

Theology of Disability in the Local Church From Compassion to Participation as Imago Dei

Monika Sibagariang
Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The Christian Church in Indonesia often faces challenges in fully including people with disabilities – both in worship, ministry, and faith communities. This article aims to develop a theological framework for disability that moves from a paradigm of mercy to a paradigm of active participation, with the conceptual foundation that all human beings – including people with disabilities – are imago Dei (the image of God). Using a practical-contextual theology approach, this research examines the local church context in Indonesia, analyzes biblical literature and Christian theological traditions, and examines field studies on inclusion in worship and ministry for congregations with disabilities. The results of the study indicate that in many church communities, people with disabilities are still treated merely as objects of mercy or altruistic service, rather than as subjects of faith with equal rights and responsibilities. This is rooted in the paradigm of normalism and the social stigma against “disability.” Through biblical reading (including stories of Jesus involving people with disabilities) and theological reflection on the imago Dei, this article asserts that people with disabilities must be seen as full participants in worship, church life, and missionary service. The proposed theological framework consists of three main components: recognition of dignity, active participation, and community transformation. First, the recognition of dignity means that people with disabilities possess spiritual dignity and identity in Christ that is not diminished by physical or mental conditions. Second, active participation requires changes in church structures, liturgy, and ministries so that inclusivity becomes real—not merely symbolic. Third, community transformation focuses on renewing congregational culture to truly embrace diversity as part of the body of Christ. These findings confirm that disability theology is not merely a social or pastoral theme, but an integral part of Christian theology that reflects the reality of salvation and an inclusive community of faith. Thus, the local church in Indonesia is invited to reject passive compassion and replace it with a theological and practical commitment to true inclusion. This article contributes to the development of a practical theology oriented toward justice, participation, and human dignity in diverse ecclesial contexts.



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Corresponding Author

Monika Sibagariang
Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, Indonesia
Email : monika@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The issue of disability is a social and theological challenge that is increasingly receiving attention in modern church life. In many local churches in Indonesia, people with disabilities are often viewed as a group in need of compassion or recipients of

charitable services, rather than as an integral part of the body of Christ with equal rights and responsibilities in church life. This paradigm reflects a legacy of long-standing theology that tends to separate "normal" and "disabled," resulting in subtle but real exclusions in church worship practices, leadership, and ministry. In the context of Christian theology, all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), without exception. This idea should be the foundation for equal relationships among all human beings. However, in practice, the church often fails to translate this principle into the lives of its communities. People with disabilities are often treated as "objects of loving service" rather than "subjects of faith." This situation reveals a gap between doctrinally recognized theology and the pastoral reality that exists within the local church. On the other hand, the emergence of disability theology as a new field of study in contemporary theology – as developed by theologians such as Nancy Eiesland (*The Disabled God*, 1994), John Swinton, and Amos Yong – offers a more inclusive paradigm. They assert that the body of a person with a disability is not a symbol of deficiency, but rather another form of God's presence, sharing in human suffering. In the risen Christ with His wounds, disability finds sacred and existential meaning: wounds are no longer a disgrace, but a sign of divine solidarity. The Indonesian context itself exhibits unique dynamics. Local churches often live in societies that still view disability medically and socially, rather than theologically. Consequently, the participation of people with disabilities in liturgy, music ministry, education, or church leadership remains limited. This highlights the need for a renewal of theological and pastoral paradigms to enable the church to truly become a community that practices true inclusivity. This research seeks to answer a fundamental question: How can a theology of disability transform the way the church views and engages with people with disabilities – from objects of compassion to subjects of participation as *imago Dei*? To answer this, this article uses a practical theology approach and contextual reflection on the experiences of local churches in Indonesia. By combining biblical analysis, theological reflection, and observations of church practices, this research seeks to build a more contextual, ethical, and transformative framework for theology of disability. Thus, this article is not merely an academic discourse, but also a pastoral call for the church in Indonesia to renew its perspective on disability. The church is called not only to serve but also to learn from people with disabilities – because through them, the church can come to know the face of God present in the diversity of human bodies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a practical theology approach with a contextual reflection method, which seeks to connect the real-life experiences of people with disabilities in the local church with theological principles derived from Scripture, church tradition, and contemporary critical reflection. This approach was chosen because disability issues are not only related to doctrine but also to church practice and community culture. Methodologically, this research follows a pastoral-practical reflection model consisting of four stages as adapted from the pastoral cycle (see Holland & Henriot, 1983), namely: Involvement – researchers conducted participant observation in several local churches in Indonesia (especially in urban and semi-urban areas) to identify the extent

to which the participation of people with disabilities was accommodated in church liturgy and services. Social Analysis – analyzes the social, cultural, and theological factors underlying the exclusion of people with disabilities in the church context. This analysis involves data from informal interviews with church ministers, pastors, and several members of the congregation with disabilities. Theological Reflection – examines in depth the biblical basis of the creation of man as *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26-27), Jesus' ministry to those considered "disabled," and the meaning of suffering in light of the cross of Christ. Pastoral Response (pastoral action) – formulating an inclusive church model that emphasizes participation, empowerment, and reconciliation of the body of Christ as a community that welcomes every person. This type of research is qualitative-descriptive, collecting data through non-participant observation, open-ended interviews, and literature review of theological journals, academic books, and church documents. Data analysis was conducted through hermeneutic theological reflection, interpreting the congregation's experiences in light of Christian faith. The research focuses on local church communities in Indonesia that have members or ministries for people with disabilities, both in Protestant and Catholic contexts. The primary unit of analysis is how the church interprets the presence of people with disabilities within its congregational structure, liturgy, and spirituality. The validity of theological reflection is strengthened by triangulation of sources (combining the results of observations, interviews, and academic literature) as well as hermeneutic dialogue between the Indonesian church context and global literature on disability theology (Eiesland, Yong, Swinton, Reynolds, and others). This reflective approach allows research not to stop at conceptual critique, but also to produce a practical transformation, namely the idea of a church that affirms all human beings – including people with disabilities – as equal and valuable reflections of God.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Church's Compassion and Paternalism Towards Disabilities

Observations and interviews show that most churches in Indonesia still practice a charity-based approach toward people with disabilities. This takes various forms, ranging from community service activities and aid provision to pastoral visits. While well-intentioned, this approach often positions people with disabilities as objects of kindness, rather than as active participants in the body of Christ. This paradigm stems from outdated theological views that associate disability with suffering, sin, or tests of faith. In certain contexts, biblical texts such as the account of the healing of the blind man (John 9:1-7) are interpreted narrowly, as if physical healing were a prerequisite for spiritual restoration. As a result, many people with disabilities feel symbolically excluded, even though they are socially accepted.

New Paradigm: Participation as *Imago Dei*

Through theological reflection, it was discovered that the strongest foundation for disability theology is the understanding of the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26-27), that every human being, without exception, is created in the image and likeness of God. This concept carries the theological implication that human worth and dignity are not determined by physical condition, cognitive abilities, or social function, but by their

relationship with God

In the light of Christology, Jesus Christ reveals God present in weakness and suffering. Christ's resurrected body remains wounded, signifying that divine perfection does not erase human imperfection, but rather redeems and glorifies it. Thus, the church is called not to eliminate differences but to embrace them as part of the diversity of Christ's body.

The Church as an Inclusive Community

Field research shows that several local churches have begun developing inclusive programs, such as involving people with disabilities in choirs, multimedia services, and prayer groups. While small in scale, these initiatives demonstrate a shift in awareness that people with disabilities are not simply recipients of love, but partners in ministry. Within the theological framework of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), each member of the body has a unique and irreplaceable function. When one part suffers, all share. Thus, people with disabilities are not a burden on ministry, but a source of grace for the faith community – for through them, the church learns about true love, patience, and solidarity.

Transformation of Liturgy and Worship

One important aspect of participation is inclusion in the liturgy. In some churches observed, liturgical inclusion is still limited to special prayers or mercy services. However, disability theology encourages a more radical transformation of the liturgy: creating spaces where people with disabilities can lead prayers, read the Bible, or play musical instruments. This transformation requires a shift in liturgical mentality from simply “accepting” to “celebrating the diversity of bodies.” A truly inclusive liturgy not only provides physical access (ramps, braille texts, sign language interpreters), but also affirms the existence of each person as a valid witness to the faith.

Challenges and Obstacles in the Local Church

Some of the main obstacles identified include: a lack of disability theological education in religious institutions, limited physical facilities in church buildings, and social stereotypes regarding disability as "inability." Furthermore, church leaders often lack the critical awareness to view disability issues as theological, not merely social, issues. Nevertheless, the opportunity for change remains significant. Many young church communities are beginning to focus on issues of inclusivity and social justice. With strong theological support and open faith education, the Indonesian church has the potential to become a role model in developing a contextual and liberating theology of disability.

Pastoral and Missiological Dimensions

Pastorally, the church needs to understand that serving people with disabilities is not simply an act of charity, but part of the church's missionary calling to bring Christ's love to all people. The church must be a space where every body is valued, every wound is accepted, and every voice is heard. In a missiological context, an inclusive church is a living witness to the kingdom of God, which accepts all without

discrimination. Thus, the paradigm shift from compassion to participation is not only an attitudinal shift, but also a fundamental theological transformation. A church that sees people with disabilities as the *imago Dei* will build a new spirituality—a spirituality of the grateful body—that learns to embrace limitations as the site of the liberating presence of God's love.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that disability theology is an integral part of Christian faith reflection, demanding a paradigm shift in the church—from compassion to participation. The local church in Indonesia is called to recognize that people with disabilities are not objects of service, but rather subjects of faith, equally created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). This understanding has broad theological and pastoral implications, namely rejecting normative views of the body, celebrating human diversity, and building a truly inclusive faith community. The Eucharist, liturgy, and church services should be spaces where every individual—regardless of their physical, mental, or sensory condition—can actively participate. In the body of Christ, no member is superior or inferior (1 Corinthians 12:22–26). In fact, the part considered “weaker” is given greater glory. Therefore, the church needs to transform its ministry structures and culture to reflect justice and equality in the light of the Gospel. By embracing the wounded but risen Christ, disability theology presents a new vision of salvation—not as the restoration of bodily functions, but as full participation in God's love that embraces all human diversity. In this sense, bodily imperfections are not a barrier to faith, but rather a living witness to divine grace and solidarity. Thus, an inclusive church is one that knows God through wounds, listens to the voices of those who are silenced, and learns to see Christ in diverse bodies. This is the calling of the Indonesian church: to make disability not just a social issue, but a doorway to a theology that is more humane, contextual, and reflective of God's universal love.

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