The Language of Disability

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by Martin Hobgen

In recent years people have come to recognise that the language used to discuss issues of race and gender is very important when addressing discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. The same applies to language of disability, since it powerfully affects how people with disabilities see themselves, and how they are seen by others. Sadly the church has lagged behind wider society in addressing issues of disability.[1]

As a wheelchair user who is married, well educated and ordained, I am used to two common ways of people addressing or referring to me. I not infrequently get mistaken for other people, along the lines of 'You're Joe aren't you?'—probably arising from the person in question knowing one wheelchair user and assuming I must be their friend/acquaintance. This confusion might indicate that for them the wheelchair is the significant identifier of a disabled person's identity. Sometimes I find myself being talked about in the third person, where someone addresses my companion (often my wife) with 'Did he enjoy…?' referring to some activity or event I have attended or participated in. Recently, while walking through a riverside park, deep in conversation with my wife and two friends, a lady interrupted us, gesticulated in my direction and asked 'Is that Joe?' almost as if I wasn't even present. We were left so stunned by this blatant objectification that we said 'No!' in unison and continued our walk.

There are myriad terms that have been, and are, used to define what is meant by disability. Although there is no clear agreement on contemporary use there is general agreement that many traditional terms are no longer acceptable. Such unacceptable terms include, but are not limited to, 'handicapped', 'spastic', 'cripple', 'dumb' and 'invalid'. Broad generalisations such as 'the disabled' which are considered pejorative should also be avoided, as should language such as 'victim', 'sufferer' and describing wheelchair users as 'confined to a wheelchair'.[2] Although apparently a negative term, 'impairment' is widely used to refer to the physical, emotional or mental conditions which give rise to a disabled person's experience of being different and disabled by society.

Debate continues about the use of 'disabled person' *versus* 'person with disabilities' and no consensus has been reached. Within a social model of disability the latter term is rejected because it infers that the disability is attached to the person and not a result of societal discrimination,[3] although there are some in favour of this form of language.[4] Others suggest that the debate about language and its impact is more important than the outcome.[5] Generally there is agreement that references should be as accurate as possible, such as 'wheelchair user' rather than 'physically disabled'. The term 'impairment' is used within a social model to specify the physical or mental attributes of an individual that give rise to social attitudes that cause 'disability'.

One group of people agreed on language usage is the Deaf community. Someone who has a hearing impairment is referred to as 'Deaf' (with capital D) to reflect the cultural context of Deaf society. Most Deaf people refuse to see themselves as disabled, reflecting their view that Deaf society, with its own languages and culture, is a valid minority linguistic group within wider society. It should be noted that many people who loose significant levels of hearing because of age are not included within the Deaf community and usually do not identify themselves as disabled, reminding us that our concern should be broader than those who are easily identified as disabled.

The term 'able bodied' is widely used to refer to anyone without an evident impairment. Because this term creates implicit assumptions about normality (when referring to people who do not experience disability) the

term 'non-disabled' has been coined. Another term that has gained currency recently is 'abled', reflecting how society's attitudes and prejudices enable those without impairments, while disabling those with impairments.

Some of the language that creates barriers between disabled and non-disabled people within our church communities is unconscious.[6] In churches the invitation 'please stand' to sing, or to signify a response to God, excludes those who would like to stand but are unable to, or have sensed God speak to them but cannot signify this by standing up. The invitation 'please stand if you are able to' is far more inclusive and implicitly allows those who can stand but tire easily, to sit when they desire. When inviting people to signify a response to God an invite to raise a hand or to look at the speaker would be far more inclusive.

Language that divides or unites

The debate about 'disability language' must not be confined simply to language that directly defines disability. Language that is used to define or describe the context for understanding and addressing issues of disability is a powerful way to shape understanding and action.

One such debate is around the understanding of 'inclusion' or 'integration', which can be helpfully illustrated by the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics.

The Paralympics is an example of the integration of disabled people into world class sport. A completely separate and parallel Olympic games is set up for disabled people, who, while competing at an extremely high level, are separated from the mainstream Games. For full inclusion to occur, disabled people need to be free to compete alongside non-disabled people—if not in the same races and events, then at least in a smoothly integrated event. To some extent at London 2012 this did happen, with some disabled athletes competing in the July Olympic Games and later in the Paralympics.

The move from exclusion to integration and then full inclusion can be hindered or assisted by the language used in the media, by politicians, business leaders and others whose voices are listened to by the majority non-disabled general public. Such language can be categorised as overtly negative, overtly heroic, or acceptance.

Negative. In our current economic crisis much emphasis has been placed on reducing the number of people on state benefits. A recent report by Scope, the disability charity previously known as the Spastic Society, has shown that disabled people have become a focus of this debate. No doubt the abuse of disability benefits exists, but disabled people as a whole have been portrayed negatively by politicians and many in the media.[7] The frequent image of disabled people who suffer or are afflicted by their impairment strengthens the negative image of disability. Wheelchair users are frequently understood as being 'confined/restricted to a wheelchair', rather than as using a wheelchair to provide them with the means of living fulfilled lives. Within the medical profession, disabled people have for too long been seen as patients who need to be made well or made normal, or who are described by their medical condition and therefore objectified. When a disabled person cannot be healed or normalised, s/he may be assessed as living a worthless life.

Heroic. At the other end of the scale some disabled people are held up as courageous heroes for overcoming their disability to lead 'normal' lives. Dame Tanni Grey Thompson is often described in heroic terms and as being of great courage for overcoming her disability to take part successfully in several Paralympics. While there is an element of truth to this, she has simply faced the same challenges as other non-disabled athletes competing at a similar world-class level, but in a different way.

Acceptance. One of the biggest shifts in the language of disability in the past 20 years has been the change in whose voices have been heard. Historically non-disabled people, mostly in the medical and caring professions, have been the authoritative voices on all matters concerning disabled people. Through their own strand of the civil rights movement disabled people have increasingly found their voices and made their views known on matters that affect them.[8] Having found their voice, there is a greater possibility that disabled people will be accepted not as victims or heroes but as equal participants in our increasingly diverse society.[9]

As a wheelchair user I am sometimes challenged when I say that 'I walk to the shops', by people who insist that

I should say 'I wheel to the shops'. While the latter is technically correct, it is an example of language that divides disabled and non-disabled people. In the same way a blind colleague will say 'I see what you mean' rather than avoiding the verb 'to see'. I will use specific language at other times, such as asking 'for a push' when I need assistance with slopes or distance. Where possible, language that unites disabled and non-disabled people should be used, while specific language relating to impairment and its effects, should be used when it is necessary for clarity in specific situations.

While language is very important we must remember that tone of voice, body language etc may speak more loudly than the words we use. Actions that embrace disabled people, and the change of attitudes are vital in communicating acceptance to those against whom wider society often discriminates, and the church has historically excluded or patronised.

There is a risk that once the church has understood the importance of the language used to understand disability (as it has begun to do with respect to race and gender), that nothing more will happen. Another inadequate alternatively is that the church could make all sorts of practical changes to enable disabled people to attend, without altering the language and accompanying attitudes.

Although language is an important element of breaking down the 'them/us' divide between disabled and non-disabled people, full inclusion in all areas of church life will only be achieved when disabled people are seen and treated as fellow sons and daughters of Christ.

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Notes to text

1.C. J. Kudlick, *Disability history: why we need another 'other'*, in *The American Historical Review*, 2003, **108**(3), 763-793.

2. C. Barnes, *Disability, cultural representation and language,* in *Critical Public Health*, 2003, **6**(2), 9-20.

3. Barnes, p 17.

4. C. D. Fernald, *When in London…: Differences in disability language preferences among English-speaking countries,* in *Mental Retardation*, 1995, **33**(2), 99-103.

5. M. Bérubé, Term paper. *Profession*, 2010(1), 112-116; P. Kuppers, Introduction. *Profession*, 2010(1),

6. C. A. Satterlee, '*The eye made blind by sin',* in *Liturgy*, 2009, **25**(2), 33-41.

7. K. Garthwaite, '*The language of shirkers and scroungers?'* in *Disability & Society*, 2011, **26**(3), 369-372.

8. N. L. Eiesland, *The disabled God : towards a liberatory theology of disability*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.

9. For example, the 17/6/2014 BBC Radio 4 Today programme and article on the best way to support disabled people, whether in small community locations or larger residential accommodation, included the voices of disabled residents in the debate as well as the non-disabled leader of SCOPE, a charity supporting those with cerebral palsy.

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