

**TASK FORCE ON ABILITY AND INCLUSION:
REPORT TO THE ELCIC NATIONAL CHURCH COUNCIL FOR THE 2025 CONVENTION**

This task force was established upon the acceptance of recommendation #4 by its predecessor, the Task Force Addressing Ableism, at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) 2023 Special Convention.

The National Church Council (NCC) appointed the members of this committee at the subsequent NCC-2024-04 meeting.

The Task Force was initially named, “Task Force Addressing Ableism”. The request of the current Task Force was to shift the focus to a more positive one, thus a request to the NCC, which was approved at the NCC-2024-09-21 meeting, to change the title and subsequent work of the Task Force to “Task Force on Ability and Inclusion”.

What is Ableism?

Ableism is a philosophy which promotes discrimination against all those who are disabled in any way. It supports the marginalization, exclusion or demeaning of those with disabilities. According to ableist thought or behavior a disabled person is a “lesser being” in value to society as a whole or to any organization predicated on membership or inclusion.

Who are Disabled Canadians?

As of 2022, results from “The Canadian Survey on Disability” by Statistics Canada identifies twenty-seven percent of the Canadian population as disabled. This means that more than one in four Canadians aged 15 years and over have a disability. This is a sharp increase from the twenty-two percent identified in the previous census in 2017, and it constitutes more than eight million of our fellow citizens.

The Challenge

Many individuals with a disability feel left outside the circle of worshipping congregations and Christian communities.

The reason for this sense of alienation, not belonging, or even exclusion is profound and takes us to the heart of the practice of Christian Theology itself. Through many centuries Christians and Christianity have associated a disability as a mark of sin, a failure of faith, a test of spiritual strength. Words like blind, deaf, and crippled are openly used to mean spiritual failure. The bent of Ableist Theology with its open and blatant discrimination has prevailed until a wondrous breakthrough in the late twentieth century.

Disability Theology

In 1994 seminal work by authour Nancy Eiesland was provided in her book “The Disabled God”, which challenged and largely banished the discriminatory theology of the last many centuries. Disability Theology has become a vibrant and leading area of Christian thinking and action around the world. DISABILITY THEOLOGY proclaims the following ten clarion tenets:

1. Imago Dei (Image of God):

All people, including disabled individuals, reflect God's image. Disability is part of human diversity, not a flaw.

2. Rejection of the Sin-Disability Link:

Disability is not caused by sin or divine punishment. It is a natural part of life, not a spiritual failing.

3. Jesus and Disability:

Jesus' interactions with disabled people focus on inclusion, dignity, and community rather than on fixing disability.

4. Healing vs. Wholeness:

True wholeness is not about curing disability but about love, inclusion, and full participation in the faith community.

5. Social Model of Disability:

Disability is not an individual problem but is created by societal barriers that exclude or marginalize disabled people.

6. The Role of the Church:

Churches should be places of radical hospitality, accessibility, and leadership opportunities for disabled people.

7. Suffering and Lament:

Suffering is acknowledged, but it does not define disabled lives. Lament provides a way to express pain while maintaining dignity.

8. Eschatology and Resurrection:

The assumption that disability will be 'fixed' in the afterlife is questioned. Resurrection may include diverse bodies.

9. Prophetic Witness:

Disabled people bring unique theological insights and challenge injustices within the church and society.

10. Interdependence Over Independence:

Christian theology values interdependence, mutual care, and shared vulnerability over the modern ideal of self-sufficiency.

ELCIC Task Force on Disability and Inclusion Rationale:

The Task Force feels that the church needs to be focusing on all abilities (not just disabilities), inclusion and welcome. Our thoughts are informed by studies in Disability Theology, particularly, "The Disabled God", named above, by author Nancy Eiesland. She challenges the traditional and ableist philosophy of many Christian Churches. She argues for a new and deeper wisdom for all to understand not only each other but the fundamental call of Christianity for a truly sacramental inclusion of those who are disabled. This approach demands the opening of hearts and understanding toward the full acceptance of the gifts and perspective each one brings to the whole communion.

Her work has sparked an energized and stimulating, radical new approach to Christian thought. More than five hundred works and lectures are currently available. Schools and faculties of theology have been formed to focus on Disability Theology. It is rapidly changing contemporary Christian thought on disability. In the 1970-80's much work was done by all levels of government concerning the physical access to buildings and spaces. Various pieces of federal and provincial legislation set our requirements. The role of congregations is to understand and use the legislation and regulations to deal with physical issues, including adding elevators, ramps, handrails and other physical devices.

The ELCIC Task Force on Ability and Inclusion Focus:

It is incumbent on all to ensure what the law and Human Rights practice demands in terms of access and accommodation are upheld. However, for Christians, there is a more important test. That is to understand and accept the gifts offered by the disabled individual to that person's Christian community. Going forward, our work will be built upon this premise.

Results of the Task Force Addressing Ableism Recommendations from Convention 2023:

Recommendations #1 through #3 recommended "certified accessibility and ableism training" for various groups within the ELCIC. This Task Force was informed that no such "certified training" is available. The assigned staff and task force then developed a workshop, "Enabling Inclusion: Cultivating a welcoming and Accessible Church Community".

Recommendation #4 led to the development of the current Task Force.

The members of the Task Force volunteered in response to a call from the National Office of the ELCIC and are:

- Victoria Featherston, Eastern Synod clergy serving the South Shore Shared Ministry in Nova Scotia. (Secretary)
- Nadine Schroder-Kranz, Eastern Synod clergy serving St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Zurich Ontario. (Co-Chair)
- Don Storch, retired Social worker, member of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Victoria, BC.
- Jodey Porter, retired from public service leadership roles, member of St. Mark's Anglican Church, Niagara On The Lake, Anglican Church Canada appointee from the Anglican Diocese of Niagara, Ontario. (Co-Chair)
- 2024 recommendation #5 led to the part time employment of Carmen Ramirez, ELCIC staff member, assistant to the Bishop for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Recommendation from the Task force:

1. The Task force respectfully request that the NCC begin a process of consideration for the adoption and proclamation of the tenets of Disability Theology.
2. A workshop, entitled, "Embracing Inclusion: Cultivating a Welcoming and Accessible Church Community" has been developed. We recommend that it be a "pilot" presentation at the September 2025 NCC meeting. A resource list of articles and videos will be compiled to be presented to allow individuals and groups to continue this work. Any necessary changes will be made following this trial run and then the workshop will be offered to all other expressions of this Church.

3. That the assigned staff member recruit a group of individuals and train them to facilitate the workshop so it can be presented to Congregational groups and other groups within this church.
4. We requested that the worship planners of the 2025 Convention find ways to incorporate those who are differently abled in the worship of the Convention.
5. To NCC, we ask that the tenure and terms of reference for this task force be clarified. We believe that the work should continue, and that the task force, with expanded membership could serve as a resource to the Diversity Equity and Inclusion staff member and to help forward this work within this church.
6. We are unclear if there are/or will be similar initiatives taken at Synodical levels, and if so, how the National and Synodical groups would integrate?
7. We recommend that the ELCIC establish a web-based chat line so that individuals and congregations might share their stories and ask questions about the work of Ability and Inclusion. We acknowledge that there are budget implications of such a recommendation, both for the technology and for staff time to moderate the chat line.
8. We recommend that the ELCIC develop a set of study guides for Bible Study using Disability Theology as their base.

References:

Eiesland, Nancy L. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994

Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. (2024, May 28). *A demographic employment and income profile of persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over in Canada, 2022*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2024001-eng.htm>

The Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability, www.wheaton.edu/faithanddisability, retrieved on 02/15/2025