lives of people with disabilities. In the church context, oppressing theological ideas are widespread and deeply ingrained in people’s minds. Some of these perceptions are expressed in practices in faith communities, which confirm to people with disabilities that they are not accepted, not respected, not understood, not regarded as autonomous human beings and actually not loved as friends.

While it needs to be acknowledged that people with disabilities’ own assumptions do a play a role in the abovementioned experiences, both the church and people with disabilities need to take responsibility for building a more positive environment.

**Conclusions on suggestions for inclusion**

**Theme five**: Suggested strategies for inclusion of people with disabilities

Strategies that will contribute directly to the inclusion of people with disabilities, have much to do with the relationships and interaction between them and others in their faith community. This entails unconditional acceptance, which will liberate the person with disability to be his own person, allowing him to do whatever he is capable of doing, and giving practical support without being condescending. In the wider context of the faith community, unconditional acceptance will also mean changes in beliefs about disability and changes in practices that will affirm him/her as an equal human being with the same needs as others, but also with potential to be of service in the church. With this interaction, people without disabilities may also experience liberation of their fears and preconceived ideas regarding disability.
**Theme six: Suggestions for accessibility of buildings and worship services**

When churches consider how people with disabilities get to church and make facilities accessible for them, it is a demonstration of an attitude of inclusion, affirming to the person with disability that his presence and participation is important. Participation relates directly to the worship services where inclusion can be established in several creative ways.

Churches are obliged to conform to the National Building Regulations Part S: Regulations regarding people with disabilities, 2010, but it appears that this is not enforced.

**Theme seven: Creating awareness about disability: models and content**

Creating sustainable awareness of disability in faith communities requires the bringing together of views in dialogue, space for freedom of expression, addressing deep-rooted causes of oppressing views and facilitating a cyclical process of action and reflection where learning and change can be internalised. The role players in this process will be people with disabilities and those without who need to interact on equal footing. It will also mean several different target groups in the church, for example, church leaders and their wives, children and family members of a person with disability.

**Theme eight: Suggestions of how people with disabilities can contribute to their inclusion.**

No disability awareness programme will be successful without people with disabilities playing an integral role. They have the responsibility to make known their readiness to participate in such programme, which implies challenging the perceptions that they are not capable for doing so. Their presence in the leadership of the church can add value towards decisions, which include the needs of people with disabilities. Their willingness to also be accommodating, can indeed point to establishing a new approach, where the aim of attitude change is for the common good of all in the faith community.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations can be considered for future qualitative research, for the practice of including people with disabilities in faith communities and for the role of social workers in the process.
Recommendations for practice from the findings

Recommendations regarding emotional experiences

Church leaders and task groups for disability in churches should take cognisance of the specific emotional experiences of being born with or becoming disabled, and the daily challenges of finding meaningful life amidst a disability. Churches need to position and equip themselves to be of appropriate support for people with disabilities and their families.

Recommendation regarding accessibility

Faith communities need to commit themselves to making their buildings, facilities and programmes fully accessible for the physical needs of people with disabilities. This relates to all buildings and facilities to comply to the National Building Regulations Part S: people with disabilities (2010) with regard to the following aspects:

Recommendations regarding models for creating awareness

It is recommended that the ideas of Paulo Freire regarding change be incorporated in a model of interaction to create awareness about disability (Schenck, Nel and Louw 2010:74). This is a process of dialogue according to the following principles, which could bring about the change towards disability inclusion in the life of faith communities:

a. Radical transformation can take place by addressing the roots of problems and values held by society and the church that cause suffering for people with disabilities.

b. Collective action by church leaders and people with disabilities, who participate on equal footing in a dialogical learning circle. In this circle, there is mutuality in the roles of learner and teacher, which implies that all stakeholders can learn and teach, in a space of acceptance and trust.

c. The process of change will be committed to be relevant to the needs of people with disabilities and the mutual benefits of their inclusion for themselves as well as the members of the faith community.

d. Dialogue is at the core of the process of change. This means open discussion between equal partners who do not passively accept the oppressing situations of people with disabilities in churches. It rather aims at developing critical which motivates the partners to act and learn.

e. There is an active search for solutions through a facilitated process. A facilitator could present the core problems of disability inclusion in the church back to the stakeholders through a code, which they seek to resolve through dialogue and action.
f. This process of change is committed to a continuous cycle of collective action and reflection. Participants are dissatisfied with the status quo of disability exclusion in the church, they reflect critically, plan and take action and repeat the process until they experience change.

**Creative methods to use in the change process are recommended as follows:**

a. The use of drama to convey messages of change
b. The use of music: composing songs regarding disability; music performances by people with disabilities.
c. Storytelling by people with disabilities, including their writings, for example, their poems.
d. Adapting all of the above recommendations to be applicable in contexts where oral interaction is preferred to written materials.

**Recommendations regarding the content of an awareness programme**

It is recommended that the proposed resource pack for disability awareness in faith communities, is developed, based on the abovementioned methods and with the following contents:

a. An overview of different disabilities and some of its impact in people’s lives.
b. Terminology regarding disabilities that affirm the dignity of people with disabilities and that contribute to a different way of thinking about disability.
c. Etiquette for interacting with people with disabilities that set both people with disabilities and non-disabled people free of their uncertainties and that is conducive to rich relationships.
d. Practice examples of how people with disabilities and non-disabled people serve and live together in their faith community.
e. All these aspects of the contents can be presented with the abovementioned methods of dialogue, discussions, drama, music, storytelling and visual arts.

**Recommendations regarding the role of people with disabilities**

It is recommended that any disability awareness programme in a church should start with the principle of direct involvement of people with disabilities. This will mean either finding those people with disabilities who are empowered to take such responsibility or position the programme in such a way that it is empowering for people with disabilities who participate.