

The Anglican Church of Australia and engagement with people living with disabilities

Monica Short

The prevalence of physical conditions, diseases, congenital and perinatal conditions, injuries, poisoning, and mental health and behavioural disorders means that people living with disabilities are a significant portion of our Australian society.¹ In 2012, 4.2 million people or 18.5 per cent of Australians reported living with a disability and an additional 4.7 million people or 21 per cent reported having a long-term health condition that did not restrict their everyday activities.² Furthermore, most people reporting as living with disabilities do not receive a Disability Support Pension (in 2010–11, 818,850 people received this payment).³

Regardless of their presence, many parts of Australian society exclude people living with disabilities.⁴ As a consequence of this daily exclusion, some Australians have been known to hide their disability so as not to miss opportunities. Some have disengaged from their local community because making authentic connections has become too difficult.

Monica Short is a lecturer in Social Work and Human Services with Charles Sturt University, a member of the Believing in 'Peoples' Living with Disabilities Research Community, and a volunteer with Bush Church Aid. She is currently undertaking a doctoral research project entitled 'The Anglican Church of Australia engaging with rural, regional and remote communities.'

Despite this, it is also important not to ignore reasons for celebration. People living with disabilities do make considerable contributions to Australian society—including its churches. The good news is that, thanks to agitation from the disability movement, there are significant governmental initiatives and social policy changes. Today, Australian society appears to be more disability aware than ever, even questioning the dominant discourses informing the national disability field's practices.⁵ Practitioners and policy makers are rethinking approaches to interventions, participation, inclusion, servicing and engagement of people groups living with disabilities.⁶ There are voices insisting that local providers and organisations, including churches, extend their welcome so that all people can fully participate and belong. This makes it an ideal time for the Anglican Church of Australia to reflect on the current discourses of disability and ability, and for dioceses, clergy and laity to reassess their commitment to including people living with disabilities. Furthermore, a number of Christians see this as an opportune moment for churches to promote the gospel message as a compelling means of restoring relationships with God and between people.

(Dis)ability is of professional interest for me as a social worker and social researcher. As a Christian, a member of the Anglican Church of Australia and an Australian, this social field is also of personal interest, not least because a number of my extended family live with chronic health issues and/or disabilities. I am proud to be their kin. While these relationships inform my research, their experiences are not included in this article.

This article is thus written by an Australian Christian from a social work perspective. It engages modern discourses regarding disability, considers how Australia currently perceives disability, and asks where are the people living with disabilities in our churches? The paper encourages the movement away from discourses that perceive or characterise people living with disabilities as invisible or an object of pity, towards discourses that embrace those with disability as people 'innately precious and inviolable,'⁷ as fully participating citizens, and also as Christians who are often making a significant contribution to all aspects of the life of the church. Concepts from the Paternalistic Models, the Medical Model and the Social Model of Disability are briefly assessed. This article also invites churches to participate in two research projects that are looking at how the rural Anglican Church engages with people living with disabilities.

Key terms

(Dis)ability is socially constructed and crosses all people groups.⁸ A person may identify as having multiple disabilities. For these two reasons, the preferred term for this article is ‘people living with disabilities.’ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, The Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992), The Australian ‘National Disability Strategy Inclusive and Accessible Communities’ policy document, and similar state-based legislations, aim to see people living with disabilities fully engaged,⁹ included and participating in their local communities.¹⁰ In Australia it is thus expected that organisations like churches will make reasonable adjustments to accommodate people living with disabilities.¹¹ This includes full access to all church activities, regardless of ability and with minimal risk. Some measures have already been taken in this regard. An example is the legal obligation for all public building owners, including church administrators, to ensure their buildings and activities are accessible.¹²

Three key discourses informing disability in Australia

Broader societal discourses influence churches. This section looks briefly, through a Christian lens, at three of the well-established (dis)ability discourses informing contemporary Australian social and welfare practices, and in doing so encourages Christians to consider how they might respond to or connect with each of them.¹³ Before introducing them, it is helpful to understand present developments within the sector. Currently, there is a movement away from more paternalistic, medical or service models of care towards strength-based, multi-dimensional, person-centred approaches, which seek to ensure that people living with disabilities are placed at the centre of decisions affecting their own lives.¹⁴ This change includes emphasising values such as belonging; being respectful of history, gifts, and abilities; friendships with other citizens; the right to access everyday community settings and to contribute their gifts to make a positive difference to others; and having control over their own lives.¹⁵

Additionally, some well-known Christian organisations from different traditions such as Anglicare, Christian Blind Mission (CBM), and L’Arche Australia encourage their members to pray for, acknowledge and affirm the God-given gifts of people living with disabilities. These organisations believe such recognition empowers all people, whether they identify as disabled or non-disabled, making society more humane and Christian communities

stronger.¹⁶ They do not ignore or minimise the spiritual and relational needs of people living with disabilities.¹⁷

Alongside this theology is rereading and retrieving biblical traditions from the perspectives of people living with disabilities, and also considering what it means to be a welcoming church in light of these perspectives.¹⁸ For example, commentators are looking afresh at the biblical book of Job with a view to better understanding disability in the ancient world, and exploring its meaning for contemporary life.¹⁹

1. Contemporary paternalistic models

Paternalistic discourses are present within contemporary Australian society. Cassidy argues that, at times, 'individual voices are being silenced in favour of a return to a more paternalistic model of disability.'²⁰ She points out that one person with power, or a board of people, who are often non-disabled, cannot speak for each individual with a particular disability.²¹

These models, which can also be observed in some Christian conversations about (dis)ability, and in some interactions with people living with disabilities, are vehemently challenged by the disability movement. Their prejudicial or alienating nature is exposed by theologians like Yong and Clifton.²²

Often people living with disabilities, who are subject to these models, feel oppressed, less human, unhappy, incapable or abnormal compared to others who are socially accepted as 'normal.'²³ Such discourses may see people living with disabilities as having childlike qualities, requiring care, needing to be civilised, or hidden.²⁴ These views disempower, degrade, isolate and exclude people,²⁵ encouraging them to hide their disabilities and their needs. Such hiding is common. For example, a survey of 1,031 Australian workers, released in 2014, found that almost 50 per cent of workers who took time off due to depression hid the reason from their employer.²⁶

The contemporary Christian community can be hospitable and inclusive. Sadly, however, in numerous cases, people living with disabilities feel excluded, pitied, friendless and unwanted.²⁷ Of particular concern are Christian discourses that characterise people living with disabilities as evil, sinful, resentful, or as a challenge to the perfect nature of God, and therefore in need of charity and pity.²⁸ Additionally, some well-meaning individuals, motivated by compassion and love, believe that peoples' disabilities will be healed by faith.²⁹ These discourses often refer selectively to Bible passages

to support their arguments, while ignoring others such as John 9:1–2 where Jesus explains to his disciples that a man was not born blind because of his sins. Though unintended, such views are deeply hurtful when people are not healed or their condition deteriorates, particularly if it is inferred that this is due to their lack of faith.³⁰

2. The medical model discourse

The treatment of people living with disabilities and chronic health conditions predates Christianity. Throughout history there have been stories of medicine enhancing peoples' lives. For example, Hippocrates of Cos (460–377 BC), who is known as the father of modern medicine, described and treated numerous conditions, including plague, and epilepsy in children.³¹ However, the medical model also has limitations, as seen in the gospel story of the healing by Jesus of a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Mark 5:25–26; Luke 8:43). She had suffered under the care of many physicians, had spent all she had on medical treatment, and her condition was deteriorating.

The medical model's inadequacies are currently being vigorously challenged by sections of the disability movement, particularly elements of the medical model discourse that describe people as a category of medicine, perceive them as ill because they have infirmities, and rob them of their voice.³² Critics ask why disability is seen as a personal tragedy requiring cure, care and intervention.³³ They resist the idea of experts like social workers and other professionals, who are often non-disabled, making decisions about the lives of people living with disabilities³⁴, such as the support they receive, the opportunities they have for socialising, their education and work, and whether their spiritual needs are recognised or not.

This model, when insensitively imposed, forces people living with disabilities to fight against being dehumanised or having their opinions ignored, and to advocate for themselves or to have an advocate, so as to ensure their needs are met. This can be exhausting, frustrating and disempowering for those requiring assistance.

Though not necessarily Christian, ideas from this model pervade Australian society and the churches. Examples exist of people attending Christian activities being introduced, labelled or referred to by their medical conditions. People are sometimes defined, without consultation, as unable to contribute or participate in church activities, or are deemed unsuitable for para-church services/activities.³⁵

3. The social model of disability

The social model of disability emerged out of the 1960s and 1970s United Kingdom disability activist movement.³⁶ It radically reappraised society's view of disability. It challenged the linking of disability and impairment, arguing that society disables, oppresses and excludes people living with disabilities rather than the impairment itself.³⁷ For example, it shows how language, and definitions of disability that stigmatise, are used to devalue and control people living with disabilities. The model also highlights the fact that, regardless of environmental and attitudinal barriers, people living with disabilities are making a significant contribution to society,³⁸ including those within the churches.

This model contains concepts, such as hospitality, that are compatible with Christian principles. This can be seen in its desire for society to welcome and include all, facilitate full participation, and allow disabled and non-disabled people to reach their potential.³⁹ Amos Yong presents a relevant example in Zacchaeus' story (Luke 19: 1–10).⁴⁰ 'Ableist' interpretations⁴¹ often disregard Zacchaeus' lack of height—and Luke's apparently deliberate inclusion of this in the passage to show how Zacchaeus overcame environmental and attitudinal hurdles to see Jesus—and so miss the full extent of his exclusion by his society.⁴² Yet Jesus welcomed him, confronted prejudice, pronounced Zacchaeus' salvation and actively included him in His mission to seek and save the lost.

With regard to the Anglican Church community, the social model of disability is helpful because it advocates 'abling' language; suggests impairments be acknowledged but not linked to disadvantage, and that gifts be affirmed; and insists that people be fully incorporated into the church's collective identity and activities, including each element of services, prayer events, evangelism activities and Bible studies.⁴³

Précis of the disability scene within the Australian Church

This leads us to ask how many people living with disabilities are participating in our churches. According to the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) of church attendance, which surveyed 1,386 church attenders, 7.7 per cent attenders identified as living with a severe or mild disability, and 48.7 per cent of people surveyed had a personal experience or connection with disability.⁴⁴ Furthermore, 7 per cent of weekly church attenders identify as having a disability, 5 per cent of monthly attenders, and 10 per cent of less

than monthly attenders.⁴⁵ So where does the Anglican Church of Australia sit within all this, especially as the Anglican Communion encourages parishes and para-organisations to welcome and include all people in the life of the Church?⁴⁶ The Anglican Church of Australia does have personal connections with people living with disabilities. In the aforementioned NCLS, the denominational breakdown of those surveyed who were living with a severe or mild disability was: Anglicans 10 per cent, Catholics 10 per cent, Uniting 9 per cent, Other Protestant 8 per cent, Lutheran/Presbyterian 7 per cent, Baptist/Church of Christ 7 per cent and Pentecostal zero per cent.⁴⁷ Thus, the percentage of people living with disabilities in the Anglican Church is similar to most denominations and, sadly, like all denominations, is substantially lower than the percentage figure for the national population as a whole.⁴⁸ The promising side of these statistics, as demonstrated in the literature, is to be found in examples of positive engagement with people living with disabilities within the Anglican Church.⁴⁹ The challenge is continually to bring to public attention change-inspiring narratives within all denominations. Internationally, and in Australia, there are examples of this occurring, such as in Colson's *Dancing with Max*, which includes the story of how the church the Colsons attend brings Max, who is diagnosed with autism, into their community; in the collection of personal testimonies of Christians in Hurley's *Take Heart*, which draws out theological questions and themes relating to disability; and, again, in Thompson and Kelshaw's *Shocked by Blessing*,⁵⁰ which links peoples' experience of living with disabilities to biblical stories and themes. These narratives show how to empower people living with disabilities in their relationship with God, with others, and the church. However, the apparent difference between the number of Australians reporting as living with a disability and the number of church attenders identifying as living with a disability indicates a need for further sharing of experiences.

Opportunities for participation

In presenting such stories, it is also important to recognise that Australia is vast, and the Anglican Church diverse.⁵¹ Strategies cannot always be transposed from one location to another. Instead, local ones need nurturing. For example, disparities exist between people living with disabilities in urban localities and those in rural Australia.⁵² There is a slightly higher presence of people living with disabilities in regional and remote localities

compared to urban ones. In 2009, 22 per cent of people in inner regional Australia, and 20 per cent of people in outer regional and remote Australia, reported living with a disability, compared to 17 per cent of those living in major cities.⁵³ This difference was also evident in 2012.⁵⁴ In 2005–06, people living with a disability outside major cities were more likely to have a severe or profound disability limitation, but were significantly less likely than those living in the major cities to access disability support services.⁵⁵

We currently have only a partial picture of the lived experience of people living with disabilities in rural, regional and remote areas. Noticeably missing are descriptions of the impact of rural disadvantage on indigenous people living with disabilities,⁵⁶ including their connectedness with churches. This is noteworthy because, in 2011, compared to the general population, indigenous peoples were more likely to be living with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and two thirds of indigenous peoples were living outside major Australian cities.⁵⁷

How can churches do more than mirror societal trends in engaging people? How can churches be leaders in demonstrating love and graciousness to all attending, model interdependence between people, and respect for the collective contributions of all volunteers? How can churches become a force that transforms their local communities for the benefit of people living with disabilities?⁵⁸ And how can the Anglican Church be sure that it is meeting the needs of people living with disabilities who desire full affiliation with it, or providing meaningful religious experience, opportunities for participation, and Christian education such as belonging to Bible study groups.⁵⁹

The extant literature, along with many Christian communities and service providers, proclaim that disability is not a problem that needs a solution.⁶⁰ They recognise that God gives spiritual gifts to people living with disabilities so they can serve Him and build up the church and those around them.⁶¹ Historically, God has gifted people living with disabilities for service (for example, Moses with leadership skills and Job with teaching skills),⁶² and He continues to do so within the contemporary Anglican Church.

It is exciting when truly positive connections are made, like St John's Anglican Church Bairnsdale's inclusion of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within their church, and work to increase belonging for all with ASD in their local community.⁶³ It is also heartening when Christian principles, such as those listed by CBM, are demonstrated within churches. Examples of such principles are: all people are valued because they are

made in the image of God; the good news of salvation is for everyone; Jesus destroyed barriers between people; God is sovereign; God gives spiritual gifts to every believer to build up the church; and, weakness is no barrier to God working powerfully for good within and through each person.⁶⁴ The challenge is to embed meaningful engagements that are consistent with Christian ideals so that they do not prove ephemeral when challenged or subject to trends and cycles.⁶⁵

Future research about disability and the Anglican Church

People living with disabilities are actively involved in Christian ministry in Australia. For example, the NCLS found that of those surveyed who were from Anglican, Catholic and other denominations, and who were in leadership or ministry, 2 per cent had a severe disability and 4 per cent a mild disability.⁶⁶

Australian and international literature also highlights the contribution that people living with disabilities are making to the church.⁶⁷ Two research projects are starting later this year with the aim of capturing narratives like Bonnie's, which is shared by Rob Thompson and Carolyn Kelshaw in *Shocked by Blessing*.⁶⁸ Bonnie, a Canadian who is married to an Australian, was born with arthogypsis (club feet) and was involved in a car crash. She lives with continual pain and significant health issues. She works, has a PhD, is a Christian, attends church regularly, and builds up those around her. She points out that it takes more faith for her to live with her condition, and to overcome its hurdles day by day, than to be healed. Bonnie explains that she lives the life God gave her, and her purpose is to love the Lord her God with all her heart, mind and soul, and to love her neighbour as herself.⁶⁹ The two research projects are a cross-disciplinary co-operative inquiry and a subsequent case study that investigates the Anglican Church of Australia's engagements with people living with disabilities in rural, regional and remote locations. These projects aim to explore people's perceptions and experiences of engagement, and whether they contribute to peoples' well-being, including their Christian faith. They will draw on theological, sociological and social work concepts. The projects will also develop recommendations about the Anglican Church's engagements with people living with disabilities. I welcome dialogue with others about these research activities.

Conclusions

People living with disabilities are a significant and valuable part of Australian society, and their contribution to Anglican communities is worthy of recognition. What impacts me as a Christian social worker and social researcher in this complex area are stories about God's people challenging exclusionary discourses through their active engagement with people living with disabilities. Furthermore, it is inspiring to hear and read about people living with disabilities using their spiritual gifts to serve God, connect with others and to build up the church. This paper has outlined three discourses informing church connections with peoples living with disabilities: the Paternalistic Model(s), the Medical Model and the Social Model of Disability. The question remains: how will the interaction between biblical principles and social discourse help inform the Anglican Church's engagements with people living with disabilities?

Endnotes

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. 'Disability, Aging and Carers, Australia: Consolidated set of tables. Main condition causing disability by age', 2009, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4430.02009?OpenDocument> (accessed 29 April 2015).
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3. Philip Hughes and Lochlan Fraser, *Life, ethics and faith in Australian Society: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Nunawading, 2014, p. 54.
4. Australian Government, 'Shut out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia', 2009, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/nds_report.pdf (accessed 22 June 2015), pp. 1, 52.
5. Cate Thill, 'Listening for policy change: how the voices of disabled people shaped Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme', *Disability and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2015, pp. 15–28; Avi Rose, 'Who cause the blind to

- see: Disability and quality of religious life' *Disability and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2010, pp. 395–405.
6. Thill, 'Listening for policy change'; Rose, 'Who causes the blind to see: Disability and quality of religious life'.
 7. Christian Smith, *What is a person? Rethinking humanity, social life, and the moral good from the person up*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.
 8. James Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, University of California Press, California, 2000.
 9. There are numerous definitions of engagement. The 'United Nations (Brisbane) Declaration on Community engagement' recognises community engagement as a two-way process where organisations involve citizens, clients, communities and other stakeholders in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment. See United Nations, *The United Nations (Brisbane) declaration on community engagement*, 2005, http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/imported/ChapterResources_UNBrisbaneDeclarationCommunityEngagement.pdf (accessed 10 December 2014). A key principle of engagement is inclusion. Inclusion is where all people, including people living with disabilities, have access to and can participate fully in an activity in the same way as any member of the community. See Christian Blind Mission, *Definition of disability: Inclusive development*, 2015, http://www.cbm.org/article/downloads/54741/IPCMT_Trainers_Stage_2_Handout_2.pdf (accessed 24 April 2015). In contrast to this is exclusion, which is what happens when people are prevented from participating fully in society due to poverty, lack of basic competencies or learning opportunities or discrimination; they are often made to feel powerless and unable to control decisions affecting their lives. In Australia, this includes people living with disabilities when they do not have the resources, opportunities and capabilities to connect with or participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities. See Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia*, 2013, <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/deep-persistent-disadvantage/deep-persistent-disadvantage.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2015).
 10. Disability is defined in numerous ways. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines people living with disabilities as 'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may

hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. See United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', 2006, <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml> (accessed 23 April 2015). The Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992) definition of disability can be summarised as permanent or temporary, total or partial, lifelong or acquired, and covers physical, sensory, psychiatric, neurological and learning disabilities; it also includes disfigurement and serious illness. See Australian Government, *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2013C00022> (accessed 10 December 2014). The Australian 'National Disability Strategy Inclusive and Accessible Communities' policy document encourages increased participation of people with disability, their families and carers in the social, cultural, religious, recreational and sporting life of the community. See Australian Government, *National Disability Strategy 2010–2020. Report to the Council of Australian Governments 2012*, 2012, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy-2010-2020-report-to-coag-2012>. There also exists individual state legislation regarding rights of people living with disabilities which contain similar definitions of disability. For a general discussion about defining disability see Cass Hearn, Monica Short, and John Healy, 'Social Work Field Education: Believing in Students who are Living with a Disability', *Disability and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 9, 2014, pp. 1344–46.

11. The United Nations defines reasonable accommodation as 'necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms'. See United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.
12. Christian Blind Mission, *Accessible church*, CBM Australia, Melbourne, 2009. For discussions and ideas about Universal Design concepts see McMair, 'Universal design and the Christian church', 2008, <http://disabledchristianity.blogspot.com.au/2008/07/universal-design-and-christian-church.html> (accessed 25 May 2015); 'Disability Concerns, Universal design in a church setting', 2010, <http://network.crcna.org/disability-concerns/universal-design-church-setting> (accessed 25 May 2015); The Centre for Universal Design, 'About universal design', 2008, <http://>

- www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm (accessed 25 May 2015).
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 15. House With No Steps, 'Person centred approaches and practices'.
 16. L'Arche Australia, 'Philosophy of care', 2013, <http://www.larche.org.au/model-care/philosophy-care/> (accessed 1 May 2015); Anglicare Australia, 'The way we care: Prayer diary 2015', <https://www.anglicare.org.au/sites/default/files/public/Prayer%20Diary%202015%20LR%20.pdf> (accessed 4 May 2015); Christian Blind Mission, 'Pray with us', 2015, <https://www.cbm.org.au/content/get-involved/pray-with-us#.VUlbIIWOVq3d> (accessed 5 May 2015).
 17. L'Arche Australia, 'Philosophy of care'; Anglicare Australia, 'The way we care: Prayer diary 2015'.
 18. See, for example, Amos Yong, *The Bible, disability and the church*, Eerdmans, Cambridge, 2011.
 19. Yong, *The Bible, disability and the church*; Patston, *Ostriches and Others: Disability in the book of Job*, 2014, unpublished MS.
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 23. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us*, p. 27.
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- this is maintained through social relations', *Disability and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 9, 2014, pp. 1473–85.
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 29. Rob Thomspson and Carolyn Kelshaw, *Shocked by blessing*, National Institute for Christian Education, Blacktown, 2007, p. 115; Clifton, 'The dark side of prayer for healing', p. 214.
 30. Rob Thomspson and Carolyn Kelshaw, *Shocked by blessing*, p. 115.
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 33. Thill, 'Listening for policy change', pp. 15–28.
 34. Thill, 'Listening for policy change', pp. 15–28; Michael Oliver, Bob Sapey, and Pam Thomas, *Social work with disabled people*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012.
 35. For example, see Kate Hurley, *Take heart: For families living with disability*, pp. 48–49.
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 37. Oliver and Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement*, p. 22; Michael Oliver, *Understanding disability: From theory to practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009.
 38. Oliver and Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement*.

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40. Amos Yong, 'Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen', <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/188189.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2015).
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50. Emily Colson, *Dancing with Max*, Zondervan, Michigan, 2010; Hurley, *Take heart*; Thompsen and Kelshaw, *Shocked by blessing*.
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