

Let's become inclusive, not exclusive Christians...!

(Josef Slowík – Adventist Special Needs Ministries coordinator, Czech and Slovak union, EUD)

Many people in today's world want to be among the elites – among those who are considered an exclusive group in society. If something is exclusive, it is not for everyone. Exclusivity is associated with the advantages and privilege only for some individuals or groups. But if you belong to people with special needs, it usually means that you are rather disadvantaged. In society, this is mostly perceived as a handicap and often leads to a negative labeling or even stigmatization of a person.

Is the situation among the Christ's followers different? What is the attitude of Christian church towards the people with special needs (to those who are seen as “different” or “disadvantaged”)? If the church is really the body of Christ, it must inevitably be an inclusive community. Exclusivity does not belong to Christian values at all (**James 2:1-9**).

Apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 12** (verses **12-27**) describes the Church as a body – an organism composed of many parts (organs, limbs) that are interdependent and where each part is irreplaceable. If any organ is missing, the body is incomplete. He warns us to neglect or underestimate any of these parts: it can be both dangerous and unwise (for some organs in the physical body are small and seemingly unattractive, yet vital)! So far, we have often neglected and underestimated those who seemed to be too weak, too disadvantaged, too uninteresting or too different. We paid little attention to them. Perhaps we are still afraid that those who are deaf cannot hear our preaching the gospel, and those who are blind cannot see the beauty of God's creation – and that it is hard to reach the kingdom of God on the wheelchair. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is that we are not able to communicate with such people and we do not know how to approach them properly because we do not have a personal experience with them yet.

Maybe some of us are confused that we are not able to heal all the deaf, blind, paralyzed or other disadvantaged people around us, as Jesus and the apostles did. It seems as if the miracles did not happen today... Be sure that the real miracle is not if we heal the people with disabilities or diseases today; the real miracle is if we accept such people as an equal part of the Christ's body – His Church. From a biblical point of view, those are people who have a perspective in the kingdom of God. He counts them into the remnant of His people (**Jeremiah 31:7-9**). His invitation is valid for them, and the Lord assumes that they will not reject it (unlike some others; see **Luke 14:16-22**) – perhaps because these people do not receive many invitations and opportunities in this world. We can read in the gospel that there were many people with special needs in multitudes around Jesus (**Matthew 15:30**). He certainly didn't heal all of them at that time – yet his disciples had met such people after Jesus' ascension, and they healed some of them, as well. However, the percentage of people with special needs in society has not dramatically diminished – they are still among us and around us. God has never removed them (even by miracle) – instead, he has always taught his people and church how to approach them: such individuals should never be discriminated or oppressed (**Leviticus 19:14-15; Exodus 22:21-22**). On the contrary, God sees their potential and counts with them (**Isaiah 35:4-6**).

As many other Christians, we often tend to the theology of prosperity: God is the one who should provide us with success and comfort in our lives above all. But the Biblical story reflects rather prosocial and antidiscrimination theology: we are to "*consider others better than ourselves*" (**Philippians 2:3**), because every human being is worthy of our attention, everybody is invited to receive God's grace and to follow Jesus, no one is excluded from becoming part of Christ's body and His living temple - including those who are disadvantaged or even rejected in major society (**1Corinthians 12; Ephesians 2:19-22; James 2:8-9**).

Of course, people with special needs need some kind of help in some daily matters – but they also have much to offer. They do not only want to be dependent on the help of others – they want and are able to serve themselves. They do not only have special needs – they also have their abilities, skills and gifts, just like all other Christ followers. We need to recognize and use their potential – and then we will see not only their differences and disadvantages, but also their enriching possibilities.

In the **Gospel of John** (chapter **9**), we read the story in which Jesus meets a man blind from birth. The disciples promptly raise a question which points to the prejudices and myths rooted between Jews (and later Christians): they saw a human impairment always as the result of sin of the individual or his ancestors. "*Satan, the author of sin and all its results, had led men to look upon disease and death as proceeding from God,—as punishment arbitrarily inflicted on account of sin*". (**E.G. White: The Desire of Ages, p. 471**). Jesus denies this opinion – and what more, he points to man's disability as a possible opportunity to manifest God's grace and power at the moment. In this story, Jesus heals the blind man using just ordinary mud and water (nothing complicated or sophisticated), but this is not the most important part of the whole story. When members of the religious elite find out that this healing took place on Sabbath, they call the previously blind man and ask him for the details of the miracle. They even suspect that he was not blind at all, and that it could have all been a scam. That's why they call man's parents – but the parents referred them back to their previously blind son. (We could probably see this response as a healthy parental attitude which respects the autonomy and independence of their adult son with special needs – but in fact, these parents only acted this way for fear of being excluded from the synagogue). So, the miraculously healed man is called again to testify that Jesus was a sinner – for the elite scholars recognized that Jesus has an unusual power, but they do not know where that power comes from. At this moment, we hear surprisingly wise answer of previously blind man: "*Why, here is a strange thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*" (**John 9:30-33**). Of course, religious leaders did not like such words, and the man was expelled immediately. What a clear demonstration that the problem with accepting person with special needs does not lie in his (or her) disability – for this man has already been healed, but they still saw him as someone disabled and disadvantaged! The main barrier lies more in their hearts and heads.

Such smart answer of a man who had been blind since his birth shows an important truth: although he had been living with a severe impairment for years, and was undoubtedly limited in his access to education, as well as in participation in the religious community (and major society),

at this moment he manifests his mature personality, good knowledge of Scripture, and sufficient moral competence and ability to defend his attitudes. We do not know how he could acquire all these abilities – most likely *“Christ gave him grace and utterance, so that he became a witness for Him” (E. G. White: The Desire of Ages, p. 474)* – but we can clearly see that his congenital impairment did not make him incompetent and dependent only on the help of his neighbors. Later on, Jesus meets him again and explains the situation: This man was born blind, but in reality he saw and clearly understood what was important. Many people, on the other hand, can physically see, but they are spiritually blind. **(John 9:39)**

In inclusive approach, the impairments, disabilities, or limitations that we can identify in lives of persons with special needs are not the most important for us. What's the most important are their abilities, their gifts and their potential for which we should find opportunities to apply. These people need our respect – we should appreciate their personal originality and deal with them equally just as with all other people. We shouldn't expect their simple assimilation (i.e. complete adaptation to our majority standards), because in many cases full adaptation is not possible for people with special needs. Inclusive approach assumes mutual adaptation of the majority and the minorities.

When creating inclusive church communities, a simple strategy called **"5B"** can be very helpful:

1. **Barrier-free accessibility** – not just the elimination of physical barriers (e.g. for people on the wheelchair), but also removing or reducing barriers in our communication with people with special needs, barriers of our prejudices or misunderstanding etc.
2. **Breaking the worries** – let's not be afraid of the contact with those who are different or have some special needs; let's build the community where such people do not have to be afraid to enter and become a part of it.
3. **Being nearby for those who need us** (not only on Sabbath) – many people with special needs are limited in opportunities to acquire new social contacts and they expect more than just visiting Sabbath worship once a week; let's accept this as an impulse to become Christians not only one day a week but every day.
4. **Biblical view on people with special needs** – nowhere in the Bible we find information that God would refuse people with special needs; on the contrary, He even identifies with them (e.g. **Matthew 25:34-40**).
5. **Building the church together** – it is our privilege to create the body of Christ and His living temple, in which all the followers have their place and mission, regardless of their human weaknesses, limitations or so-called special needs.

Such inclusive church community can provide already here, on earth the living experience of present kingdom of God. It can be a living testimony of God, who will not cast out anyone that comes to Him **(John 6:37-40)**. Amen

Our heavenly Father, may we create a community which is open for anyone who longs for Your grace and who is willing to follow You, regardless of his disadvantages or even special needs – for Your power is made perfect in our weakness. Thank you that nobody is excluded from Your love and blessings.