

Article

Building Coalitions with NGOs: Religion Scholars and Disability Justice Activism

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Received: 18 December 2017; Accepted: 16 January 2018; Published: 18 January 2018

Abstract: The World Council of Churches (WCC), an organization of 348 member churches, is a model of coalition building particularly through its support of individuals, churches, and their ministries for the inclusion, participation, and contributions of people with disabilities in its ecumenical work. The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) informs one of the initiatives of the WCC—faith in Jesus Christ and communion fellowship—in the journey toward visible unity and justice for people who were too often missing the banquet of a church of all and for all. EDAN and other international disability advocates have most recently embedded its agenda of inclusion into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations explicitly recognizes the Human Rights for persons with disabilities and, with the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), has raised protections against discrimination, exploitation, and abuse of people with disabilities to the level of international law. The World Health Organization works collaboratively in gathering data and local analyses of efforts to minimize preventable disability and maximize rehabilitation program availability with partners across the globe. These organizations, global in nature, have benefitted from the insights raised by people with disabilities and scholars working at the intersections of disability, religion, and justice. This essay examines the efficacy and opportunities of international coalitions available with these organizations so as to challenge the ethics of simple accommodations with a more robust social justice of affirmation and advocacy for people with disabilities: a new paradigm for our churches and our world.

Keywords: World Council of Churches; Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network; UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goals; World Health Organization; disability justice; inclusion; liberation

EDAN is a WCC sustainable structure to ensure that disability concern remains in the Agenda of the work with churches. Its main purpose is to improve the well being of persons with disabilities both in the church and society and in this endeavour, it carries forward WCC vision of a just and inclusive society with a specific focus on work with persons with disabilities. It exists to provide a model of being church through advocacy for participation, inclusion and active involvement of persons with disabilities in all aspects of spiritual, social and development life of the Church and society.

Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network ([EDAN 2012](#))

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes persons with disabilities and has thus opened doors for their participation and recognition as active contributing members of society: who must not face any discrimination or be left out or behind. Persons with disabilities should be recognized as equal partners, and be consulted by Governments, the UN system, civil society and other stakeholders. . . .

Persons with disabilities strongly believe that only by utilizing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a guiding framework in implementing the SDGs, will it be ensured that exclusion and inequality are not created or perpetuated.

Position Paper by Persons with Disabilities (NU 2016)

The *World Report on Disability* suggests steps for all stakeholders—including governments, civil society organizations and disabled people's organizations—to create enabling environments, develop rehabilitation and support services, ensure adequate social protection, create inclusive policies and programmes, and enforce new and existing standards and legislation, to the benefit of people with disabilities and the wider community. People with disabilities should be central to these endeavors.

World Health Organization ([World Health Organization and World Bank 2011](#), p. xi)

History, literature, philosophy, science, and scripture are replete with stories of outliers, outsiders, and outcasts. Many of the people so identified expressed a disability of one sort or another. Think about the people behind the terms “the blind”, “the lame”, “the deaf . . . and dumb”, “the idiot”, “the leper”, and other derisions attached to individuals and of their places in—or more likely out of—their communities. Compare those terms as well with contemporary use to find the colloquial meanings of that vocabulary relatively unchanged. Nevertheless, from those thoughts you can begin to appreciate the presence of people with disabilities in those storied accounts, not just or only their conditions. Of course, these terms often carry pejorative metaphorical connotations; such deleterious terms are no longer acceptable referents to the people who live with those disabilities and some no longer acceptable for the condition implied—and yet those terms and implied negative associations persist. The preferred terms today follow a general rule of people-first or identity-first language (e.g., people/person with disabilities, people/person with intellectual developmental disabilities, people/person living with x, y, or z; Blind, Deaf, Autistic).¹ My point is that regardless of geographic or social location, references to disability confirm that disability is not only an artifact, disability is a reality in the lives of many people—more than one billion—today.

From historical retrievals as well as in today's news, individuals with disabilities have been born into the human family or have become outliers by means of a condition or conditions acquired after their births. Those disabilities resulted in their welcome to or rejection from their natural/natal communities, as the local powers and authorities—in the home, school, work, play, and/or religion—would have it. Still, taking seriously the likelihood of each and every person encountering and acquiring disabilities in her/his lifetime—as the above quote from the WHO *World Report on Disability* recognizes and “Disabled World” reminds its readers that “People with disabilities are the largest minority group, the only one any person can join at any time” ([Disabled World 2004–2017](#))—outlier status defies common sense, a common humanity, and the common good.

With the insights of work on behalf of justice in the US Civil Rights movements, their successes offered a way where it appeared there was no way . . . for a people to move from the margins of their communities to the center. The way forward arose from a collective memory and unshakeable belief among activists that, in spite of tribulations suffered, Isaiah prophesized God was and remains on their side (Is 43: 1–7). Since mid-twentieth century, people with disabilities, their caregivers, and their advocates have followed “that way” to claim their right to places within their communities and beyond to undo the outlier status assigned and the many assaults perpetrated against them. Some of the rights to participate in personal, social, and ecclesial activities that have been summarily denied to people with disabilities are now granted to them though they are enjoyed only sporadically. Sporadic access is dependent largely on awareness followed with action by those with power of the desire among people with disabilities to so participate—as the excerpt from the Position Paper to the UN Sustainable Development Platform by Persons with Disabilities quoted above demonstrates—or on the will of the dominant power and authority to admit that there are obstacles blocking their way.

¹ On language options in reference to disabilities, see ([Kassenbrock 2015](#)).

Disability justice has come a long way since the days of exposure, ridicule, and warehousing experienced over the millennia, though a good deal needs to be done before the presence of people with disabilities is commonplace. In this essay I am especially interested in how Christian communities appreciate or criticize the diversity present in humankind inclusive of the diversity of persons with disabilities (I leave a comprehensive exploration of similar initiatives engaged by the world's religious traditions to others). Modern communication technologies have facilitated international cooperation (and conflict, disruption, and interference) at unprecedented levels. Among the cooperative successes are the efforts by diverse Christian denominations to work together in a common interest of witness to faith in the Incarnate Word of God/Jesus of Nazareth/the Risen Christ of Faith; the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network, quoted above, models advocacy for and with people with disabilities in our churches. These efforts are reflected in coalitions built around a common Christian calling: to reject war and its assumptions of privilege by an aggressor; to serve those in need of food, shelter, education, healthcare, and friendship; to make a way out of no way.

In what follows I examine the coalitions of the World Council of Churches and its Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, the United Nations *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and its 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and the World Health Organization in dialogue with disability justice. The essay unfolds in three parts: First, I present an historical overview of the international, global coalitions at work in the three organizations. Second, I consider disability justice at the crossroads of their concern. And third, I encourage a more deliberate effort on the part of scholars in Religion and Disability Studies to engage both these secular and religious initiatives with gratefulness and skills-related support. Where scholars from multiple disciplines inform a good deal of these global initiatives in behind the scenes work with these organizations, it is as imperative that we scholars in religion especially work also at the front lines of this mission for disability justice.

1. Historical Overtures and Global Initiatives

Long before the establishment of the World Council of Churches, United Nations and World Health Organization, individuals formed family units, communal activities for survival of clan members and the arts, eventually leading to group organization beyond the local and familiar social spheres. From these groups, culture emerged and, along with culture, ruminations about the divine.² From ruminations and culture building, capacities for both self and group transcendence developed and continue to adapt to the many changes accompanying population growth and environmental change that have led, subsequently, to global initiatives of many kinds and for many—positive and negative—ends.

2. World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches has its roots in late 19th to early 20th century lay, missionary, and Sunday school movements during a period of widespread immigration as a result of “rapid” mass transit and European colonial expansion east, west, and south. Members of these movements were concerned for evangelization, service, and fellowship with nascent Christian communities in “the colonies”. Formal collaboration among them was modeled after the League of Nations, when other mission groups and the Orthodox Synod joined in conferences that met following World War I to labor deliberately through ecumenical networks to advance Christian fellowship and to thwart another global war. International in scope, the alliance of joint conferences intended cooperation under the banner of ecumenism in the mission of a unified witness to Jesus Christ. The ecumenical organization now known as the World Council of Churches was initiated by a vote of 147 Christian denomination leaders (missioners and clergy) in 1937–1938. Unfortunately, the start of World War II delayed incorporation until this global alliance of churches for peace was able to convene its 1st Assembly

² On the development of human culture, see ([Franchini 2002](#)).

as the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam (22 August–4 September 1948).³ The purpose of the World Council of Churches—now 348 member churches worldwide—is to be a visible sign of the common calling of Christians to faith in Jesus Christ expressed in Eucharistic fellowship, mission and evangelism, and service in the promotion of justice and peace between people and for our common home (WCC 2013c). In matters related to people with disabilities across denominational boundaries, the World Council of Churches (WCC) presents a new paradigm for being “a church of all for all”.⁴

Perhaps little known to the academies of scholars in studies of religion, religious texts, and theological studies, the WCC has identified the relevance of the church to, for, and with people who are or have been beyond the scope of interest, who may be inexperienced in the drive for power, and who are likely and deliberately marginalized—i.e., not simply ignored—by an agenda of able-bodied and able-minded normativity. The WCC has been attentive to the constellation of issues surrounding disability since its assemblies in the 1960s, establishing the need for sustained exploration of how the Christian churches could be more inclusive of people with disabilities than previously. To this end and as a WCC structure, the achievements of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) “in working with the WCC, the churches and the wider disability sector since inception have been centered on sensitizing the society on inclusion and to help in providing ecumenical space, and facilitating the churches, regional, and national ecumenical bodies to become more responsive as beacons of hope, dignity, and inspiration for persons with disabilities” (EDAN 2012). Recently, more than 60 members of the EDAN, all belonging to WCC member churches, attended the 10th WCC Assembly in 2013, where the full participation of people with disabilities was affirmed in word and in their presence, numbering 10% of delegates out of the 656 in attendance⁵ (a percentage close to par with global estimates of people with disabilities) (US Census Bureau n.d.; WHO 2015a).

My own tradition, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), has withheld itself from full membership status in the WCC. In place of membership, however, the RCC is a partner with the WCC, with delegates that work as voting members of the WCC’s “Faith and Order Commission” and “Mission and Evangelism”. A Joint Working Group between the WCC and RCC was formed in 1968, following one of the initiatives of Pope John XXIII, who convened the ecumenical Vatican Council II (1962–1965).⁶ Before the Council, John XXIII established a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (1960), “the beginning of the Catholic Church’s formal commitment to the ecumenical movement” (Vatican 2005). The first public exchange between this Secretariat and the WCC was with five RCC delegates, who attended the WCC 3rd Assembly, New Delhi, India (1961). The Secretariat prepared four of the Vatican Council’s sixteen documents—*Unitatis redintegratio*: Decree on Ecumenism (1964), *Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965), *Dignitatis humanae*: Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965), and *Nostra aetate*: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (1965)—each concerned with the RCC’s relationships with other people of faith. The second most visible exchange was when two WCC observers attended the four autumn sessions of Vatican Council II.⁷ *Unitatis redintegratio* remains the guiding principle of the RCC response to the call for Christian unity, echoing a near identical recognition with the WCC of the scandal that is the disunity among Christians. As a result, though “Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only . . . many Christian communions . . . profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature” (Vatican Council II 1964, §1), Nevertheless, the principal reason the RCC does not become a full member concerns the nature of the RCC as a unified communion of Catholics globally and the

³ On this history, see (WCC 2013a); also (Hooft 1982).

⁴ On this paradigm, see (WCC 2003; EDAN 2016).

⁵ On attendance at the 10th Assembly, see (WCC 2013d).

⁶ On relations between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, see (WCC 2013e).

⁷ On participation at the Second Vatican Council, see (WCC 1999).

nature of the WCC determination of delegates on the basis of denominational membership;⁸ Catholics outnumber—by millions—members of other denominations: voting power by the RCC delegates would disadvantage votes by all other Christian communions.

The WCC meets in assemblies on average every seven to eight years with a total of ten global gatherings to date.⁹ Its concern for the subject of disabilities emerged at the 3rd Assembly, New Delhi, India (1961), in discussions on religious liberty along the lines of the United Nations “Declaration of Human Rights” and the potentially consequent penalties for the churches’ failures to apply those rights to persons with disabilities. At the 4th Assembly, Uppsala, Sweden (1968), the WCC began to explore the concept of a “more inclusive” church, which intensified concern of inclusion for people with disabilities (PWD) so much that beginning with the 5th Assembly, Nairobi, Kenya (1975), every subsequent WCC Assembly has reflected upon the place of PWD in the churches. The final report of the Nairobi Assembly, “Breaking Barriers”, included a section on “The Handicapped and the Wholeness of the Family of God”, a statement that affirms church unity inclusive of both PWD and the nondisabled. The 6th (Vancouver, Canada 1983) and 7th (Canberra, Australia 1991) assemblies continued exploring ways to facilitate participation and unity with and for PWD. At the 8th Assembly, Harare, Zimbabwe (1998), ten persons with disabilities were invited to advise the WCC on inclusion strategies; that advice resulted in the formation of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) and EDAN was adopted as one of the program initiatives of the WCC. The work begun in Nairobi and raised again in Harare continued with initiatives designed by EDAN and directed at accessibility, at rights not charity, and at inclusion and participation as well as a WCC commitment to non-offensive terminology and the adoption of the referent “people with disabilities” thereafter (EDAN 1999). Since the 9th Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2006), EDAN has been fully integrated into the work of the WCC. At its 10th Assembly, Busan, ROK (2013), the WCC fulfilled the initiatives from Harare and Porto Alegre in support of individuals, churches, and their ministries for the inclusion, participation, and contributions of PWD expressly in accepting human diversity, vulnerability, and the limits of mortality in all facets of its ecumenical work for peace and justice.

3. United Nations

In light of the principles of the 12 August 1941 Atlantic Charter, the United Nations was organized during the Second World War with a 1–2 January 1942 twenty-six nation pledge: a “Declaration by United Nations”, against the war’s Axis Powers. From that pledge a series of conferences by heads of states—in Moscow and Tehran on the goals of international peace and security (1943), in Dumbarton Oaks on the future organization’s structure (1944), and in Yalta on voting protocols (1944–1945)—led to establishment of the United Nations in San Francisco (1945). It was in San Francisco that 850 delegates of fifty nation states along with 2650 persons of their staffs, “representatives of over eighty percent of the world’s population, . . . determined to set up an organization which would preserve peace and help build a better world” (NU 2017a). Among the affirmations and promotions of equality and equal rights, justice and respect for obligations, social progress and better standards of life, the signatories of the *Charter of the United Nations* thenceforth resolved to practice tolerance, unite in peace for security, and promote the economic and social advancement of all peoples (NU 1945, Preamble).

Aside from the unprecedented international collaboration of nation states and a mere three years after its *Charter* was promulgated, the United Nations (UN) developed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (10 December 1948) by which nations can measure their achievements in and protections of fundamental human rights in their communities and in others. Deliberately a-religious in its argumentation, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) opens nonetheless with a fundamental premise about human beings and recognition of their inherent dignity and equality

⁸ On RCC participation with the WCC, see (Armstrong 2013).

⁹ On the work of the assemblies, see (WCC 2013b).

that is familiar to many if not all faith traditions. Moreover, the *UDHR* proclaims on account of this dignity that “every individual and every organ of society . . . shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance” (NU 1948, Preamble). This reference to observance is key for any attempt to advance peace and security among the nations and peoples across the globe. As recognition of the interdependent nature of contemporary realities confirms, the international standard enumerated in the thirty articles of the *UDHR* entail obligations and duties of an ethical nature to respect, protect, and bring to fruition the potentials and capabilities inherent to persons, to their human dignity, and to a genuinely fully human life.

The *UDHR* is the founding rationale of a number of UN program initiatives, among them: International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Program (WFP), and Women (UN Women). These initiatives and others respond to critical needs of all those affected in a series of internal UN growth—from paternalism to empowerment—regarding respect for PWD and inclusive of the particular needs of persons vulnerable to disability indifference. From 1945–1955 the UN Secretariat and its Economic and Social Council considered disability issues, promoting the rights of persons with disabilities in matters related to prevention and rehabilitation, and subsequently established the Temporary Social Welfare Committee. From 1955–1970 the health and welfare model shifted to social welfare. The UN was mindful of a *de facto* entitlement of PWD to the fundamental human rights upheld by the *Charter*, the *UDHR*, and the anti-discrimination principles of the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” (NU 1966a) and “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (NU 1966b). In the decades that followed, the UN gradually approached disability more contextually when the General Assembly adopted declarations addressing “The Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons” (1971) and “The Rights of Disabled Persons” (1975), which declarations signaled the first recognition rights for PWD that, unfortunately, limited the force of those rights on the basis of an individual’s presumed capacity as it was determined by some agency and on local governments’ abilities to fund programs that would facilitate an individual’s ability to exercise those rights. From these initiatives the UN moved along with some of its member states toward increased recognition of PWD in their midst.

The experience of the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons convinced the UN that social attitudes against PWD played a dominant role in the unjust construction of barriers to their inclusion and participation. In response, the UN adopted the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons (NU 1982) that included policy benchmarks on the prevention, rehabilitation, and the equalization of opportunities for PWD. The UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–1992) provided a timeframe for implementation of the World Programme of Action. The efforts of the World Programme confirmed the need of support to integrate a society for all, which support offered explicit guidelines that recognized persons with disabilities as agents of their own destinies and advocated for full participation of each nation’s citizens, including their citizens with disabilities.¹⁰ Over five UN world conferences and numerous sessions of UN plenary and regional commissions on the economy and on social development (1992–2007), attention to institutionalizing and equalizing the rights and dignity of PWD were negotiated; an *ad hoc* committee was established in 2002 as a working group to prepare and draft the text of what would become the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD).

It seems to have been a long time in coming; nevertheless, those negotiations were affirmed when the UN assumed full responsibility for “all” people. In December 2006, the “UN General Assembly adopted by consensus the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and its Optional Protocol. The negotiation process represented the quickest [result] in United Nations history, with unprecedented levels of participation of civil society organizations. On 30 March 2007 the Convention and Optional Protocol opened . . . with a record number of 82 opening signatories” (NU 2017b); to date the CRPD

¹⁰ On the development of guidelines to implement these initiatives, see (Rioux and Heath 2013).

has 160 signatories. With this momentum, the intersection of Disability Studies and human rights for PWD is confirmed in the CRPD general principles (NU 2006, Article 3):

1. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons;
2. Non-discrimination;
3. Full and effective participation and inclusion in society;
4. Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;
5. Equality of opportunity;
6. Accessibility;
7. Equality between men and women;
8. Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

The pressing question remains, how will the UN maintain its commitment to PWD? In addition to the UDHR and CRPD, the UN started a major campaign to “end poverty” as the central theme of its Millennium Development Goals (2001–2015). While specific attention to the goals for persons with disabilities was lacking, the success of the 2015 Millennium Campaign is recorded in dramatic figures of poverty reduction, millions more children enrolled in primary education and achieved parity in access to education for boys and girls, increased numbers of women in elected public service, decreased infant mortality and maternal mortality rates, increased access to retroviral treatment to millions preventing death from HIV and AIDS, and millions of lives have improved as a result of access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation (NU 2017d). As the immediate connections between poverty and disability are noted widely in the literature, the Millennium Campaign affected positively the lives of many PWD. With the end of the Millennium Campaign the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote prosperity while protecting the planet on which all depend.

The SDGs incorporate the work yet to be fully realized of the 8 Millennium Development Goals, particularly on poverty, education and gender equity, and healthcare. Further, the SDGs attend to decent work and working conditions, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, care for our common home planet Earth, and work for peace and justice through strong institutions and global partnerships. Like the Millennium Campaign, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines “a universal, integrated, and transformative vision for a better world”. Moreover, the language about the SDGs apply universally to all people: “countries will mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, *while ensuring that no one is left behind*” ((NU 2017e), Sustainable Development Goals). Unlike the Millennium Campaign, the 2030 Agenda has been receptive to and has invited contributions to its Sustainable Campaign’s Knowledge Platform from major groups and other stakeholders, voluntary national reviews, intergovernmental forums and bodies, and partnerships and voluntary commitments.

Among the major groups and other relevant stakeholders invited to contribute to the Sustainable Development High-Level Political Forum Knowledge Platform is the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities. The 2016 “Position Paper by Persons with Disabilities” responding to the subject “ensuring that no one is left behind” was endorsed by 312 organizations;¹¹ the 2017 “Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities” input paper does not include signatories, yet the same organizations are suspected by the similar composition style. The 2016 “Position Paper” opens with the estimate of PWD

¹¹ Among the 312 endorsing organizations, those identifiably Christian-based include Asociación De Familiares De Niñas Y Niños Con Discapacidad “Los Angelitos”, CBM/International Christian Development organization, Christian Fellowship SHORE, Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba, and the WCC EDAN. EDAN reports extensive participation in drafting the position paper.

worldwide, exposes the failures of the Millennium Campaign to reference PWD explicitly, identifies unfinished work of the MDGs, offers recommendations for inclusion and equitable access through enabling environments, and expresses what at face value appears as an insight from liberation theology in “reaching the farthest behind first”. (NU 2016). The 2017 Knowledge Platform “Input” addresses material hardship in households including persons with disabilities, the discriminatory nature of the health sector toward PWD, barriers to participation by women and girls with disabilities, and the vulnerability of PWD to climate change and disaster-risk (NU 2017c). In addition to the contributions by PWD that addressed concerns surrounding disability, two other groups submitted papers to the 2016 Knowledge Platform and twelve other groups submitted papers to the 2017 Knowledge Platform with explicit concern for PWD (NU 2017f).¹²

4. World Health Organization

Similar to the 19th century initiatives that gave rise to the WCC, the World Health Organization marks its roots in increased trade and travel with a secular concern for health crises of “foreign pestilence” by yellow fever, cholera, malaria, typhoid, and other epidemic diseases, which crises were ministered by the purveyors of modern medicine and international sanitary conferences in Europe and the US from 1851 to the end of the century. Those conferences led to the Pan American Sanitary Organization in 1902, the Office International d’Hygiene Publique (OIHP) in 1903, and the Health Organization of the League of Nations in 1921. The OIHP was instrumental in standardizing the classification of disease, establishing a common vocabulary for pharmacopoeias, publishing a report on the physiological base of nutrition, and publishing the *Weekly Epidemiological Record*. With the start of World War II, the League of Nations/OIHP model was transferred to the newly chartered United Nations in 1946 under its Economic and Social Council and that Council’s mandated responsibilities for health (and other) matters.¹³ Subsequently, the World Health Organization (WHO) became the directing and coordinating authority for health within the UN system in 1948.

The primary role of WHO is to direct international health initiatives and to lead partners in global health responses. WHO enjoys this authorization by virtue of Article 25 of UDHR, which states the right to “well-being . . . including food, clothing, housing and medical care [and] to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood”. With this right, the Constitution of WHO was adopted in 1946 by the International Health Conference “to promote and protect the health of all peoples” with the single objective of “the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health” (WHO 2014, pp. 1–2). It would be another twenty years—1966—before the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights codified “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” (NU 1966b, Article 12). Although cautions are in order on the potential conflation of health-to-illness as ability-to-disability, WHO has utilized the Human Rights model and the CRPD to recognize both the barriers to well-being experienced by many PWD and the failures to provide access not only to healthcare but to education, employment, family, community, and public life.

WHO began to address disability through a lens more conducive to the social construction(s) of disability than the UN’s earlier efforts in a series of publications: 2001 *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (WHO 2001) and ICF-CY companion classification for children and youth (WHO 2007); with the World Bank, the first *World Report on Disability* (World Health Organization

¹² See inputs to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, Major Groups and Other Stakeholders: 2016 among a total of 23 group categories where disability was referenced were 3 major groups and other stakeholders—AP-RECM, Major Group for Children and Youth, and Persons with Disabilities; 2017 among a total of 48 group categories where disability was referenced were 13 major groups and other stakeholders—AP-RECM, Commission on Voluntary Service & Action, Education and Academics Stakeholder Group, KEPA, Major Group for Children and Youth (Child-focused submission), Major Group NGSs, Major Group Women, SDGs Kenya Forum, Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, Stakeholder Group on Ageing, Together 2030, Volunteers Groups, and Zonta International. For both 2016 and 2017 inputs, see (NU 2017f).

¹³ On the developments leading up to the World Health Organization, see (Charles 1968).

and World Bank 2011); and *Global Disability Action Plan 2014–2021: Better Health for All People with Disability* (WHO 2015b). Unlike strictly medical models of disability, these documents reject simple determinations of interventions for this or that disability. Rather and following the insights of social economist Amartya Sen,¹⁴ WHO has adopted a schema for determining the support or repression of human rights owing to all people on the bases of their “functioning capabilities”. The underlying principles guiding use of the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) point to universality, etiological parity, neutrality, and environmental influences. These principles inform conclusions that disability occurs everywhere, functioning is measurable across cultures with a set of common metrics, classification must include both positive and negative assessments of functioning (i.e., ability and limitations), and an accounting of the local geographic and social conditions that facilitate or thwart functioning.

In advance of the UN, WHO began to engage people who had direct experience with disability in their efforts to address the status of the health and well being of PWD. Despite the value of the CRPD, the UN was not deliberately inclusive of PWD in determinations about disability (the UN has remedied this failure in part with the SDGs Knowledge Platform). Appropriately, the *World Report on Disability* (Report) presents narrative vignettes at the start of chapters two through eight (of nine) penned by PWD, living across the globe in twenty-one countries (from Australia to Zambia). Acknowledgments for support of the Report include CBM International, “an international Christian development organization, committed to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in the poorest communities of the world” (CBM 2010a), among the sponsors. The “Introduction” notes that while each of the nine chapters was “written by a number of authors, working with a wider group of experts from around the world. Wherever possible, people with disabilities were involved as authors and experts. . . . The drafts of each chapter were reviewed following input from regional consultations . . . which involved local academics, policy-makers, practitioners, and people with disabilities” (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, p. xxii). Unfortunately, the Report does not provide biographical information on any of the contributors. Nevertheless, among named contributors, Tom Shakespeare, Professor of Disability Research at Norwich Medical School, Norfolk, UK, figures prominently: co-authoring the “Introduction”, contributing to chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9, serving on the Editorial Committee, and with three others preparing the final text of the Report summary. Additionally, PWD among members of the Advisory Committee include Amadaou Bagayoko and Miriam Doumbia, Sir Philip Craven, Kicki Nordström; of the remaining sixteen members of the Advisory Committee, six have extensive personal and/or professional experience with disability. The work by CBM, Shakespeare, and other members of the Advisory Committee offers a contemporary example of building coalitions in the work and mission of disability justice.

The Report boldly “charts the steps that are required to improve participation and inclusion of people with disabilities” (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, p. xxiii). Appreciatively the Report admits, “Disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual’s contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)” (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, p. 4). It is especially in reference to the contextual factors that scholars in religion and disability, especially in light of the compelling recognition of the intersectionality that disability presents in the academy, are well poised to contribute to the conversations and plans of action for disability justice.

5. Crossroads of International Coalitions and Disability Justice

The WCC, UN, and WHO each have taken seriously the concerns of justice with and toward people who stand literally and figuratively outside of the churches and houses of worship of many

¹⁴ On basic human functioning capabilities, see (Sen 2017; Nussbaum 2006).

religious traditions, often beyond the scope of the interests of international socio-political relations, and comparatively distant from the concerns of varied private sector institutions. As a result of these coalition efforts, disability justice is “on the books” in most of these entities, and many unaffiliated and smaller organizations have made commitments to the cause. No doubt like racial justice, LGBTIQ justice, and justice for women, disability justice presents a compelling intervention by these bodies as their members have come to recognize the intolerable ignominy of disadvantaging discriminations against not only individuals with disabilities but discriminations against the class(es) of people living with disabilities.

A good deal of the interventions by the WCC, UN, and WHO to interrupt and prevent harms depend upon an acceptance of the trend to nationalize and localize international law, most evident in the use of the *UNDHR* and, for the purposes of this essay, the *CRPD*. In particular, while these organizations put forward humane appreciations for the respect of persons and the rights accruing to all, lamentably, the likelihood of local authorities (church, nation, and/or state) to incorporate these initiatives will depend on the effect they bear on domestic and/or ecclesiastic law.¹⁵ However, one of the more promising possibilities of the *CRPD* is not its focus on PWD but its insistence that the *CRPD* applies the *UNDHR* and other instruments explicitly to PWD and, thereby, raises the bar for everyone. The *CRPD* does more for PWD by attaching enforcement to the *UNDHR*, interpreting and applying existing rights “as well as a new approach to treaty enforcement. For this reason, the *CRPD* is significant not only to people with disabilities but also to the development of human rights generally, by offering new human rights protections for all people, with and without disabilities” (Kanter 2015, p. 5).

At this juncture it is critical to recall the consciousness raising success of people with disabilities and their allies and the still remaining work of disability justice writ broad and with those human rights protections.

[As] success breeds success, as awareness of the social sources of disability and as more and more people with impairments act autonomously, their raised consciousness may be transformed into empowered consciousness. Empowered consciousness ‘means acting together to empower others. And an insistence on ‘active, collective contestation of control over the necessities of life: housing, school, personal and family relationships, respect, independence, and so on.’ . . . [It] is to be expected that a period of success will be followed by one of quiescence on disability rights issues may follow (Winter 2003).¹⁶

It is to this period of quiescence that the work of coalition building between scholars of religion, the initiatives of international non-governmental organizations, and local governing bodies can bear fruit. With the international instruments presented by the WCC, the UN, and WHO, religionists are well poised to raise the stakes regarding the imperatives of human rights surrounding disability justice. Religion scholars working in disability justice especially have access to the arguments for such justice on the basis of the fundamental claims about all people, identifying especially those who are vulnerable—like the sojourner, displaced person/refugee, widow/widower, orphan, unemployed, socially dispossessed, and otherwise impoverished—that faith or religious sensibilities enjoin practitioners to offer welcoming and inclusive hospitality, to uphold the rule of law, and to go further in developing and protecting human rights.

The Christian tradition, informed as it is by the communities of intertestamental Judaism and mindful of the periods of sojourn among our forebears the Patriarchs and Matriarchs through the desert Exodus, the diaspora Exile, the Return to Israel/Palestine, and the challenge of occupation has been especially formative for the WCC and, though unacknowledged, the secular UN and WHO international organizations as well.¹⁷ It is near impossible to not recognize the Judeo-Christian

¹⁵ On incorporating or failing to incorporate initiatives, see (Barak-Erez 2004).

¹⁶ Internal quote, (Charlton 1998, p. 119).

¹⁷ On the Judeo-Christian influence on developments in the UN and WHO, see (Lehmann 2015).

religious sensibilities in the secular sphere, given the language “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women . . . and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” (UN *Charter*, Preamble). Faith, dignity, justice, law, freedom, peace, and security—the terms enshrined in the UN *Charter*—ground the crossroads of collaboration with and for PWD that reach out to those who may be questioned about their right to such goods and access to the means not only to survive but to thrive.

Disability justice in the vocabulary of the Judeo-Christian traditions may point to the harms that vulnerable persons and classes of people have suffered with a view to preventing those harms and to relieving the scars of any open wounds. It is to this “may point” that scholars in religion are called to respond in support of international initiatives to, in so many words, pay attention to those who are “othered”, “marginalized”, “alienated” and then harmed as a result by failures to heed the moral imperatives of care. Those imperatives are found, for example, in Exodus 22:21–22, Psalm 82:3, Isaiah 1:17, Psalm 146:5–9, Matthew 25:35–40, Hebrews 13:1–3.¹⁸

These international bodies have benefitted also from the extensive history and interpretative trajectories of natural law owing in part to religious houses of study.¹⁹ Many of these religious institutions inherited the natural law and enshrined its traditional schema, founded on philosophical theses regarding “the good” and the principles of practical reason given this or that contextual exigent determining what is right and just for human beings. Unfortunately, many of those enshrinements have been used at cross-purposes to liberty and justice (e.g., heteronormativity). Nevertheless, the fundamental insights—from Aristotle, Boethius, Augustine, and Aquinas to contemporary theorists—remain persuasive: the first principle of the practical reason is that all beings seek the good. Consequently, the first precept is that “good” is to be done and evil avoided. “Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations is the order of the precepts [:] . . . preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles . . . sexual intercourse, education of offspring, . . . to know the truth about God and to live in society . . . belongs to the natural law ” (Aquinas 1948, I.II.94.2c). From self-preservation to life in society, this trajectory developed into language and positive law surrounding both the common good and the support of access to that good that form the basis of human rights found in the UN *UDHR*.

The common good commands both attention and action in matters of protecting universal human rights and in building coalitions of disability justice to resist, and at last, to correct the negative determinations against PWD and others vulnerable to harm. Further, the common good extends the foundations of the “good” of human flourishing that is access to an exigent or a seemingly trivial requirement to thrive in this or that particular context. Moreover, in these days of hypersensitivity to the “other”, a practical working understanding of the common good will expose attempts to deny access to the means of flourishing on the basis of race, culture, religion, ethnicity, and ability. Denied access is contrary to the natural law, to individual and communal rights, to these international overtures as well as to the Judeo-Christian tradition of care for those in need.²⁰ Alternately, thriving will be the key measure of success with these NGO initiatives for and with PWD in their pursuit of justice for those threatened by complacency, complicity, or commission of sin: “the failure to bother to love” (Keenan 2004, p. 61) to pay attention to another, to have concern for another’s well-being and welfare.

Clearly, being oppressed or neglected by dominant powers and authorities is no badge of honor, rather such an experience is an affront to the dignity of the person and classes of people so insultingly treated. Thus, inspired by scriptural, philosophical, and theological texts, religionists can remind

¹⁸ Among others on the biblical sources of the failure to care, see (Avalos et al. 2007; Melcher et al. 2017; Moss and Schipper 2011; Olyan 2008; Yong 2011).

¹⁹ On libraries, see (Gamble 1997).

²⁰ On the commonweal, see (Hollenbach 2002).

their audiences of how these sources come to bear on local, national, and international initiatives to protect against and relieve the injustices and sins of commission, complacency, and complicity. Further, scholars engaged in theological ethics can engage these sources accordingly so as to encourage change among those with power and the institutions and systems constructed to support a scandalous status quo. As religionists working in disability justice and those concerned with others who are vulnerable to discriminations have demonstrated, justice for people with disabilities—as justice for the widow, orphan, and sojourner—is justice for everyone. The crossroads of disability justice taking shape in these international initiatives provide opportunities for scholars in religion to influence work with and for PWD, work that can affect positive change in the lives of PWD and many more others as well as to put our guild's research and insights on human diversity alongside content- and context-diverse functioning capabilities into service with a broader, international public.

6. Scholar Activists in Local, National, and International Coalitions

I received a completely unexpected invitation to participate in a conference sponsored by the Council for World Mission,²¹ EDAN (of the WCC), and CBM. I delivered the keynote address to “Building an Inclusive Community: Moving beyond Accommodation to Affirmation and Advocacy for People with Disabilities” in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 21 July 2014.²² This address and the week of seminars that followed the opening plenary introduced me to the international initiatives among Christian churches and the WCC with to advance the cause of inclusion as a mission imperative for their own and their denominations' integrity. The conference received financial support from and presence of executive members of the CBM, one of the organizations that contributed to the *WHO Report* and a continuing presence in working towards a disability inclusive world (CBM 2007, 2010b, 2010c).

I was humbled by the invitation, by Church leaders in attendance—among them many individuals with disabilities—in their work of advocacy and inclusion, and by the equal regard for and hands-on commitment to improving the lives of PWD. From this experience and my continuing interest in the work of the Council for World Mission, EDAN/WCC, and CBM, I realize the dearth of scholars building coalitions on the pressing needs of working with and for PWD in the trenches of Christian community life as well as in the broader national and international—ecclesial, economic, legal, political, and social—institutions of which we are all implicitly a part.

For Christian ethicists the challenge of putting moral imperatives into concrete action has evolved in fits and starts. I know that media personnel call upon many of us when an ethical quandary presents and others of us may be asked to comment in our own congregational bodies. Yet, those responses may be guarded and our involvement curbed particularly when the subject involves our own communities. Mindful to not one-up or slight the local power structures of political or clerical authority where our research expertise may threaten, I suspect that many of us keep a low profile even when issues of local critical importance are exposed. However, it is to just such issues that we religion scholars ought to respond in activist solidarity with the authority earned by study and in service to the local, national, and international common good.

The WCC, UN, and WHO have made significant overtures on behalf of and with PWD, using their international platforms to recommend initiatives in the work of disability justice. As noted above, the likelihood of institutional powers to incorporate these initiatives depends on the construction of domestic, international, and ecclesiastic law. Still, it is to these efforts that informed activist scholarship in religion could be brought to bear on effective change.

The language and force of human rights present a compelling rationale for the contributions that religion scholars can make in these efforts. The challenge remains to engage concrete practices that will reflect international instruments like the UN *Charter* and WCC “Church of All”. Those practices

²¹ On the partnership of churches in mission, see (Council for World Mission 2014b).

²² On the 2014 conference, see (Council for World Mission 2014c); also (Council for World Mission 2014a).

have the potential to be locally and globally transformative.²³ To begin, religion scholar activists, in a necessary dialogue with PWD, can engage the inspiration and passion of their theologizing as a force of persuasion for what, in the language of ethics, could be argued is right in light of the common good. Next, informed by collaboration with PWD, scholars can raise the insights of critical theory on race, gender, and disability to construct frameworks tailored to particular contexts that motivate the (local) powers to think about all the people they serve and the goods owing to those most vulnerable or marginalized.²⁴ In this construction, scholars would be well advised to follow the recommendations in the “Position Paper” (NU 2016) and “Input” (NU 2017c) for direct practical action.²⁵ With exposure of those contextual realities, scholars and their collaborators can work to mobilize their communities, utilizing, for example, the successful methods of ADAPT: a US “national grass-roots community that organizes disability rights activists to engage in nonviolent direct action, including civil disobedience, to assure the civil and human rights of people with disabilities” (ADAPT 2018, “Welcome”). Finally, guard against fatigue and what appears as the slow pace of change by remembering the gains made in a relatively short period of time for women, racial minorities, and other marginalized people the world over, granted while the *parousia* is not yet realized it is nonetheless palpable, at least in part.

Regrettably, for many academics, including those working in religious ethics, disability is not on their professional or research radar. Even so, if as Christians believe, the Incarnate God, Jesus of Nazareth died by crucifixion then rose from death and was recognized in his resurrected body by the disabling wounds in his hands, head, feet, and side,²⁶ then Christian scholars have all the more reason to institutionalize disability justice in local, national, and international law. Minimally, Christian religion scholars can advocate on behalf of and for PWD as a class of persons who have been marginalized on account of their diversity in a world teeming with difference and whom the *New Testament* offers as the preferred companions of Jesus. Further, Jesus’ teaching about being neighborly, extending mercy to someone who has suffered injustice, and remaining attentive and accountable to what is right may offer additional incentive to get involved. While other examples could be cited, consider the Beatitudes as a source for scholar-activism.

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) invite the hearer to ponder the ethical demands an eschatological future holds to Christians for the task of discipleship here and now. As such, the sayings refer to the already-but-not-yet future about which all of our lives are subject until our last breath and the kingdom come. This reading “calls for both active response within the community and attentiveness toward the ultimate end” (Chan 2012, p. 158). While it is a stretch to suggest that each of the Beatitudes directs Christian religion scholars to social activism, surely “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mt 5:6), “Blessed are the merciful” (Mt 5:7), and “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9) could inspire scholars’ work in strengthening the local, national, and international coalitions working toward justice for PWD. Consequently, when theological ethicists take note of and injustice in the distribution of resources, access to critical services, or worse harms like abuse or neglect, therein a righteous anger stirs us to expose the wrong and to persevere against the powers and the odds against human flourishing, right order, and the common good. Similarly, when a neighbor lies forsaken Christians are instructed to reach out in loving care—to feed, to clothe, to visit—as well as to ensure that a network will continue provisions in our absence. Likewise, when scarcity threatens and war sabers rattle we remind ourselves of the peace-shalom that comes in abundance with right relationship between all peoples and the cosmos that sustains us. In the ways that these scenarios goad Christians to action on behalf of an individual so ought we to be goaded on behalf of a class of persons in coalitions for justice at local, national, and international levels.

²³ On the foundations of this pragmatism, see (Cahill 2013).

²⁴ On contemporary critical theory and scholar activism, see (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009); also (Hale 2008).

²⁵ On social practice theory, see (Williams et al. 2018).

²⁶ On the disabling crucifixion and resurrected Christ, see (Eiesland 1994).

7. Concluding Thoughts

The tradition of the common good and preferential justice serves as an antidote to stigma, austere policy setting, and decision-making on international efforts to assure communal resource allocation in reference to people with disabilities. Rather than the dominant normative assumptions about disablement, diversity more accurately describes the human condition inclusive of people with disabilities and the nondisabled alike. From a start with diversity, instead of denigration difference will be appreciated. From a start with diversity, everyone's needs for common goods will be measured by a preferential option for those who today may need more but tomorrow less so as to flourish. For those who have long-suffered under dominant ways and means, this antidote begins to remedy injustice.

People with disabilities defy the expectations of homogeneity assumed in the development and imposition of norms and standards; as a result of their embodied diversity, they have been othered and stigmatized by dominant narratives. The UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* recognizes "that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (NU 2006, Preamble 5). CRPD signatories have resolved "to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity" (NU 2006, Article 1). The World Health Organization notes the diversity of gender, age, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or cultural heritage among people with disabilities, and that "the disability experience resulting from the interaction of health conditions, personal factors, and environmental factors varies greatly" (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, p. 262). Disability Studies literature, led by scholars with disabilities and their allies, confirms that the experience of disability is multifarious and the experience of disadvantage multidimensional.

Disability Studies challenges the historical trajectory and portrayal of disability in religious literature, in legal and policy determinations, and in the hermeneutic assumptions of structural and social conditions that have othered people with disabilities from a presumed normative main. These histories depict people with many different kinds of disability as deviant. Such depictions prize conformity, homogeneity, and symmetry that permit social and legal discrimination against diversity and heterogeneity. Consequently, people with disabilities have been and continue to be othered by the nondisabled-normate,²⁷ revealing discomfort with creation's kaleidoscopic diversity.²⁸ Sadly, this discomfort and opposition to the remedial efforts of the CRPD, Civil Rights Act (1964), Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), as well as the efforts by ecclesial communities remains considerably widespread nationally and internationally.²⁹ The academy of scholars working in Religion and Disability Studies is encouraged to take up the cause beyond our research, writing, and teaching, and to bring our insights to bear on local, national, and international efforts, including support for developments in law to build activist coalitions of and for disability justice, now.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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²⁷ On this neologism, see (Thomson 1997).

²⁸ On human and creation's diversity, see (Iozzio 2013).

²⁹ On the unfinished work of legislation concerning civil rights in the United States, see (Iozzio 2017).

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