

## ***Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion***

Lamar Hardwick, InterVarsity Press, 2021.

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Known as the “Autism Pastor,” Lamar Hardwick is an essential voice in a rising field: the theology of disability. In *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, the author is true to the subtitle, casting a pastor’s vision for positive change in the church. As an insider, he brings refreshing honesty to the challenges of ministry among the disabled. He calls the reader to foster authentic, not merely symbolic, inclusiveness toward this underserved community. Hardwick prophetically urges churches to be “gatekeepers of the type of kindness and gentleness that those in the disability community need to experience in order to come out from hiding and to shed the stigma of shame that society has placed on them” (p. 11).

Interweaving his personal story with biblical and theological tropes, Hardwick deftly forges a theological vision, both personal and didactic. The text creatively mingles biblical exegesis with sensitivity to disabilities. For instance, the parable of the lost sheep leads him to wonder why disabled persons are disproportionately absent from most churches relative to their numbers in society. Based on Paul’s breaking of the walls between Jews and gentiles, Hardwick explores the barriers that exclude the disabled. He redresses this condition by meditations on peace, unity, individuality, reconciliation, and sacrifice as core theological themes that apply to the task of inclusion.

Christ’s practice of table fellowship explicitly included the disabled in his parables. He challenged those who sought the highest position at a banquet to “always assume the position of humility rather than the position of honor” (p. 53). Honoring the disabled means not merely recognizing them but expecting such members to offer areas of profound competence.

Hardwick’s testimony after his own diagnosis of autism led him to wrestle with “belonging to what I felt to be two separate communities” (p. 69). This awareness of “double-consciousness” helps to explain the alienation between the disability community and the church. As a pastor who is both African-American and autistic, this theme of W. E. B. Dubois is indeed a poignant inclusion.

In 1990, when the Americans with Disabilities Act excluded churches, this was a historic missed opportunity. Many churches ignored fundamental access concerns and tacitly accepted the exclusion of the disabled. Hardwick gives practical advice for dismantling such barriers. He lists four characteristics of churches that are making progress: 1) a philosophy of people over programs, 2) a celebration of the disabled rather than mere tolerance of their presence, 3) “circles over rows,” emphasizing personal over impersonal arrangements of church life, and 4) pastoral approval over mere pastoral apathy (pp. 96–97).

Dennis L. Durst, review of *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, by Lamar Hardwick, *Ethics & Medicine* 37, no. 2–3 (2021): 161–162.

The depth of the problem is evident through some startling statistics. In 2010, 19% of the population in the United States was listed as disabled. Worldwide, only 5–10% of this population is currently being reached with the Christian gospel, making the disabled a significant “unreached people group” (pp. 102–3).

Hardwick’s pastoral focus is central to the book, and he offers constructive guidance to preachers wishing to address disability from the pulpit. Preaching themes include broadening the community’s borders, real community over mere charity, disability as an added rather than diminished value, and disability from a first-person perspective. Multiple-point practical action steps are sprinkled throughout the work, leading the reader to surmise that many of the sections began as a sermon or lesson plan. The preacher’s penchant for alliteration peeks through in section headings. Case in point: Pray for Peace, Provide Protection, and Practice the Ministry of Presence (pp. 131–36). While such jargon of the evangelical church may be readily recognizable to ministers and long-term church folk, these phrasing choices might seem trite to others reading the text.

As both a pastor and a professor, I resonate deeply with Hardwick’s explorations of Scripture, especially highlighting seven substantive passages “where persons with disabilities are at the center of God’s agenda to advance his kingdom” (p. 154). The author shows that his concern is thus not peripheral to the message of Christianity but has been marginalized by unintentional cultural forces in the life of the modern church. To address this systemic problem, he rightly insists: “We need disabled pastors, professors, and theologians to provide the church with a new context for reading Scripture and developing doctrine that is born through the lives and lenses” of the disabled community (p. 160).

For the readership of *Ethics & Medicine* who are active church leaders, this book is a vital tool for consciousness-raising and a font of ideas to make the church more inclusive. For medical professionals, however, *Disability and the Church* may not provide adequate bioethical reflection. Missing still is a critique of the medical field for its deficits in caring for the disabled. Based on conversations with parents of autistic children, I sense that resources remain inadequate to meet these families’ needs, which may be true for those with other disabilities. When disabled medical professionals speak out in the fashion that Lamar Hardwick has on behalf of the pastoral ministry, this may remove even more barriers to the treatment of the disabled.<sup>13</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. See, e.g., Mollie Frost, “Doctors with Disabilities Reflect on Challenges,” *ACP Internist* (February 2020), <https://acpinternist.org/archives/2020/02/doctors-with-disability-reflect-on-challenges.htm>.

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