

From exclusion to belonging

Understanding disability inclusion in spiritual communities.

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Religion and spirituality provide many with a deep sense of purpose, comfort, and direction. It is often a place people return to in times of grief, celebration, confusion, and when needing guidance. Spiritual spaces like mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples offer us a sense of community, comfort, and a connection to something greater than ourselves.

Journeying through disability can bring about feelings of isolation, confusion, loss, and despair. Yet, for many persons with disabilities, it can also be a path to profound spiritual awakening. Whether through faith in a higher power, a deep appreciation for nature, or connection with the universe, spirituality can provide individuals with a sense of belonging, purpose, and inner peace. But for many persons with disabilities, inclusion within faith-based and spiritual spaces can be challenging. Many of these spaces and places, despite being built on values like compassion, unity, and justice, are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Instead, they are left at the margins of the very communities that are meant to welcome them.

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION

The experience of disability has long been entrenched in social stigma,

often relegated to narratives of charity, limitation, and dependency. Interpretations and definitions of disability shape the way disability inclusion is understood and enacted. Society has traditionally viewed disability by focusing on what a person *cannot* do. This perspective can reduce people to their conditions, overlooking their capabilities, contributions, and aspirations.

An inclusive approach recognises that contextual barriers, whether physical, attitudinal, or institutional, are what truly disable people. Inclusion, then, is not about “fixing” the person, but about transforming environments and attitudes to accommodate all forms of human diversity.

LIVED EXPERIENCES: LESSONS FROM THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

My PhD research explored how disability inclusion is experienced within the Muslim Ummah (community) in South Africa. What emerged was a disconnect between religious teachings – which emphasise equality, mercy, and justice – and the exclusion many persons with disabilities feel when trying to engage in communal spiritual life.

While the Qur’an and Hadith speak clearly about the dignity, equality and value of all individuals, participants in the study shared

stories of inaccessibility, ignorance, and isolation. Persons with disabilities shared that they had to make the extra effort to belong in these spaces while community members offer pity instead of facilitating inclusion.

Faith leaders interviewed in the study were honest in their reflections on the exclusion that occurred all too often. In the Muslim community some mosques and leaders are working toward greater inclusion, but systemic change remains slow. This sentiment is echoed in many other faith traditions and communities worldwide.

FROM PRESENCE TO BELONGING

Inclusion isn’t limited to letting someone through the door or ramp. Real inclusion involves ensuring that persons with disabilities feel they belong, that they are seen, heard, and valued. It means persons with disabilities have access to opportunities that enable them to play meaningful roles of their choice within the social networks to which they belong, where they may give and receive support, and where they feel valued. In an inclusive faith-based community, persons with disabilities are not guests or an afterthought. They are integral, active members whose presence enriches everyone’s spiritual journey, including their own.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

An ongoing commitment to understand the barriers faced by persons with disabilities starts with listening to persons with lived experience of disabilities, centring them as experts by experience and involving them in decision-making to facilitate their community integration. It requires a collective, concerted effort from all community members. Faith leaders are crucial stakeholders in this collaboration. Through role modelling acceptance and inclusive practices, they create opportunities for their communities to follow their lead. Training opportunities focused on disability awareness, such as that offered by Inclusive Practices Africa, can help bridge gaps in understanding disability, promote inclusive practices, and foster a sense of shared responsibility within communities. Inclusion is not an act of charity; rather, it is a reflection of our shared humanity and a fulfilment of our highest spiritual values.

TOWARD A FUTURE OF TRUE INCLUSION

The journey toward inclusion is a continuous process of learning, unlearning, and relearning. It takes commitment to challenge negative, discriminatory attitudes towards disability and persons with disabilities within our communities and within ourselves. □

