



RELEVANCE OF THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS IN DISABILITY DISCOURSE AND ADVOCACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

The concern of this paper hinges on the fact that over the years, there have been the sensitizations of theological institutions in Africa towards disability discourse. It was observed that theological education hardly engage in disability discourse. Hence, the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), a Project of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has attempted to integrate disability studies in the curriculum of theological institutions as a starting point in equipping students towards meeting the spiritual needs of people with special needs. Therefore, this paper takes a cursory look at perceptions and attitude of people towards people with disabilities in the Nigerian society. It explores the nature and purpose of theological education, and highlights the journey of EDAN on the integration of disability studies in theological institutions. Finally, it itemizes ways by which theological institutions could engage in disability discourse and advocacy.

Keywords: advocacy, disability discourse, EDAN, people with special needs, theological education

1. Introduction

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, significant emphasis has not been laid on disability discourse and advocacy related issues by theological institutions. A cursory look at the curriculum of theological institutions reveals a drought of courses on disability studies or courses that relates to Persons with disability. Although the Nigerian Baptist

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Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso and a few other theological institutions have few courses related to this subject, taught occasionally to students who are interested in it. It is not out of place to say that the inclusion of disability and disability advocacy related courses in the curriculum of theological institutions should be an intentional activity, which is monitored to its utmost intent.

Consequently, stakeholders in the field of theological education have recently embarked on a rethinking mission aimed at providing an all-encompassing theological education curriculum, which involves efforts towards meeting the spiritual needs of persons with disability. This is considered as a total ministerial formation programme. The need to minister to the disabled has not been given due attention, both at theological education and the level of church ministry. The failure in doing this could be attributed to varying motifs, which may include: cultural prejudices, exclusive or negative theological perspectives, social stigmas and taboos. These factors have often led to the exclusion and isolation of people with disabilities (PWDs).

In the event that PWDs suffer neglect or being isolated by friends, peers, family members, and members of the community they belong, or they are denied, discriminated and excluded from active involvement in spiritual, social and developmental life of the Church or accused as being cursed by God; the pertinent question that arises from this experience is *“why do theological institutions and Christian ministers remain silent?”* It is crystal clear that there is no unity in churches without acknowledging the gifts of PWDs present in those assemblies. This is resultant from the fact that all people with or without disabilities are created in the image of God and called to an inclusive community life in which they are empowered to use their gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. This inclusive community of all, the people of God, is holy in Christ irrespective of the physical state of their bodies and level of psychological functioning (Longchar, 2007).

The concept of theological education is described basically as an effort towards the development of people through a formal course of study. The development of people is done, through equipping individuals with biblical knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes needed for Christian ministry to God’s people and entire creation. The formal course of study is operated through curricular activities (that is, the courses taught). Longchar (2007), the Joint Consultant of Ecumenical Theological Education for Asia and Pacific of WCC and CCA stated that the *“Ecumenical Disability Advocate Network (EDAN) has drawn the attention of all that without the inclusion of the gifts of persons with disabilities, we cannot talk about the unity of the church. It is often said that 10% of the world’s population have one form of deformity or the other”*.

When governments through special schools and other avenues, engage in disability issues and endeavour to reach out to people with disabilities, then theological

education and educators also need to deliberately engage meaningfully in ensuring that education given to their students include the ministry to people with disabilities (PWDs) whose needs are special and very much included in the task of the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 19-20; Mark. 16:15-18).

The education of persons in the discipline of theology, towards identifying and meeting the needs of PWDs is a worthy task for all theological institutions, theologians, pastors, Christian educators and educators generally. Therefore, this paper is essentially tasked with how theological institutions can meaningfully engage in disability discourse and advocacy for PWDs in Nigeria. In the context of this paper, *“disability discourse refers to disability studies, which connotes a general examination of the term ‘disability’ as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon”* It also emphasizes how disability is defined and represented in the Nigerian society. According to the Centre on Human Policy, Law and Disability Studies, disability studies have a diverse area of academic inquiry, which is both interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary because no singular academic discipline can place a claim on Disability studies. Rather, it is central to many overlapping disciplines informed by scholarship from theology, education, sociology, law, policy studies, cultural studies, philosophy, gender studies, communications and media studies, literature, political science and the arts (www.disabilitystudies.syr.edu/what/whatis.aspx). Advocacy is used in this paper to mean the support and encouragement theological institutions will give towards meeting the needs of PWDs as people whose needs are special and needs special attention.

The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reported that over one billion people or about 15 per cent of the world population live with some form of disability. About 10 per cent of children in Africa have one form of disability or the other. In Nigeria there are 19 million physically challenged persons (*The Punch*, June 18, 2013). World report on disability in 2014 also showed that there were about twenty two million Nigerians with one or different form of disability. The emergence of these reports reveals that a significant part of the world’s population live with disability and this calls for deep concern from theological institutions in Nigeria among other stakeholders, to be involved in reaching out to these persons with special needs especially those in their immediate environs such as those in Nigeria.

2. Perceptions and Attitude of People towards PWDs in the Nigerian Society

In some other parts of the world, persons with disability seldom receive attention and care from abled persons, most especially, if they are not knit by family ties. This phenomenon is compounded by the realization that persons with disability are treated

as second-class and object-of-charity or in certain cases, abandoned. In most or some places, they are subjected to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts by the abled-bodied majority. Society keeps them ignorant, neglected, abandoned and dependent by denying them access to formal education and employment opportunity (Longchar, 2007). They are viewed as ‘persons who are not visibly or physically whole or have a kind of deformity to be beneath or below the standard of a normal social crowd or setting (McCloughory and Wayne, 2002). They are sometimes regarded as “invalid” or “inadequate”. These categorized differences label disabled persons from what society understands as perfect” (Shrout, 2007). Consequently, the notion of rejection is created and acceptability of disabled persons becomes difficult to attain in the society.

As earlier noted, there are some cultural beliefs and practices which influence the attitudes and philosophy of life with respect to PWDs or the issue of disability. Historically, many African communities had superstitious as well as false beliefs about disabilities and PWDS. For example, disability was considered as an affliction, and a consequence from God as a result of bad action by the person(s) affected or the family members. A few plausible examples of bad actions are punishment for sin committed, taboos, telling lies, killing an innocent person, violation of restricted days, supernatural powers/evil curses and many more (Longchar, 2011).

Furthermore, within some ethnic groups and communities in Nigeria, it is generally believed that the person disability is either a curse from the gods or has been disabled through an act of witchcraft. In either case, the family with a disabled member is stigmatized. Okafor (2005) stated that *“some local ancient mythology has it that the disabled are social outcasts serving retribution for offences of their fore fathers.”* Specifically in Nigeria, the prevalent attitude of people towards PWDs is governed by stigmatization (Omouabi, 1989), just as certain social stigmas are associated with disability (Osukwu, 2010). This cascades into “vulnerability and marginalization” on the part of the person with disability. There is a dearth of an enabling environment and an institutional framework for PWDs persons to realize their full potentialities (Ojo, 2012).

According to Osukwu (2010) the situation is worst when it is a woman that has a disabled condition – the marginalization and prejudice is heightened. This is corroborated by The Nigeria Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Policy on Rehabilitation, 2013 in a document wherein it articulated the discrimination and marginalization against women with disability, making them experience double jeopardy, first as women and second, as women with disabilities. This, and other unfavourable perceptions and societal isolation of women living with disabilities make them have continued experience of setbacks as well as put them at greater risks in life and subject them to living with severe psychological problems and low self-esteem (Osukwu). In like manner, the same Policy on Rehabilitation

emphasizes that Nigerian children with disabilities have over the years suffered neglect owing to the fact that they are perceived, to be incapable, ill, a source of social misfit and a burden to their families and the society at large.

According to the Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN) Report (2004), PWDs are least cared for and they experience widespread discrimination as most families in Nigeria who have disabled persons as members are afraid of being ridiculed and laughed at by their neighbours and the public. Therefore, they keep the person with disability indoors and in isolation, (especially, people with physical expressions of disabilities). By such measures, the disabled person is prevented from participation in normal educational, economic, political and social activities (Akhidenor, 2007). Prevention from involvement in normal activities such as mentioned, makes them feel alienated, not equipped or enabled and are deprived of contributing to the society where they belong.

3. Nature and Purpose of Theological Education

Theological education is a part of the life and mission of churches in their respective situations. It equips men and women to participate in their church's evangelical drive, witness and service to people in the different contexts of the world. In other words, *"theological education is an intensive and structured preparation of men and women of the church for participation in the ministry of Christ in the world."* (Theological Education in North East Asia, report of the Seoul consultation, 1967)

Theological education can be seen from both broad and narrow perspectives. For instance, from a broad perspective, it is not restricted to professionals and specialized institutions, but it encompasses the totality of Christian community reflecting on its life together in worship and fellowship, on its missionary commitment in the world, and on those aspects of its Biblical and confessional heritage and tradition that guides it in all it does. In this broad perspective, theological education is central to the life of the whole Christian community (Ecumenical Responses To Theological Education in Africa, Asia, Near East South Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, 1976). From a narrow perspective, theological education is concerned with the preparation and continued training of professional leadership for churches.

A number of churches have established structures to enable this more formal education process take place (Ecumenical Responses To Theological Education in Africa, Asia, Near East South Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, 1976). Following the rise in lay leadership movements and the popularity of theological training by extension programmes implemented by many theological schools, irrespective of the cause or the result, the concept of theological education at all levels has shifted or has

broadened its operation from what was previously confined to professional or clerical training to the task of equipping the entirety of God's people for the work of ministry.

Oghenekevwe (2009) opined that theological education is an education that is God - centered and structured to meet the total needs of man namely: physical, and social, psychological and spiritual. Adetunji and Akinbobola (2012) added another dimension by describing theological education in both implicit and explicit terms. Implicitly, it is the process of preparing for a religious vocation as seen in the ministers of the 'good news' revealed in Christ Jesus. Explicitly - it is the process of providing God-called men and women with knowledge, skills, competence or usually desirable qualities of behaviour or character. These are provided by a formal course of study, instruction or training the school provided for such trainings and moulding of lives are called theological seminaries or theological colleges.

The underpinning purpose of theological education in theological institutions is holistically weaved around the fulfilment of the global vision of Christ's Great Commission. Specifically, *"The purpose of most theological institutions can be found in their vision/mission statements as well as aims/objectives. These can be found in their governing and administrative documents like catalogue and prospectus"* (Ayandokun and Enyioha, 2012), one of such examples is that of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS), Ogbomoso, Nigeria. Its purpose is clearly articulated as: *"an academic institution, providing high-quality theological education and professional training for God-called men and women to help meet the need for effective leadership in the work of churches, schools and the denomination not only in Nigeria but also in other parts of Africa."*

One out of the seven objectives is to equip people to fulfil the total mission of God for the World today (NBTS, Catalogue 2011-2015).

4. EDAN's Work on Disability Discourse and Advocacy in Theological Institutions

The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) is a Programme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on persons with disabilities. EDAN's is principally saddled with the task of advocating for the inclusion, participation and active involvement of persons with disabilities in spiritual, social, economic and structural life of the church in particular and the society in general. It is situated within the group which harnesses WCC work on marginalized groups which include Persons with Disabilities, Dalits, Indigenous people, the issue of racism and forced migration. EDAN was established after the WCC 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998 on the realization that WCC needed to ensure a sustainable structure for the continued work of disability concerns in the agenda of the church (Kabue, 2013). Among other focus of EDAN's activities and

operations is the introducing of disability discourse in churches and theological institutions.

According to Kabue (2013) the journey of EDAN on disability discourse in theological education began in 2004 with the first meeting of the deans of theological studies from five institutions jointly organized at Limuru Conference Center by EDAN and the St. Paul's University-Faculty of Theology. The aim of the meeting was to discuss how to initiate disability discourse in theological institutions, giving attention to awareness, advocacy and pastoral theology that is relevant to persons with disabilities. A four-day workshop organized in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2004 brought together representatives from: St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya; United Theological College of West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica; Stockholm School of Theology, Stockholm, Sweden; Asia Theological Seminary, Lungsod Quezon, Philippines and Lutheran Senior Seminary, Brazil.

Also in attendance were five EDAN representatives from Sweden, United States, Jamaica, Ghana and Kenya; representatives from The United States National Disability Committee along with three other independent theologians from the United States. A generic disability studies curriculum emerged from this consultation, which has been adapted for use in institutions globally as deemed appropriate. Those who attended the Limuru consultation promoted the curriculum in the institutions that they are associated with.

In 2007, work began with the Association of Theological Education Seminaries in South East Asia (ATESEA), and in 2008 with the Latin America Theological institutions Association and the South Pacific Associations of Theological Seminaries. Varied approaches were taken by the different associations in relation to the original draft curriculum and included adaptations, infusion with other disciplines and contextual insertions as necessary. Work with theological associations in Africa has progressed slowly. However the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in seeking to address the WCC work on ecumenical theological education is providing a conduit through which EDAN can work. That journey has taken the following steps:

- i. A 2010 workshop with the West Africa Association of Theological Institutions (WAATI) in Ghana. WAATI comprises of the Anglophone countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia.
- ii. In 2011 (at the NBTS Ogbomoso), August 2014 (at Institute of Churches and Society, Samonda, Ibadan, Oyo State) and 2015 (Catholic Institute for West Africa, Port Harcourt) similar workshops were held in Nigeria. Currently the outcomes of the workshops is being published in a book to be used as a resource materials among other EDAN books for the teaching of disability studies in

theological institutions in Nigeria and other WATTI institutions (Ishola-Esan, 2015).

- iii. In February 2012, the first workshop for the Association of Theological Education in East Africa (ATIEA) was organized in Nairobi.
- iv. In April 2012, French speaking West and Central Africa had their workshop in Nairobi with additional workshops in progress.
- v. In July 2013, work was initiated with the Association of Theological institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA) in Lusaka, Zambia, in July 2013 with plans for follow up work in 2014.

In addition to the above studies done in South Asia, Latin America and the Pacific, there is an engagement with the National Council of Churches in Korea, as well as associations in Myanmar and Indonesia. In all instances, the workshops begin a process followed by advocacy regarding the engagement of curriculums in the life of institutions. This journey was informed by the belief that long term impact in influencing the church, in providing space for the expression of persons with disabilities in its spiritual, social and development life, requires a multi-dimensional approach. First, it is necessary to ensure that the leadership of the church was engaged in discussing disability as a vital part of the witness and mission. Secondly, as the foundation for the continuation of this process, it was necessary to focus on the training of ministers. My focus here is the work with theological institutions and ministerial formation (Kabue, 2013). *“The most suitable foundation through which the churches could best be engaged in disability discourse is the introduction of Disability studies in Theological institutions”* (Kabue, 2013).

5. Theological Institutions, Disability Discourse and Advocacy for PWDs in Nigeria

There are several avenues through which theological institutions could engage in disability discourse and advocacy. EDAN has done the sensitization through the instances of disability discourse (curriculum) development frameworks for several theological institutions including those of Nigeria. This sets the ball rolling for proactive and pragmatic steps to be adopted for a sustained success of the work of EDAN.

Below are some recommendations:

1. Increasing knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes: Knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes are embedded in the curriculum contents, learning experiences and its successful implementation. Knowledge acquired by students during training in theological institutions should be increased beyond that which the curriculum contains and presents in the past and currently. This is to be done by the deliberate inclusion of disability discourse in the curricula of such training

programme. PWDs are part of the task of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-18). The Great Commission is a global mission covering all nations and all disciples thereby adhering to the total mission of God for the World.

Moreover, increasing knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes will demand a new way in teaching-learning process. Since the concerns on PWDs involve a multi-dimensional character, a disciplinary approach will not be sufficient to unravel the complexity in it. Engaging different disciplines will be more helpful. How do we study it? One may start collecting knowledge and information about PWDs with the help of a medical doctor and a social worker, make an analysis, raise the biblical and theological perspectives and conclude it with some reflection on concrete action. Provision should be made for direct exposure to the concrete situation and struggles of persons with disabilities. Case-studies involving PWDs in the teaching sessions and relevant reports and analysis of the problems will deepen learning (Longchar, 2007). The writer of this paper had engaged a case study (a PWD to assist in teaching –learning of disability discourse as a course in the one week minim ester teaching programme of the NBTS in January 2015. The outcome of such learning has been the deepest ever as evaluation reports were received from the students who offered the course as compared with those who took the course earlier.

2. Adopting a theology of inclusiveness: This contributes to Disability Studies and presents disability itself as part of a diversity and richness, which should be reflected in the disability discourse for an educational programme for PWDs (Kamba, 2013). Kamba (2013) citing Aubert's (1996) which expressed that in a theology of inclusiveness, a person who has a disability needs to be recognized as God's creation, as a person created to connect to all life in perfect harmony. Despite this, people with disabilities (PWDs) around the world still feel set apart, marginalized in relation to others (apparently able-bodied people). This means that, despite the efforts of the rights movement for people with disabilities, spearheaded by the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the life of the PWD continues to be marked by the experience of discrimination, prejudice and inequality.
3. Promoting positive attitudes toward disability: There is need to change the attitudes that prevent any sort of interaction with PWDs (Ajuwon and Sykes, 1988). Public enlightenment work in schools, churches, communities should begin the process of educating people in order to eradicate superstitions about causation of disabilities, and to modify the fears and myths about PWDs that create misunderstanding and inhibit normal interaction (Ajuwon, 2008). The process of promotion of changing attitudes is a worthy venture for theological

institutions. Furthermore, this will lead to an enhanced social acceptance and participation by both students in training and the PWDs themselves in schools, churches and society.

4. Enabling the theological community to do away with certain prejudices and misconceptions that have been infused by Christian traditions and interpretations that have been uncritically perpetuated. We have a notion that disability is something 'abnormal'. They are silently and in some case consciously marginalized in Christian theology. However, experience of disability is in no way a negligible experience that theological discourse can afford to ignore, because if it is ignored, it limits the opportunity for both reflection and presence. If theology is silent about disability, it poses barrier for people with disabilities to be partners in theological task of the believing community (Prabhakar, 2006).
5. Synergizing and partnering with Faith-based communities: Theological institutions in partnership with Faith - based communities and other church denominations affords an opportunity of a collaborative effort to responding to needs of PWDs in whatever measure could be helpful. Steps of advocacy could also include consistent attempts at sensitizing and creating awareness about PWDs in the communities and society at large. Specifically, theological education should also in the course of introducing disability discourse to her students educate them on advocacy awareness as they go to lead God's people (in churches or other contexts) as advocates and should led the followers to committed to advocacy services not only on behalf of their fellow members but other members of the society who have disabilities (Valdez, 2014).
6. Making the infrastructures of theological colleges and seminaries more disability friendly'. For example, providing a ramp at the entrance of the building would create a context where people who use wheel chair enter and interact with others (Longchar, 2007 citing Prabhakar, 2006). This step has been taken by NBTS, after the workshop organised by EDAN in 2011 held at the NBTS, Ogbomoso, Nigeria.
7. Promoting leadership inclusiveness: Theological institutions should advocate for and teach, and exemplify leadership inclusiveness as against leadership of exclusion both in churches and organizations that are linked to theological institutions.

6. Conclusion

The crux of this paper elucidates that education in whatever context should result in transformation, positive change on humanity and the society. If theological education is

to play a transformative role in communities and fulfil their original purpose, then an all-inclusive educational approach which takes into cognizance the education of their students on reaching out to PWDs and PWDs being involved in the training process of persons who engage in the responsibility of the Great Commission should be top-notch such that, their graduates will be sensitized towards the ministry to people with special needs just as governments and other stakeholders continually be involved and concerned in disability discourse and advocacy.

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