



***Disability in Mission – The Church’s Hidden Treasure*, eds. David C Deuel and Nathan G John. Hendrickson, 2019.**

Neville Howard Carr^a

^a PhD, MA, BD, BA Hons, Member, Australian College of Educational Leaders and former CMS missionary in the Philippines and Tanzania

Disability is often viewed as a reason for disqualification or a cause for attrition in cross-cultural missionary service. In addition, some theological views may lead to non-inclusive approaches to persons with disabilities, which is being challenged in the twenty-first century.¹ There is little in the literature on living with disability as a redemptive part of effective and sustainable missionary service. This book seeks to address that gap in the literature.

A co-editor (N. John) asserts that “disability-inclusive missions provide major opportunities for ministry in the twenty-first century.” He defines disability as “impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions from various physical and non-physical causes... various weaknesses, emotional issues and vulnerabilities” (p.6).

The “success-oriented approach” of mission agencies, he says, squeezes missionary candidates “into rigid molds in which they have to be intelligent, strong, agile, and have high energy: the Type A personality.[W]e therefore discount people who are different” (p.3, 4).

He and his wife faced challenges raising a severely disabled daughter in a mission context. He argues that many case studies in the book “outline a similar pattern whereby God has worked powerfully in missions through disability, and not just in spite of disability” (p.5).

The specific focus on cross-cultural missions and disability is because “international mission is typically out of bounds for people with disability.” Rarely do books “explore the role of people with disability in global missions” (p.7).

Deuel (ch.1) suggests that “God uses disability and any resultant weakness as part of our growth.” Weakness in others “is our opportunity to

serve them and to help them grow” (p.12). God “chose Moses, Isaiah and Paul in weakness and disability, then sent them on their missions.” He challenges Christians to “pray for a greater presence of disability and weakness in the church” (p.17). The man closest to God was the “least able to communicate his experience to others. Moses’ disability did not prevent God from using him. This is weakness pressed into service” (p.24).

Subsequent chapters explore some of the dilemmas and heartaches missionary parents face with the responsibility of caring for a disabled child in a non-Western context. Bonnie Baker, who had a breakdown described as post-partum depression after the birth of her Down Syndrome daughter (ch.3) asks, “Would it be responsible for us as parents to take a cognitively disabled child away from all the resources available in the United States (therapies, special education, etc.) and bring her to a developing country where there was no guarantee that any resources would be available?” (p.33). Through the struggles, her daughter (Anna) came to be seen as a “leavening agent” of the Kingdom, in whom “something of the work of God was going to go on display in Anna’s life that would bless Indonesian families” (p.41). Anna changed several things for Bonnie (worldview, calling, and a sense of God’s sovereign purposes in special needs):

Make no mistake: raising a child with disabilities on the field may be one of the hardest investments you will ever make in your life, but it holds great potential for kingdom impact on the people around you, and it brings glory and pleasure to God (p.44).



Chapter 4 tells how a missionary couple became foster parents of an Indian baby born with “no eyelids, no fingers, severely webbed legs, a cleft palate and lip, as well as an absent nose” (p.46). This involved surgeries in the United States, a journey through which God taught them how to love and redefine missions—“a life laid down... Adam transformed both my husband’s and my heart and mission to look away from ourselves and our short-sighted views of changing the world” (p.53, 58).

Barry Funnell (ch.5) relates how his paraplegia drew him closer to God, becoming involved through the use of a wheelchair in bible translation work in Malawi and Tanzania: “My disability has taught me how insignificant working legs are in the light of souls and their eternal wellbeing” (p.73).

The story is told, in chapter 6, of Paul Kasonga, a gifted preacher and leader in Zambia, whose leprosy “gave him ministry integrity among his peers and valuable spiritual insight for preaching and counselling” (p.81).

Justin Reimer (ch.10) raises some considerations that parents of children with a disability need to make regarding applying for mission work:

[W]e must be careful about our questioning of the missional ability of a friend with a disability and their fitness for ministry... Taking your child with special needs out of a culture that provides some of the best disability-related resources in the world and moving them to a country with nearly none of these resources requires a creative approach (p.127, 128).

The emphasis in chapter 11 turns to Member Care. Many who approach mission agencies suffer from “physical illness (e.g., food allergies), mental health issues and relational dysfunction,” yet “mission policies and practices still seem unwilling to look past a perceived risk and fully embrace workers with disabilities. There is a near absence within the Member Care literature regarding the management of those with disabilities. However, there is hope for change as we continue to move forward... [especially] when

it comes to disability inclusion” (p.138). The capacity to deal with autism is mentioned: the “more a disability is understood, and the more clearly the needs of the individual or family are made known, the better the risk can be managed” (p.144). Four main areas of concern for mission agencies are listed: “(1) the nature and extent of the disability; (2) the parents’ ability to cope; (3) the planned place of service and receiving team; and (4) the suitability of schools and health care in that place” (p.144). Some very practical guidelines for sending and supporting agencies come in the penultimate chapter (p.148).

The Conclusion offers further wisdom: “Missionaries with disability can vividly understand the grief and struggles that others with disability feel. They can share deeply in a place of trust that is unique to them” (p.153). It reminds the reader how the “pain and suffering is very real” for each of the contributors and editors of this book (p.155). The mission movement “should focus more on how to enable those with disability to serve, and to continue serving” (p.158). It offers a warning: “If we do exclude people with disability from missions, then the mission movement is missing part of the body. The mission is itself disabled. And that’s not God’s plan” (p.160).

Reviewer Comments

Pre-field preparation is touched on with reference to a writing project to “teach and train others in how to engage effectively” with disabled children (p.120). Mission agencies vary considerably in preparing missionaries for service—from three-week intensives to programs lasting months. Whatever unresolved problems beset an individual, couple, or family (e.g., relational, theological, psychological, health, familial), unless addressed rigorously, they will be exacerbated in any cross-cultural context. The editors might have given more thought to this in an otherwise thought-provoking volume. The suggestion that there was “no screening process” in the case of Moses (p.21) sends a wrong message. Chapter 10 fortunately does note strategies for parents taking a disabled child to the field.

There is some problematic speculation that Moses, Gideon, and Paul suffered from a “speech

disability” or impediment (p.9, 12, 17, 20–22, 24–25, 87, 88), when “slow of speech” or “thorn in the flesh” may allow other interpretations—for example, in the case of Moses, that “he had forgotten Egyptian!”² If God is “the cause of disability,” why is it a “serious error” to blame him (p.22) for a natural response with which God can surely cope? It’s unwise to build a case on Scripture that is unclear.³

Undoubtedly, the stories in this inspiring book testify of the sovereign grace of God in testing, strengthening, and mobilising the faith and loyalty to Him of missionaries living with disability. Perhaps further study might be informative about cases with more sinister trajectories (e.g., divorce, apostasy, sibling resentment, or “emotional, physical and relational health breakdown” [p.141]), such as the recent articles in this journal on treatment-resistant depression.^{4,5} For every “success” story, how many “failures?” What lessons could be learned by mission agencies from such comparative and/or longitudinal studies? Chapter 11 deals with Member Care and provides some good wisdom and guidelines for mission agencies dealing with disability (p.147).

A strength and weakness of the book is its reliance on personal stories—powerful and heart-wrenching, displaying remarkable resilience and courage; yet prone to a certain sameness. The stories are moving, but perhaps more rigorous editing might have helped.

Finally, the traditional understanding of mission as sending folks to less developed countries or different people groups is still dominant among agencies and churches. This

book is no exception, though clearly testifying to the brokenness and humility of each missionary’s life. The danger is that it elevates the missionary to an elite status among ordinary Christians, called by God to engage in mission everywhere. Cross-cultural mission can take different forms in secular and multicultural societies, like Europe or Australia. Equipping both able and disabled believers for mission in such contexts may have different challenges from those outlined here. This stimulating book calls for a sequel, perhaps entitled *Disability in Mission at Home and Abroad!* I recommend it heartily to any reader with an interest in missions.

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3. Note: Abraham’s argument with God about Sodom, the many Psalms of complaint, or Jeremiah’s accusation of God’s deception [Jer 15:18; 20:7].
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Correspondence: Neville Carr. ebedyah45@gmail.com

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