

Editorial

Jackie Wyse-Rhodes

Metaphors that invoke able bodies are everywhere. “She stands up for justice.” “I hear what you are saying.” “I feel seen.” “They were blinded by their own ambitions.” “My words fell on deaf ears.” These metaphors assume that normal bodies are able bodies. Such speech thus limits our imaginations around what makes for a good and functional human body, suggesting that the “best” bodies are ones that can stand, see, speak, and



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hear with no need of accommodation. It has not escaped my attention that even the title of this journal, *Vision*, draws on deeply ingrained assumptions around eyesight and the ability to move through

the world with intention. Why do organizations have a “vision statement” rather than a “statement of purpose”?

A friend of mine once described herself as “temporarily able-bodied.” The truth is that most of us will, at some point in our lives, experience a disability, and untold numbers of us already do. When the language we use, in our churches and beyond, constructs a worldview in denial of the prevalence and diversity of disabled experiences, we participate uncritically in cultural assumptions about what kind of bodies are admirable and to be emulated. As such, we close ourselves off from experiencing the rich kaleidoscope of diverse embodied experiences. Such rigidity results in harm to disabled and (temporarily) nondisabled people alike.


In this issue

In this issue of *Vision*, we bring together fifteen writers who engage with disability theology as a transformative conversation partner for biblical interpretation, theological reflection, worship leading and preaching, and spiritual autobiography.

In the issue’s opening essay, Sarah Werner invites us to embrace the connection between unique expressions of physical embodiment and robust spiritual vitality, and in so doing, to resist the cultural idealization of “normalcy.” Though Western cultures often frame disability in terms of individual loss, an integrated view of spirit and body could serve as a resource for faith communities seeking to accommodate and welcome

bodily differences. Werner offers historical and theological resources for interpreting difficult and potentially alienating biblical passages that portray acts of miraculous healing.

The next four essays place autobiography and personal experience in conversation with disability theologies. Bryce Miller explores ongoing, messy aspects of Christian call narratives that he dubs “ministry in spite



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of.” He reflects on embodiment and pastoral identity, telling his own story while suggesting that a more capacious culture of call will help to attend to the Spirit’s ongoing work, both individually and corporately.

Christina Reimer describes how her experience parenting a child with disabilities has changed the way she engages scripture, preaches, and teaches. Reimer mines biblical narratives from Exodus and the Gospels, offering alternative interpretive options.

Heike Peckruhn reflects on her experience teaching disability theologies in higher education settings, noting especially a resistance among her students to consider the image of a disabled God. Peckruhn describes how her students buy into a persistent myth linking “normalcy and potency” and find it especially “destabilizing” to think of the divine as having any “cognitive or emotional limitations.” Peckruhn suggests that it is in just such theologizing that “we begin to desire and work toward a future that is interdependent and inclusive.”

In addition, this issue of *Vision* features an excerpt from Amy Kenny’s book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* (Brazos, 2022). While telling her own story, Kenny reflects on the liberative power of wheels and describes how conversations about the afterlife often erase disabled bodies.

Four more pieces engage Christian worship and disability. Rebecca Spurrier shares her learnings from a multi-year process in which a group of scholars and pastors with and without disabilities are working to create a prayer book that centers disability in worship and ritual. She explores ways of “thinking more creatively, flexibly, and expansively about worship” while actively supporting disabled clergy and lay leaders.

Emily Hunsbaker narrates her changing understandings of what makes for a valuable community member, explaining how her own life experiences helped her shake loose the ableist assumptions that shaped her childhood congregation. Drawing on her work with the Anabaptist

Disabilities Network, Hunsbaker offers practical tips for churches wishing to “nurture spaces of belonging for people with disabilities,” observing that making these changes will benefit all, disabled and nondisabled alike.

In an interview with *Vision*, Darla Schumm reflects on her scholarly journey as an expert at the intersection between religious studies and disability studies. She gives readers a preview of her forthcoming book, exploring the experiences of people who are disabled in their religious communities, and she encourages faith communities to “prioritize accessible love.”

A prayer by Erica Lea-Simka rounds out the collection of pieces addressing worship. Her prayer was first made available on the “Welcoming EveryBODY” website created by Mennonite Church USA.¹

Three pieces in this issue explicitly address biblical interpretation. Leah Thomas explores the book of Job through a disability theology lens, challenging René Girard’s characterization of Job as a “failed scapegoat.” By integrating the insights of several disability theorists, Thomas highlights Job’s bodily suffering, suggesting that Job is in fact an “ideal scapegoat.” Thomas’s interpretation offers resources for modern readers as they contend with the stigmatization and scapegoating experienced by disabled communities today.

Shana C. Green integrates reflections on the Gospel of John with their own story, modeling engagement with New Testament stories of healing through the lens of disability theology. By placing these texts in conversation with their own embodied experiences, Green empowers readers to seek practices of liberatory reading and interpretation.

Katherine Dickson’s sermon on Luke 5:17–26 highlights how “the social model of disability” is at play when, in this Gospel story, the physical structure of a building is altered by a community in order to enable access for their disabled friend. Dickson calls all into “the middle of God’s enlivening power” and “continued work of breaking down the walls of hostility, designing access for community and relationship.”

The final three pieces directly engage Anabaptist theology. In conversation with disability theologians, Daniel Rempel argues for an anti-Docetic Christology that takes seriously Christ’s woundedness and suffering. “Following the disabled Christ” invites us to “embrace human

1 See <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/learn-pray-join/welcoming-everybody/>.

contingency,” release the need for control, and come to terms with our own wounds.

Engaging the thorny matter of “inclusion,” Jason Greig explores how traditional Anabaptist theologies of baptism prioritize choice, a difficult stance for those with profound cognitive disabilities. In particular, he engages the baptism and membership curriculum recently published by the Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN).² Jeanne Davies, executive director of ADN and author of the curriculum, replies to Greig’s critique, explaining the ways the curriculum responds to a deep need for resourcing among Anabaptist congregations.

A tribute to Nancy Eiesland

I would be remiss not to comment on the fact that in this issue eight writers—Reimer, Peckruhn, Kenny, Schumm, Thomas, Dickson, Spurrier, and Rempel—all cite the work of Nancy Eiesland (1964–2009), particularly her 1994 book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. As editor, I did not request that writers interact with Eiesland’s work. All eight did so independently. For any readers hoping to engage disability theology for the first time, or to explore it anew, there is no better place to start than Eiesland’s groundbreaking first book. In many ways, this issue of *Vision* serves as a tribute to the profound way her life and work inaugurated—and continues to enliven—theologies that center disabled people in the context of a world (and a church) that often, knowingly and unknowingly, relegates disabled bodies to the margins or erases them altogether.

About the author

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² See Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Baptism and Membership Curriculum* (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023), <https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/resources/baptism-curriculum/>.