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Towards a liberating reading of the Bible for Churches in Southern Africa

Makomborero Allen Bowa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused very serious social suffering across the globe and has exposed just how vulnerable our communities are. Societies are struggling to absorb the unfolding devastating consequences of the pandemic. In the context of Southern Africa, as is the case across the globe, the pandemic has severely disrupted public life and has had a devastating and ruinous impact on the formal and informal economy (UN 2020b:8; Paul et al. 2021:2). The implications of the coronavirus are much more far-reaching in the context of disability as the pandemic is triggering and exacerbating several challenges for persons with disabilities, particularly those who have always been vulnerable to economic discrimination. Developments from many Southern African countries including Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa strongly indicate that persons with disabilities continue to be the forgotten vulnerable community in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their challenges have been compounded by the impact of the pandemic which continues to threaten lives and livelihoods in ways that have not been seen or experienced before (UNPRPD and IDA 2020:2). The pandemic has deepened and heightened the marginalisation of persons with disabilities by increasing the risk of poverty in their lives. Recognising the unprecedented challenges that persons with disabilities are facing in the Southern African context, this article advocates for a more comprehensive and inclusive response from the Church in partnership with other stakeholders if the retrogressive impact of the pandemic is to be minimised.

Historically, the Church has a long history of reading the Bible poorly in response to disability resulting in the marginalisation of such persons in the broader societal context. A climate of exclusion in the context of disability characterises the Church in Southern Africa and the broader African society. The Church has contributed substantially to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of persons with disabilities through its faulty interpretation of biblical texts on disability. Certainly, the Church has contributed to the continuum of negative perspectives towards disability prevailing in

contemporary society, which perspectives nurture and perpetuate the nexus between disability and poverty in the Southern African context. This chapter engages and interrogates the beliefs in the Church that fuel negative perspectives on disability in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa with the view advocating for a liberative approach to biblical texts on disability. The major implication of this way of thinking is that there must be a paradigm shift in the way the Church has addressed the issue of disability as suggested by Ndlovu (2016:36). This should result in the development of a liberative theology of disability, which theology is rooted in the positive perspectives on disability found in the Bible. The chapter further argues that the Church must champion a disability response to the coronavirus pandemic and any other future calamities of a similar magnitude and nature. The Church in Southern Africa has a huge role to play in serving the needs of persons with disabilities during and in the aftermath of the pandemic by taking appropriate action to guard against their marginalisation and stigmatisation through a liberative reading of biblical texts on disability. Therefore, this chapter assesses the potential risks for persons with disabilities during and in the aftermath of pandemic and articulates the measures that the Church in collaboration with other stakeholders can put in place to mitigate processes that may further marginalise persons with disabilities from the mainstream structures of society thereby exposing them to poverty.

The Church in Southern Africa and disability: critical reflections on the Churches' interpretation of biblical texts on disability

The Church in the Southern African context, as is the case globally, has a long history of excluding persons with disabilities and this practice is rooted in its interpretation of biblical texts on disability. Osukwu (2019:61) indicates that the exclusion of persons with disabilities in the Church is a common practice that continuously negates the purpose of a "Church of All and for All". Respectively, writing in the context of Zimbabwe, Sande (2019:3) observes that when it comes to the integration in the mainstream of the Church, persons with disabilities continue to experience very serious exclusion and stigmatisation. This exclusion is nurtured and perpetuated by negative and discriminatory perspectives on disability, which perspectives are rooted in the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability. For Sande (2019:3), biblical interpretation is undoubtedly at the centre of denigrating persons with disabilities in the Church and consequently in the broader Zimbabwean society. Accordingly, Matsebula (2012:414) observes that there is a serious disparity in the recognition of disability as a human right and social development paradigm in South African Churches and this has been a great injustice to persons with disabilities. This disparity emanates precisely from the manner in which the Church interprets texts on disability. As Machingura (2019:212) indicates, the discriminatory attitudes

towards persons with disabilities prevalent in the Southern African context manifest primarily from the intersection of cultural traditions and biblical texts on disability. As such, the Church has always provided the ideological funding which fosters the marginalisation of persons with disabilities. Consequently, the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability, particularly those found in the Old Testament, has been detrimental to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Scholarship on disability has established that the Old Testament contains texts such as Leviticus 21:16–23 depicting discrimination against persons with disabilities as well as texts such as Leviticus 19:14 and Deuteronomy 27:18 that call for non-discrimination (Vengeyi 2016:151,152,161; Nyamidzi and Mujaho 2016:78–90). What is surprising is that the Church in the Southern African context has tended to focus on those texts that depict disability negatively and yet there are several other texts that depict positive perspectives on the experience of disability. In their ancient social setting, both perspectives on disability had a bearing, particularly on the inclusion and exclusion of persons with disabilities in the mainstream structures of social organisation (Bengtsson 2014:290). The positive and non-discriminatory perceptions fostered the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Conversely, the negative and discriminatory perspectives promoted the exclusion of such persons from the mainstream structures of society. The Church in the Southern African context seems to have ignored this fact and has continuously focused on negative texts on disability which foster the exclusion of persons with disability. For example, in the Zambian context, the understanding of disability as the consequence of social-cultural and religious misfortunes directed to the family emanates partly from the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability (Banda-Chalwe et al. 2012:922). This idea has resulted in the exclusion of persons with disabilities. Therefore, as rightly pointed out by Machingura (2019:220), it is quite unfortunate that the Bible is intermingled with texts that have been interpreted in oppressive ways and these continue to reinforce the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream structures of society.

The fundamental implication of the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability has been the development of a theology that fosters the exclusion of persons with disabilities. The Church's approach to these texts has led to shrinking attitudes towards persons with disabilities. As Togarasei (2019:147) indicates, the Church's interpretation has informed its response strategy to the realities of disability through the ministry of charity and healing. Certainly, the perception of persons with disabilities as cases of charity has been prevalent in the Church. Historically, this has been the Church's approach to disability in Southern Africa but while this approach seems plausible, it has been quite problematic in that it reinforces the discrimination of persons with disabilities. It is in this respect that Mugeere et al. (2020:66–67) argues that even though charity may offer much

needed help, it also promotes segregating and demeaning attitudes, rather than justice, equality and participation. Accordingly, Eiesland (2009: 240) is convinced that the Church has for too long provided the ideological funding and charitable practices which result in the marginalisation of persons with disabilities. For Wolfenberger (1998:15–16), persons with disabilities are often marginalised when society views them as objects of charity. Certainly, the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in many Southern African countries including Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa strongly indicate that persons with disabilities are marginalised and excluded from the mainstream structures of society.

Accordingly, Togarasei (2019:136, 137) stipulates that it is quite unfortunate that the Church has concentrated on the theology of healing since several problems arise from this theology in the context of disability. This theology develops from a faulty understanding which associates disability with sin, which system of thought has been very common in the Church from time immemorial. Throughout history, the Church has interpreted Biblical texts on disability in ways that subtly or explicitly reinforce the idea that disability is caused or is rather a consequence of sin (Satterlee 2010:34; Machingura 2019:214). For instance, Mugeere et al. (2020:75) highlights that in Zambia, some of the pastors portray persons with disability as testimony to God's punishment to the "wicked and spiritually cursed" and this has resulted in the development of a disabling theology which has been problematic for persons with disabilities. For Gosbell (2018:9) and Mugeere et al. (2020:75), the alleged association between sin and disability contributes substantially to the marginalisation and rejection of persons with disabilities in the broader societal context. Therefore, as Sande (2019:4) demonstrates using the example Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe, the faulty belief that disability is associated with sin is problematic as it fosters and perpetuates the discrimination of persons with disabilities and often encourages their withdrawal from the Church. Accordingly, this belief creates problems for persons with disabilities and results in their stigmatisation and exclusion (Chitando and Phiri 2016:471; Togarasei 2019:138,142). This faulty system of thought causes a lot of pain, embarrassment and disaffection on the part of persons with disability as they are often accused of being sinners or lacking faith in the event that their disabilities are not healed (Kabue 2016:228; Togarasei 2019:138). Consequently, this system of thought often disqualifies persons with disabilities from actively participation in the Church. For instance, Mugeere et al. (2020:75) highlights cases of pastors and other leaders who tend to exploit the plight of persons with disabilities in the name of performing healing in the Zambian context. Consequently, it is because of such developments that persons with disabilities withdraw themselves from actively participating in the institution of the Church.

Mueleman and Billiet (2012:173) argue that religious outlooks continue to structure the values, behaviour and attitude patterns in the broader society. In this respect, the use and interpretation of biblical texts on disability

provides insights regarding how disability is constructed in the context of the Church and the broader Southern African context. As has been indicated, the Church has contributed immensely to attitudes towards disability prevalent in Southern African societies through its interpretation of biblical texts on disability. Certainly, by implication the negative and discriminatory perspectives on disability prevalent in these countries have emanated from the Church's teachings and attitudes towards persons with disabilities. It is in this respect that Masango (2019:4–6) argues that the church in the southern African context has not only neglected persons with disabilities but has also discriminated against them, and reinforced their exclusion from the mainstream structures of society. As suggested by Machingura (2019:220), biblical texts just like African traditions, beliefs and cultures must never be taken for granted when it comes to how they shape attitudes, values and beliefs towards disabilities. Thus, the Church plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards disability, which attitudes filter into the broader society. What this means therefore is that, if the Church's perspectives on disability are predominantly negative and derogatory, as is common in most Churches in Southern Africa, the same attitudes are fostered in the broader communities thereby subjecting persons with disabilities to discrimination and marginalisation.

The fundamental implication of the Church's response to disability has been the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream structures of the Church and society. The negative perspectives on disability that develop from the Church's interpretation of texts on disability have given rise to the systematic segregation and oppression of persons with disability. In Osukwu's (2019:62) view, this explains why persons with disabilities are rarely considered in the larger scheme of things of the Church. Similarly, persons with disabilities are hardly considered in the mainstream activities of the Church in Zimbabwe. For instance, Sande's (2019:3,4) study demonstrates that there exists no disability focused subject in the pastoral training curriculum of most Churches and that a very few Churches in Zimbabwe have Braille Bibles and other facilities like ramps for persons with disabilities to use. Osukwu (2019:62) also indicates that it is extremely difficult to find any mainline Church in which persons with disabilities are ordained as priests. Respectively, it is extremely difficult to find persons with disabilities occupying positions of leadership in mainline Churches in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. For instance, Matsebula (2012:414) one of the major challenges is that the institution of the Church in South Africa has not accepted that disability is a human right that requires mainstreaming in all respects. This evidence clearly suggests that the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the structures of the Church emanates from the negative perceptions and ideologies relating to disability prevalent in the Church. The same negative and discriminatory perspectives are perpetuated in societies and foster the marginalisation and exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream social, political and economic structures of social

organisation. These negative attitudes transform into the discrimination of persons with disabilities, which discrimination is often exacerbated in crisis situations

Social exclusion in the context of disability: implications on the poverty-disability nexus

Generally, social exclusion is a process that involves the marginalisation, systematic disadvantaging and discrimination of certain groups of people from mainstream society on the basis of their disability, ethnicity, etc. (Tobias and Mukhopadhyay 2017:25). In the context of disability, social exclusion involves the marginalisation of persons with different categories of disabilities from the mainstream society to the extent that such persons are systematically disadvantaged on the basis of their disability (ibid). Research has established that in any given context, social exclusion through marginalisation leads to poverty and deprivation (ibid). As such, social exclusion in the context of disability has the same effect. Ramachandran (2016:30) indicates that the relationship between social exclusion and poverty is such that poverty is seen as a consequence of social exclusion and social exclusion as a vulnerability factor leading to poverty. Research has also demonstrated that social exclusion confers disadvantage on certain groups and involves the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in society, whether in economic, social, cultural and political arenas (Ramachandran 2016:26). Tobias and Mukhopadhyay (2017:26) also stipulate that social exclusion is a complex phenomenon that is closely linked with the complexity of powerlessness that often results from inadequate social participation. Certainly, social exclusion in the context of disability becomes a form of disempowerment, particularly for persons with disabilities, especially considering the fact it inhibits their integration into the mainstream structures of society. Consequently, it is this lack of participation that disempowers persons with disabilities and renders them helpless as well as incompetent.

This development makes persons with diverse disabilities powerless and susceptible to the very extreme levels of the social and economic condition of poverty in all its multi-faceted dimensions. As such, the poverty among persons with disabilities in contemporary Southern African societies especially in Zimbabwe and Zambia is one element that is ultimately associated with their powerlessness, which powerlessness is the primary result of exclusionary tendencies. When considering the relationship between poverty and disability, focus should be on the negative perspectives on disability since it is commonly acknowledged that such perspectives provide the foundation for the stigmatisation and discrimination of persons with disabilities (Nyamidzi and Mujaho 2016:78). In Southern Africa, the bulk of negative perspectives on disability which fuel the exclusion of such persons in society are rooted in the Church's faulty interpretation of Biblical texts on

disability. Consequently, this social exclusion becomes the primary mechanism that connects disability and poverty. It becomes the very mechanism that perpetuates this vicious and disruptive connection. Given that research on poverty has generally established that social exclusion leads to poverty through fostering the marginalisation of certain categories of people in society (Tobias and Mukhopadhyay 2017:26), it therefore follows that the nexus between poverty and disability in contemporary African societies is rooted in the exclusion of persons with disabilities from mainstream structures of the Church and society.

Accordingly, the persistence of negative perspectives and attitudes towards disability in any given context confers great disadvantage on the lives of persons with disability. This is evidenced in the context of the Church in Southern Africa which continues to view disability in negative and discriminatory ways which emanate primarily from its interpretation of biblical texts on disability. Such perspectives have the power to influence the exclusion of persons with disabilities from both the mainstream structures of the Church and society. In other words, negative perspectives on disability confer disadvantage on persons with disabilities in that they establish the limits to the inclusion of such persons within the mainstream structures of Church and broader society. In fact, negative perspectives on disability establish the limits to the Church's social ideology of inclusion in the context of disability, resulting in the alienation of persons with disabilities from its mainstream structures. Therefore, negative perspectives on disability in the Church occasion the exclusion of persons with disabilities, which exclusion leads to marginalisation and discrimination of such persons in the broader society exposing them to serious conditions like poverty. In his study on disability in Southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, Machingura (2019:212) attests that historically, persons with disabilities have experienced discrimination and poverty as a result of societal interpretation of scriptures on disability, which interpretation is often championed by the Church. As such, the institution of the Church has nurtured and perpetuated the nexus between poverty and disability prevailing in most Southern African countries through its interpretation of scriptures on disability.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the increased risk of vulnerability and poverty among persons with disabilities in Southern Africa

Having established how social exclusion in the context of disability leads to poverty, this chapter advances the argument that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of vulnerability and poverty among persons with disabilities. Generally, crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic magnify and exacerbate the challenges of all vulnerable groups in society including the constituency of persons with disabilities (UN 2020a:2). Peek and Stough (2010:1262,1268) argue that from a social vulnerability

paradigm, persons with disabilities are most at risk during and in the aftermath of a disaster and have concluded that disasters often lead to unfolding adverse effects on the lives of persons with disabilities since such persons already face many developmental challenges. Respectively, the COVID-19 pandemic and its related socio-economic consequences is exacerbating the challenges of persons with disabilities (UNPRPD and IDA 2020:2). The negative perspectives that foster the exclusion of persons with disabilities are still in effect during the coronavirus crisis. For instance, in the context of Zimbabwe, the available evidence strongly indicates that persons with disabilities continue to be largely ignored in the responses to the pandemic. As Rambiyawo (2020) indicates, disability organisations such as the Centre for Disability and Development, Deaf Zimbabwe Trust and the Zimbabwe National League for the Blind have expressed concern over the unprecedented social exclusion of persons with disabilities in the government's Covid-19 response process and have advocated for a response that is not homogeneous, but disability category specific, corresponding directly to identified COVID-19 disability needs.

Generally, the response of many African countries is feeding on pre-existing social and economic inequalities associated with disability and threatens to exacerbate them (UN 2020a:4). Certainly, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa are not an exception. Generally, as Peek and Stough (2010:1264) indicate, the stigma and institutional exclusion often experienced by persons with disabilities can further threaten their physical health in the context of a crisis. In this respect, many persons with disabilities in the Southern African context are at a high risk during the Covid-19 era and their risk is twofold. First, persons with disabilities are at a high risk of contracting the coronavirus since gathering information can be more difficult for such persons in the context of a crisis as information changes so quickly, and yet that information is not made readily available in formats accessible, especially to persons with hearing, vision and even cognitive disabilities (UN 2020a:5). This the situation prevailing in the context of Zimbabwe to the extent that organisations representing persons with disabilities have sued the government and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) demanding accessible formats on all COVID-19 related information.

Respectively, in the context of Zambia and South Africa such organisations have emphasized the need for all other official communications by government ministries involved in the fight against coronavirus to be produced in formats which are accessible to persons with disabilities, through the use of Braille pamphlets, and audio versions, large print versions, and digital readable-text versions of official communications (IDA 2020). The unavailability of COVID-19 related information in formats accessible to persons with disabilities increases their vulnerability to the coronavirus, which vulnerability emanates precisely from their lack of sufficient information relating to the pandemic. Accordingly, most of the methods that have been recommended for preventing the spread of the pandemic prove

to be ineffective in the context of disability as persons with certain types of disabilities struggle to adopt to social distancing and washing of hands regularly (WHO 2020:2). Such approaches are not always feasible for persons with certain types of disabilities and yet there are no specific initiatives that take into account such limitations and realities in the context of disability. Therefore, it is in this respect that the IDA (2020) has recommended that African countries, including Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa come up with holistic and integrated disability inclusive Covid-19 responses that meet the needs of people with disabilities across the entire COVID-19 prevention, treatment, mitigation, care and support spectrum (Rambiyawo 2020).

Secondly, persons with disabilities are at high risk of falling into extreme poverty during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Tragically, the pandemic has plunged the world economy into recession and risks reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty (UN 2020b:8–9). The pandemic threatens to derail the progress that has been made with regards to addressing the challenge of poverty among persons with disabilities in Southern Africa. The relationship between poverty and disability has been evident in a number of studies conducted around the world, especially in developing countries including Zambia and Zimbabwe (Mitra et al. 2011). This chapter contends that in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa persons with disabilities belong to the vulnerable populations that are at a high risk of falling into abject poverty as a result of the pandemic. This argument is not far-fetched because persons with disabilities continue being excluded and their perspective is barely being included in the response to the pandemic. Writing in the context of South Africa, Trani et al. (2020:2) highlight that, persons with disabilities face high risks of poverty and their inclusion in humanitarian interventions and development policies remains elusive. As such, the pandemic threatens to exacerbate the levels of poverty experienced by persons with disabilities in South Africa especially considering that such persons with disabilities in South Africa have been disproportionately represented amongst the poor and many of them live in circumstances of poverty (Graham et al. 2013: 325).

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the formal and informal economies (UNPRPD and IDA 2020: 2) and Southern African countries have not been spared especially considering the fact that the economies of countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia have been fragile for a very long time. For instance, Paul et al. (2021:2) indicate that the economic consequences of pandemic have been felt most strongly by persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in Zambia and they argue that the pandemic has indeed exacerbated the poverty levels in the country. Respectively, Darren Sharpe (2021:15) et al. indicate that the high level of poverty in Zambia was already one of the major problems prior to the pandemic, especially for unemployed youth and people with disabilities. As such, the pandemic threatens to exacerbate this problem by increasing the risk of vulnerability and poverty among persons with disabilities. Certainly, the

COVID-19 shock has further aggravated the poverty and inequality situation in Zambia, whose economy has been increasingly fragile over the years (Paul et al. 2021:18). In the context of Zimbabwe, persons with disabilities are also among those worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown as many of them are unemployed with no stable income (Masenyama 2020).

Therefore, in the Southern African context, the pandemic is taking a heavy toll not only on the health of all people, but also on people's ability to earn a living, to feed themselves and their families. The pandemic has caused very serious human and economic devastation such that persons with disability are enduring great hardships. For instance, the majority of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa survive on informal trading and most of them have been unproductive and continue to be unproductive until the lockdown measures are relaxed, a development that is largely devastating to their economic well-being. Consequently, the COVID-19 has become a food security issue in these countries as most persons with disabilities are food insecure since their livelihoods are informal and thus affected by the lock down measures (IDA 2020). This has impacted negatively on the financial situation of persons with disabilities such that if nothing is done to assist them their poverty will inevitably rise to extreme levels. As such, the pandemic is posing very serious challenges in terms of income security for persons with disabilities (UNPRPD and IDA 2020: 2), which financial challenges are likely to worsen even in the aftermath of the pandemic.

According to Peek and Stough (2010:1261), disaster risk is socially distributed in ways that reflect pre-existing inequalities in that some groups are more vulnerable and prone to economic loss in the wake of different hazards. It is quite unfortunate that this is exactly the pattern witnessed in the context of disability during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, as has been indicated before, the response to the pandemic is feeding into pre-existing social and economic inequalities associated with disability and threatens to exacerbate them (UN 2020a:4). In the Southern African context, the pandemic has exposed a climate of exclusion and inequality in the context of disability, which often characterises most African societies in normal times. For instance, the government of Zimbabwe announced a ZWL600 million financial package to assist vulnerable households during the lockdown but it is unclear whether persons with disabilities are beneficiaries of this programme (ZimRights 2020:13). Thus, it is apparent from the government of Zimbabwe's response to the pandemic that there is no specific package to cater for persons with disabilities (Masenyama 2020). The absence of a disability specific financial package attests to the exclusion of persons with disabilities in the government's response strategy.

This is a disturbing development especially considering that the pandemic is surely affecting persons with disabilities more significantly than the rest of the population in Southern African context. Consequently, persons with

disabilities have undoubtedly become a more vulnerable group within a vulnerable population, especially considering that they are already excluded and are subjected to very serious social suffering which is largely felt in relation to poverty. Generally, persons with disabilities are rarely considered in the larger scheme of things even though such persons constitute a significant part of the population (Osukwu 2019:62). Similarly, this pattern is witnessed in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa where persons with disabilities are being excluded particularly in measures to mitigate the devastating economic impact of the pandemic on the population. It is also unfortunate that the pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by persons with disabilities as the barriers to their inclusion have become even more complex and heightened. It has become extremely difficult for persons with disabilities to navigate many community, institutional and attitudinal barriers, which barriers are even challenging for them in the absence of any pandemic or crisis (UN 2020a:9). Such persons are certainly struggling against negative and discriminatory perspectives on disability which are perpetuating their exclusion in the wake of the pandemic. In essence, the pandemic is negatively impacting on the health and economic well-being of persons with disabilities resulting in the increased risk of vulnerability and poverty among such persons, not only in the context of Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa but across the African continent as well.

Positive perspectives on disability and the social ideology of inclusion: lessons from the old testament for Churches in Southern Africa

Historically, the Church's interpretation of biblical texts on disability has tended to focus on the negative and discriminatory perspectives on disability, which perspectives have always led to the exclusion of persons with disabilities. Fundamentally, this has created the impression that positive perspectives on disability are absent in the Bible, and yet the reality is that texts such as Job 29:15, Leviticus 19:14 and Deuteronomy 27:18 exist and clearly articulate positive perspectives on disability that contest the stigmatisation and marginalisation of persons with disabilities. Certainly, in their original context, such texts commanded the Israelites to treat persons with disabilities as one would treat those without (Vengeyi 2016:135). The positive perspectives captured in texts such as Leviticus 19:14 and Deuteronomy 27:18 were designed to respond to prevailing discriminatory social attitudes that led to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in the ancient society (Frick 2003:229; Olyan 2008:1; Vengeyi 2016:160). In most cases, such exhortations acted as mechanisms for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The objective of such measures was that of protecting persons with disability against stigmatisation and discrimination which would ultimately culminate into their exclusion from the main structures of social organisation.

This exclusion was a threat to the concept of social justice in that it fostered the stigmatisation and discrimination of persons with disabilities violating the maintenance of social solidarity in ancient Israel. As such, texts in the category of Leviticus 19:14 offered an alternate perspective on disability. This alternate perspective protected persons with disability against discrimination and indeed fostered their inclusion into the mainstream structures of society. The logic of this line of inquiry leads to the conclusion that the exhortations expressed in the texts were social protection measures that were meant to eliminate or mitigate against the exclusion of persons with disabilities which resulted from the actions that the texts strongly speak against. The behaviours that are discouraged in such texts had the potential of inhibiting the participation of persons with disabilities in the mainstream structures of society. As a result, persons with disabilities were excluded on the basis of such negative perspectives and this increased their risks of falling into poverty.

Having indicated that positive perspectives on disability exist in the Bible, this chapter argues that there has to be a paradigm shift in the way the Church in the Southern African context has addressed and dealt with the issue of disability. As Ndlovu (2016:36) rightly puts it, there is need to rethink all religious attitudes, doctrines and practises emanating from Christianity that militate against full participation of the persons with disabilities in the mainstream activities of society. Given that in the past the Church has nurtured negative perspectives through its faulty interpretation of biblical texts on disability, it now has the mandate to cultivate positive perspectives through the same process. Writing in the context of South Africa, Masango (2019:4–6) argues that there is need for a theology that will help us to reconstruct a full understanding that persons with disabilities are also created in the image and likeness of God, and thus they can and must fully participate in society. Machingura (2019:220) argues that the theological engagement of the Bible must help challenge our theological understandings and misunderstandings that promote the exclusion of persons with disabilities. This calls for the development of a theology of disability in the context of Churches in Southern Africa, which theology must be informed by a liberative reading on Biblical texts on disability, particularly texts that express positive perspectives on disability. This theology of disability should seek to liberate persons with disabilities from all oppressive structures and systems that contribute to their material deprivation and discrimination (Ndlovu 2016:37).

The Church's mission towards persons with disabilities should not necessarily be limited to healing and charity, but their empowerment and integration into our societies (Satterlee 2010:37; Togarasei 2019:136,138). Togarasei (2019:138,147) further argues that the mission of the Church in the context of disability, must not only be limited to what happens in the Church, but to go as far as advocating for the welfare of persons with disabilities in society and ensure that such persons are included and participate fully in all activities of

their societies. This is exactly what the Church in the Southern African context and across the African continent needs do during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. To achieve this, the Church has to seriously endorse all positive perspectives on disability in the Bible that can be appropriated in the creation of a more just and inclusive society (Ndlovu 2016:36,37). Respectively, Churches in Southern Africa must engage such positive perspectives on disability to counter to prevailing negative and discriminatory social attitudes towards disability that are subjecting persons with disabilities to various forms of stigmatisation and marginalisation exposing them to extreme levels of poverty during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing the extent of exclusion in the context of disability (UN 2002a:2). As such, it is imperative that the Church, as an institution that commands moral authority, must ensure that persons with disabilities are not isolated and ignored in any initiatives. The Church has to champion the inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Swinton (2012:172) argues that the idea of including persons with disabilities does not go far enough in overcoming the alienation, stigmatisation and exclusion of such persons and he thus advocates that the Church should move from ideas of inclusion to the practices of belonging. The thinking of belonging should therefore be at the centre of the Church's theology of disability to ensure that persons with disabilities are accepted for who they are without having to conform to some kind of faulty relational social and legal norms that are defined society (Swinton 2012:184). This thinking of belonging in the context of disability must therefore inform the Church's response during the period of the pandemic. The integration of persons with disabilities should find its roots in the Church's interpretation of Biblical texts on disability, which interpretation should be inclined towards exploiting the positive perspectives that foster a social ideology of inclusion and belonging in the context of disability. The Church in Southern Africa must provide an alternative social ideology of inclusion which contests the stigmatisation of persons with disabilities. This social ideology of inclusion must be engaged as a mechanism to protect persons with disabilities against stigmatisation and discrimination which consequently leads to their exclusion from the mainstream society. Respectively, this social ideology of inclusion based on the liberative interpretation on Biblical texts on disability can be the primary mechanism that the Church can use to break the connection between disability, vulnerability and poverty in Southern Africa especially considering that historically this connection is nurtured by negative perspectives on disability which emanate primarily from a poor reading of the Bible.

Conclusion

This chapter has established that COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of people's lives, but its impacts are especially acute for persons with

disabilities. Historically, the Church in Africa has contributed largely to the continuum of attitudes towards disability which are predominantly negative and discriminatory through its interpretation of biblical texts on disability. Consequently, such negative attitudes have fostered the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream structures of the Church and broader society. This exclusion has nurtured the correlation between disability, vulnerability and poverty in the Southern African context. The chapter has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of vulnerability and poverty among persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. In these countries, persons with disabilities are subjected to very serious social suffering, during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and their suffering is heavily felt in relation to the social condition of poverty. The chapter has argued that the positive perspectives on disability in the Bible can be quite resourceful for the Church in Africa in its fight against the systematic and institutionalised marginalisation of persons with disabilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has created an opportunity for the Church to revise its approach to biblical texts on disability and embrace a more liberative reading of these texts to enforce positive social attitudes towards disability. In essence, this inevitably leads to the inclusion of persons with disability in the mainstream structures of the Church and the broader Southern African societies during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Essentially, such positive perspectives emanating from the Church will reduce the chances of persons with disabilities being seriously disadvantaged, socially and economically thereby breaking the causal intersection between poverty and disability in many African countries including Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa.

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