

# **What is a Christian response to disability in Cambodia?**

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Glenn Miles, Servants

## ***An introduction to disability in Cambodia:***

One in twenty children are born with a disability or become disabled during their childhood. This is worldwide but in Cambodia it may even be greater in some areas.

Type Of Limitation	Prevalence %
<b>Moving difficulty</b>	2.0 - 2.5
<b>Seeing difficulty</b>	0.5 - 0.8
<b>Hearing/speech difficulty</b>	0.5 - 0.8
<b>Learning difficulty</b>	0.2 - 0.4
<b>Chronic fits</b>	0.3 - 0.6
<b>Strange behaviour</b>	0.1 - 0.2
<b>Feeling difficulty (in hands or feet)</b>	0.1 - 0.2
<b>Combinations of the above</b>	0.2 - 0.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	4% - 5%

Source: Helander, E (1993) 'Prejudice & Dignity' UNDP

Fig. 1. United Nations description of prevalence of disability according to limitation rather than diagnosis.

Although one might expect disability to affect all people equally, the poorest children are most likely to be disabled due to the comparatively poor care of their mothers during their pregnancies and deliveries, the unsafe environments in which they live and the lack of available care and support which compound their disabilities.

Even though Cambodia's conflict is past, children continue to be vulnerable to injury and permanent disability from land-mines and other unexploded ordnance. For those who received injury during the conflict this may have been made worse by the mental trauma and stress that is suffered as a result of personal injury or loss of, or separation from family members.

Children can also be forced, through poverty, to become involved in dangerous occupations. In many of these hazardous environments, for example on a building site, in building roads or in factories, children can become disabled due to little or no safety precautions. Advocacy for safe working conditions and against all forms of 'intolerable' labour is therefore crucial for working children. Street children literally living and working on the street, are at great risk of being disabled by a road traffic accident. Poor and vulnerable children are also less likely to get any treatment, care or support after injury as well, so are more at risk of complications from lack of access to rehabilitation, even where this is available.

## ***Our attitude is the biggest disability of all.***

When I first wrote this paper I kept referring to 'disabled children'. I was rightly criticised because children with disabilities are first 'children,' and then 'with'

disabilities'. It was an important reminder that this is what we need to do when we look at and work with children with disabilities. The labelling of children is one of their biggest disabilities. In fact, children with disabilities in Cambodia experience some of the deepest discrimination of all children.

When I worked in Site 2 refugee camp, a number of young men were banished to one end of the camp to an 'orphanage' for boys who had lost their limbs to land-mines fighting in the war. Even though they had fought for their country they were despised by many of the community because they were disabled. So, they received a double tragedy, one losing a limb and the other losing the support of their loved ones. Some were so depressed that they were willing to act as assassins to kill people in the camp for a fee. I was glad to see the church taking services to the young men on Sunday and I remember asking one boy what he wanted us to pray for. Instead of asking that his limb would grow back he asked that his heart be mended. We prayed for a touch from God but it was terribly sad.

Dr. Sue Jack describes some of the problems if fatalism "In Cambodia it is estimated 95% of people are Buddhist and so disability is often regarded as due to bad '*karma*', either of the parents or the child. There are social and financial disadvantages along with this, as well as the feeling of helplessness that this is 'fate' and therefore nothing can be done about it. Families may have tried to seek help for their children from traditional healers but been unsuccessful, and this decreases their motivation to seek help from the fledgling disability services that are now appearing in Cambodia. The sense of fatalism and 'unfortunate destiny' means that children are often 'hidden' from view in the back of the house and at times neglected, so finding children needs to be very proactive".

### ***How are Christian organisations dealing with this issue?***

Apart from the Catholic involvement with people with disabilities at Wat Tan and the Lavalla School with the Marist brothers, there are a number of Protestant organisations working with people with disabilities too.

It is exciting to see the work of organisations like Servants trying to address the problem of disability in their community of Srok Mean Chey.

Dr. Sue Jack describes the work of Servants, "We try to mainstream the children into schools if possible and advocate at the local schools on their behalf and provide any equipment necessary to make mainstreaming possible e.g. building ramps. Once a week we have a therapy/play session where caregivers are taught appropriate exercises, reinforcement and teaching of good caring practice for their children is also given."

Families are not given false expectations "We stress that it will be the caregivers commitment to the child that will help the child improve, not our expertise, and that it will be a long slow process. We therefore do all we can to provide ongoing support to the whole family, making sure they understand advice given e.g. for exercises and how to follow it. It is also a great opportunity for families to meet one another and we often try to facilitate links between old families and new to encourage each other in

what progress is possible - this speaks much louder and has much more impact than anything we can say.”

As well as prejudice towards disability they also have to deal with racial prejudice as well “We see Khmer, Cham (Muslim) and an increasing number of Vietnamese children as one of our staff speaks fluent Vietnamese and our health district has a significant number of Vietnamese families who are socially marginalised and who often have difficulties accessing health care in Cambodia”

Another organisation working in this area is the Cambodian Association for Development of Farmers and the Poor working in Kampot. The Director Mr. Sam Ouen (Fig. 2) who is himself disabled is an excellent role model and demonstrates to families that with God’s help and some determination he can and does exceptional things. He recently put together a photo-journal (example in Fig 3) of several of the children in their community and it demonstrates one of his own philosophy that if it is possible, then it should be tried and then done. The children are involved in school, cooking, playing, contributing to the household chores and working in the fields alongside their peers. The programme supports families through a cow-pig bank that helps families who are more vulnerable because of the child’s disability, for example if a family member cannot work and needs to look after a child.

It is hoped that good community based rehabilitation will enable many families to keep the child with them, as they are supported in every way possible to work with the child and experience the benefits and joys of raising a child with disabilities, as well as the heartaches and stresses. Whether children are able to stay at home or not, however, will often depend on the extent of their impairment but also whether there is an older sibling, grandparent or other adult to take responsibility for them. The main care givers are usually immediate family and their ability to work with the child with disabilities will depend on their work, chores, schooling needs etc. This in turn may depend on the support of their community and where Christian their church community.

It is also recognised that some children will be so severely disabled that some families will be unwilling or feel unable to have their children with them. In some cases, parents may resort to infanticide at, or shortly after birth. Even where this does not happen the child may well die from malnutrition, malaria or chest infection in the first year. However, if they do not die, then they are likely to survive for some time which requires a long term commitment. The Group Homes currently supported by YWAM/OMF and EXAT provide support for some of these children with more severe disabilities.

The other way in which the issue of disability can be approached is through advocacy where the attitudes of the public, health, education and social service/voluntary sector professionals and of course parents can be influenced to see beyond the disability to the ability of the child.

### **What is disability and what is impairment?**

Tearfund believes that the focus should be as more on what the child *can* do than on what they cannot do. The World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) International

Classification of Impairments and Handicaps (version 2: See Fig. 4) refers to the concept of *disablement*. This moves away from the strict medical model in an attempt to define the causes and effects of disability in a more positive way. The terms *disability* and *handicap* have been replaced by the more positive concepts of *activities* and *participation*. However, we must remember that, “words can be politically correct and well packaged, but the majority of people with disabilities are lonely, lost, isolated and often ostracised by society.” (Nigel Poulton of World Concern) A change of words alone is not enough but a genuine attitude of Christ-like servant-hood.

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<b>Impairment</b>	A loss or abnormality of a body part (i.e. structure) or body function (i.e. psychological function). The psychological functions include mental functions.
<b>Activity</b>	Everything a person does from simple activities (e.g. grasping, moving a leg, seeing) to complex skills and behaviours (e.g. remembering past events or acquiring knowledge).
<b>Activity limitation (formerly disability)</b>	Difficulty in the performance, accomplishment or completion of an activity at the level of the person because of e.g. pain/discomfort, doing it too slowly/quickly or not at the right time/place
<b>Participation</b>	Participation consists OF all areas or aspects of human life, including full experience of being involved in practice, custom, or social behaviour .
<b>Participation Restriction</b>	The disadvantage for a person with impairment that is created or worsened by environmental and personal factors.

Source: WHO ICIDH - 2 (1997)

FIG. 4 WHO International Classification of Impairments and Handicaps.

The Medical model of disability adhered to by many doctors has viewed impairment as an, ‘abnormality’ which needs to be ‘corrected’, ‘cured’ or ‘overcome’. It is based on the concept that the human body is alterable and that the social environment is unalterable. The Social model of disability developed by community based practitioners stresses that a handicap or disability is a relationship between an individual and his/her environment and shows an increased acknowledgement of the role societies play in disabling a person.<sup>1</sup>

### What does the Bible say about disability?

*‘Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour...Now you are the body of Christ and each of you is a part of it.’ 1 Corinthians 12: 22-3, 27.*

Each and every child is a unique individual created in the image of God with inherent worth (Gen. 1:26). If full maturity is seen as “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13) in whom “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9) we need to accept that for all, there is, and always will be, a limit to how far wholeness is achieved. As Christians, we believe this to be true whether or not the child has a physical or mental disability. In fact, none of us will reach complete wholeness until we reach heaven. Even Jesus himself had to live out his life in human form with all the limitations that human bodies impose. Dr. Peter Sidebotham who previously worked with Servants in Cambodia says “Children with a

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<sup>1</sup> Hartley, S. and Wirz, S. 1993

disability or without one need to be encouraged to reach the full degree of their God given potential”.

Nevertheless, “the concept of wholeness is very much a part of accepting and understanding that disability is simply a small part of who a person is.” This is said by Dr. Nancy Lane who herself is disabled. Children with disabilities are ‘whole’ as they are and to say otherwise perpetuates the negative stereotypes: “It also perpetuates the notion that a disabled body means one is not a whole person - thinking, sexual, with same needs and desires as non-disabled.”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, in Cambodia children with disabilities are often seen as a liability that uses up precious resources and are therefore not a priority for communities and most of the Government and/or health departments or even families.

All of us need to experience God’s love. Unfortunately, children with disabilities more than other children may experience prejudice and rejection from an early age, so the response of the church must provide an alternative loving environment. It can be painful to be ‘different’, but in God’s “upside-down” Kingdom, *“to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness”* (1 Corinthians 1:25-31).

Some key Biblical characters, like Moses (Exodus 4) and St. Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9), had impairments. It has been suggested of Mel Horne from ‘Church Action on Disability’ that, “this wouldn’t have been the case if God didn’t mean impaired people to be around.” Both Moses and Paul were specifically chosen for their tasks of spreading God’s message and yet in Exodus 4:11 God said to Moses about his speech impediment: “I made you thus”. Paul’s body metaphor (1 Corinthians 12) suggests that all people (including children with disabilities) are created to reveal the general inter-dependence of human beings (rather than dependence or supposed independence).

Disability is not due to sin of the child or parents or because of a lack of faith of the child or parents. It may be a wonderful revelation to a child with disabilities when they find that God loves them unconditionally, and that they have equal access to Him in prayer and worship like any other child, man or woman. “I call you by name” says the Lord “You are mine” (Isaiah 43:11)<sup>3</sup>.

It is interesting that Jesus himself chose to continue to have the marks of the crucifixion after the resurrection when as a perfect being he might have chosen to have no marks. Instead, Jesus invited his disciples to touch the holes in his body. In so doing he can be seen to be “challenging the way non-disabled people avoid those with disabilities”.<sup>4</sup> “By His stripes we are healed”.

The New Testament church was continually encouraged to reach out to those who we wouldn’t normally feel comfortable with and to love them unconditionally e.g. the Good Samaritan. but as Jean Vannier, who founded the L’Arche communities where

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Lane.

<sup>3</sup> Bowers, F, 1996

<sup>4</sup> Taylor & McCloughry, 1998

people with disabilities and others live together in community, has observed: “*Loving someone is not doing things for them but revealing to them that they are precious*”.

Nevertheless, it is important that children with disabilities are not seen as existing only to enable others to serve God better. This could give the message that the server is more important than the recipient.

### **What is the best way to help children with disabilities?**

Historically, children with disabilities, especially those who were described as ‘mentally retarded’ were kept out of site in huge asylums. For example, London is surrounded, at a distance by a ring of asylum hospitals. Alternatively, children were put into special schools such as a school for the blind. This was exported to much of the developing world so that Governments and Christian organisations have until recently seen institutions as being the main way of dealing with what was seen as the ‘problem’ of disability.

However, things have gradually been changing. United Nations Development Programme research<sup>5</sup> indicates that service delivery programmes for people with disabilities in third world countries would benefit from including the following principles:

1. Mobilising the family and community.
2. Empowering people with disabilities themselves.
3. Changing attitudes of people towards disability.

These principles mirror the Biblical principles of supporting the concept of the family, ministering to and encouraging the vulnerable and of having no prejudices towards those who are not the same as ourselves.

As usual though the attitudes must start with ourselves and with the church. Do we welcome the disabled person into the church or do we absorb the prejudices and inappropriate cultural norms and reject them? We must challenge our deep-seated fears and prejudices and ask what Jesus would do?

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<sup>5</sup> Helander, 1993

## **References:**

Bowers, Faith '*Treat with special honour: People with learning difficulties in the life of the church*' A Baptist Union Publication, 1996 (Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11, UK).

Hartley, Sally and Wirz, Sheilah '*Investing models of service delivery for people with communication disorders in Anglo-phone Africa, Work in Progress*'. Volume 3. NHCSS. University of London, London, 1993

Helander, E '*Prejudice and Dignity: an introduction to community based rehabilitation*'. UNDP. New York, 1993

Horne, Mel '*Did God Create Impairment? :a Bible Study*' *All People: the magazine of Church Action on Disability*, 1998

Sidebotham, Peter '*Child development and disability*' unpublished, 1998.

Taylor, M and McLoughry '*A Disabled God*' *Third Way*. October 1998.

Through the Roof '*Roofbreaker Guides*' *Guidelines for involving children with disabilities into church life*. Roofbreaker Guides, Through the roof ministries, UK, 1999

Wirz, Shelagh & Winyard '*Hearing and Communication Disorders*' Macmillan Press, London, 1993.

Young, F '*Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on L'Arche and living with disability*' Darton, Longman & Todd. 1997.

- Group of essays of theologians after visiting the L'Arche communities

## **Key Resources:**

Coleridge, Peter '*Disability, Liberation and Development*' Oxfam Publications, Oxford, 1993

Eiesland, Nancy L '*The Disabled God: towards a libertory theology of disability*' Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, USA, 1994

- Looks at Jesus being 'disabled' on the cross and then at the meeting with the disciples after the resurrection.

Ingstad, B & Whyte, SR (ed.) '*Disability and Culture*'. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. 1995

Potter D '*Am I Beautiful.... or What?*' Scripture Union, Oxford. 1998

- information about learning disability, training material for individual or group use, essential guidance on running meetings for people with learning difficulties, a course of teaching materials for such meetings

Ransom, Judy Griffith. '*The Courage to Care: Seven Families Touched by Disability and Congregational Caring*'. Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1994

- Chronicles the stories of people whose lives were dramatically changed by the caring of congregations, friends, and family. Important book for Churches wanting to understand why and how caring is part of what it means to be a community and to offer hospitality.

Webb-Mitchell, Brett (1993) '*God Plays Piano Too: The Spiritual Lives of Disabled Children*'. Crossroads Publications.

- The stories of children with disabilities who had wonderful, but often hidden, gifts. Webb-Mitchell shows the Church how to welcome and receive the gifts and “reveals the *hidden wholeness* that lies beneath the broken surface of all our lives”

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Webb-Mitchell, Brett. '*Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church*'. Crossroads Publications. 1994

- This is concerned with learning *how* to welcome people with disabilities and *why* doing so is essential for the Church. “For it is only when we learn how to be with those who are different from us, and learn how to accept the love of God that we all need, that we will be able to sustain a community that is capable of worshipping God”

Werner, David. '*Disabled Village Children: A guide for community health workers, rehabilitation workers and families*'. Hesperian Foundation, Palo Alto, California. 1994.

Werner, David 'Nothing about Us Without Us'. Hesperian Foundation, Palo Alto, California. 1998.

- explores innovative aids that can be made at low cost. It also considers how people with disabilities and those without them can learn together

***Christian Resource Organisations:***

Church Action on Disability (CHAD), 50 Scrutton Street, London EC2A 4PH, UK

Tel: 44 171 452 2085 Fax: +44 171 452 2001 E mail: [mlpcfm@aol.com](mailto:mlpcfm@aol.com)

- Education and awareness raising of disability in churches. Produce access audit, resource pack, study pack and youth pack. Quarterly magazine “All people”

Deaf Christian Network, PO Box 212, Doncaster, South Yorkshire, DN2 5XA, UK Tel: +44 1302 369684 (Voice/Minicom) Fax: +44 1302 739660

- Resources for people working with profoundly deaf people

Disability Awareness & A Healing Ministry, (The Rev. Dr. Nancy Lane, Ph.D) P. O. Box 274, Lansing, N.Y. 14882-0274, USA Tel: 607-533-4083 Email: [nlane1@twcny.rr.com](mailto:nlane1@twcny.rr.com)

- Resource for people working with women who have been abused or sexually exploited, including women w/disabilities.

Evangelical Alliance Disability Forum, 186 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BT, UK Tel: +44 171 207 2100 Fax: +44 171 207 2150

- Umbrella organisation for Christian disability organisations

SPRED, Special Religious Education Department (RC Church), c/o Brothers of Charity Services, Lissieux Hall, Whittle-le-Woods, Chorley, Lancashire PR6 7DX, UK. Tel: 44 1257 266 311

- Look at spiritual needs of people with learning difficulties and provide suitable study and worship material

Through the Roof, PO Box 178, Cobham, Surrey, KT11 1YN Tel/Fax: +44 1932 866333 E mail: [info@throughtheroof.org](mailto:info@throughtheroof.org)

Website: [www.jafministries.com/throughthe roof](http://www.jafministries.com/throughthe roof)

- ◊ The disability outreach of Joni Erickson Tada. Produce a series of one page ‘Roofbreaker Guides’ about including people with different types of disabilities into the church.

Torch Trust for the Blind, Torch House, Hallaton, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 8UJ, UK Te; @ +44 1858 555301 Fax: +44 1858 555371

- Christian resources for blind and visually impaired people