

## The Role of the Church in Inclusive Education

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## Abstract

This work focused on the various ways the church may support inclusive education, highlighting the role that the church plays in creating a diverse and fair learning environment. In today's educational debate, inclusive education has emerged as a critical objective. The church is in a unique position to help bring inclusive education to fruition since it is a societal institution with a long history of community engagement. The study further evaluated the efforts made by the church to implement inclusive education, the progress made, and the possibility of ensuring it extends its services to all parts of the world. This study was guided by the social model theory, and adopted a qualitative method to collect data. Qualitative data pertaining to inclusive education was gathered through a synthesis of the literature and document analysis. Results showed that the church has played a significant role towards promoting inclusive education. The church becomes a vital partner in the quest of educational institutions that accept diversity and empower all learners, ultimately contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and peaceful society, by utilising its influence, resources, and community ties. This study underscored the importance of continued efforts by the church to strengthen inclusive education thus achieving equitable and quality education for all.

**Key words:** Church, diverse, equity, inclusive education, quality, special needs

## Introduction

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the number of children and the youth out of school stood at 244 million by 2022. From this figure, 98% million of the population come from sub-Saharan Africa, mostly from poverty-stricken backgrounds, while some are refugees, street children, those in statutory children's institutions, persons living with disabilities and marginalised groups such as orphans (UNESCO, 2022). Furthermore, there are 240 million children with disabilities worldwide and just like their counterparts, these children have dreams and aspirations that should be harnessed through provision of quality education in order to maximise their full potential. It is rather unfortunate that children with disabilities are often left behind in terms of gaining access to education as they persistently face stigma, discrimination therefore being denied the chance to actively participate in learning, taking part in their communities, in the workforce and taking part in crucial decision-making processes that has an impact on their lives.

To better understand the subject matter, let us attempt to define some terms used in this work. Inclusive education entails the education model that accommodates all learners irrespective of age, social status, background, physiology, medical condition and many others. Inclusive education addresses barriers to education faced by marginalised groups, promoting inclusive practices, and supporting students with special needs. Equity in education entails acknowledging and being committed to girls, refugees, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and persons with special needs or learning difficulties to ensure no one is left behind (Thompson & Barbara, 2019:6). Generally, an education policy is inclusive when it does not tolerate segregation as a precondition for accessing learning resources.

From another perspective, Bui *et al.* (2021:2) assert that inclusive education ensures that students with different abilities and from different backgrounds are placed in age-appropriate classes within their neighbourhood schools to receive high-quality education. Learning is reinforced via support, interventions, or instruction to enable learners to succeed in their learning goals (Bui *et al.*, 2010; Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Overall, inclusivity seeks to ensure that no one is denied access to mainstream education. Inclusive education is an effective means of according children a fair chance to access education in order to harness their skills to thrive in life, regardless of their social-economic status, gender, and diversity among other differences (Forlin & Loreman, 2014). Inclusive education systems value the unique contribution of each individual child by allowing them to grow and thrive for the betterment of all.

While governments, educators, and community organisations play pivotal roles in championing inclusive policies, there are still significant gaps for some children. For instance, those with disabilities are still unable to access education due to a number of factors such as poor infrastructure, negative attitude of stakeholders, and stigma. Against this backdrop, religious organisations, particularly the Church, should contribute to the cause of inclusion in the educational system. The Church is eminently positioned to engender ideals that will foster inclusive education, highlighting its dedication to social justice, civic involvement, and moral principles. There is a paradigm shift from these deals to prosperity gospel which unfortunately has taken the centre of stage of the contemporary church in Kenya. It is evident that for Kenya to have a holistic inclusive education model, the Church must be in the forefront. To this end, this research aims to evaluate the involvement of the church in education. The research employs a descriptive and interpretive approach to analyse developments in this theme.

## **Historical Foundations of Church Involvement in Inclusive Education**

Religious institutions frequently act as the major educators in many communities, and the Church has always been involved in education. In the past, the Church has been crucial in advancing literacy and education and establishing the groundwork for inclusive education. The formation of educational philosophy within the Christian tradition was substantially influenced by notable individuals like Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas (Pattison, 2015:1). Notably, the church has over time played a key role in shaping the educational landscape, laying emphasis on holistic development of an individual with spiritual, social and intellectual growth. Historical foundations of the church involvement in holistic education went through five phases:

### **Monastic Education (4th-15th centuries)**

In the first centuries of Christianity, monastic communities emerged as centres of learning. Monasteries, such as those founded by Saint Benedict, became repositories of knowledge, preserving classical texts and serving as centres for scriptoria where monks painstakingly copied manuscripts. Monastic education was holistic, emphasising not only theological studies but also the liberal arts, sciences and practical skills. The Benedictine order, for example, emphasised the importance of *ora et labora* (prayer and work) and encapsulated a holistic approach to education.

### **Cathedral Schools and Medieval Universities (11th- 15th centuries)**

The rise of cathedral schools and later mediaeval universities marked a significant expansion of church-led educational efforts. Cathedral schools, often associated with cathedrals and monasteries, provided education for clergy and budding scholars. The curriculum included a wide range of subjects, which contributed to a well-rounded education. The establishment of universities, such as the University of Paris and Bologna University further formalised education by

integrating different disciplines and promoting a holistic approach to knowledge.

### **Jesuit Education (16th Century Onward)**

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, St. Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus, which became the vanguard of holistic education. The Jesuit educational philosophy emphasised the development of the whole person – mind, body and spirit. Jesuit schools, colleges, and universities around the world adopted a curriculum that combined rigorous intellectual education with spiritual formation and a commitment to social justice. This holistic approach aimed to create well-rounded individuals ready to engage with the world in a thoughtful and ethical way.

### **Missionary Schools (18th Century Onward)**

The expansion of the colonial powers led to the establishment of missionary schools, where the church played a key role in providing education to the indigenous population. Missionary educators recognised the importance of addressing the cultural, social, and educational needs of students. Holistic education in this context sought to uplift communities by integrating education with health care, vocational training and community development.

### **Modern Ecclesiastical Engagement (20th Century Onward)**

In the 20th century, the church's involvement in education continued to evolve. Many religious orders and denominations expanded their educational services and established schools and colleges that aimed to nurture the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of students. Emphasis on holistic education has become increasingly relevant as educators have recognized the interconnectedness of various aspects of human development. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the church has played a pivotal role in providing holistic education that was in tandem with spiritual, intellectual, and social growth of congregants in an inclusive setup.

However, modern trends indicate that the church is either lagging or not doing enough. For instance, just recently, a certain pastor was arrested for radicalising his congregants into tenets that are not in concord with this modern era. There are many others whose doctrines tend to entrench stigma and dichotomy between those who have disabilities and others. Such teachings clog the wheel of inclusive education. According to Akinyi (2023:1) the government has deregistered five churches this year squarely for dwelling on retrogressive homilies that consider exposure and education as antithetical to Christian ideals. While the government is making an effort, the mainstream Churches tend to care less.

### **Promoting Inclusive Education by the Church: The Way Forward**

For the church to ensure inclusive education, the work proposes the following steps:

#### **Community Engagement and Support**

The Church is in a unique position to work with families and individuals who are struggling academically since it serves as a cornerstone of many communities. Local churches frequently offer a welcoming environment where families may look for advice and resources for their special needs children. To promote diversity, churches frequently set up support groups, educational initiatives, and alliances with schools (Brown & Williams, 2019:8). In Genesis 1: 27, “All people were created in God’s image” and thus, God treasures them equally. This belief has been the driving force behind the desire to embrace persons living with disabilities in the church. Accordingly, to Dawning and Hardin (2007) a loving community creates an inclusive learning environment for children.

From the above discussions, we can deduce that for a successful inclusion process to take place, the religious community should cultivate a caring and accommodating environment to cater to all learners inclusive of those with diverse learning needs. Learning is at its best as a communal

exercise. Churches have buildings for use in hosting community programmes. Learning communities ought to foster collaborative learning taking into account people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, genders, perspectives and persons with disabilities making learning meaningful and rich for all. Efforts to identify pastoral gifts among Church Leaders should be rekindled to enable those with the gift of teaching, preaching, mentorship, and counselling to find their suitable positions, such that while “Augustine engages with the community, Luther interacts with students, while Bonhoeffer models the virtues of communal learning” (Banks, 1999: 181, 205).

From the foregoing, it becomes imperative that the Kenyan church spices up its service to humanity by promoting understanding, acceptance and support for all individuals regardless of their abilities and social-economic status. When the need arises, the church can be more vocal in speaking truth to power and identify with the vulnerable. This will in no small means promote inclusion in education.

### **Commitment to Social Justice**

According to Bassey, social justice is the right and reasonable conduct or social justice treatment to all individuals in the society. Therefore, the administration of social justice is an extension of God’s work to protect defenceless members of the society. Social justice and equality are fundamental tenets of inclusive education. The Church ought to be a leading force in promoting the rights of people with disabilities and other minority groups because of its strong emphasis on compassion and care for the downtrodden. “The Church’s dedication to inclusivity has been greatly influenced by the teachings of Jesus Christ, which place an emphasis on love and acceptance for all” (Smith, 2017:1). The church through advocacy creates public awareness about disability rights through Acts, such as the Individual with Disability Education Act (2004), and Children’s Act (2001). Such Acts were enacted in Kenya, for example, to safeguard the rights of persons living with disabilities (PLWDs). The church achieves this goal through

workshops, presentations and awareness campaigns to eliminate stigma.

Further, the Church should emphasise the doctrine of ‘do unto others as you would want them to do unto you’ as yardstick for social interaction. Cheating a fellow human person unfairly on the account of physical or mental disability is considered a sin before God and man. The church stands as a great rock of refuge to the weak and a voice the voiceless as was in the days of the old. Today, when money rules the society, it appears that the rich/privileged often resort to grabbing lands and other belongings of the poor knowing that the poor cannot afford the cost of litigation. This endures because the church has not done enough as the good shepherds to flock the Lord has placed in their hands. This study posits that the church can do better in fostering social justice by providing legal aids, advocacies, lobbying to enact laws that will protect and ensure that inclusive and holistic education for all is achieved.

### **Moral Values and Character Education**

Moral values are guidelines that assist a person in distinguishing right from wrong. Decency forms the bedrock upon which early Christians thrived. Christians were known for modest lifestyles knowing that this life is ephemeral and transient. Thus, those who have more would often share their surplus with other members. Greed and unbridled quest for acquisition of materials even to the detriment of others is on the increase. This has led to people taking actions without considering the impact on the less privileged. In education, those with no disability consider it unbecoming to share the same classroom and learning resources with those with disabilities. Hence, equitable access to academic possibilities is compromised thereby making inclusive education, which aims to instil acceptance, accommodation and other virtues amongst students difficult.

It is against this backdrop that Jones (2018:31) posited that “moral values like compassion, understanding, and tolerance for diversity is one way that the Church, as a moral authority, supports this part of education. Church-sponsored religious

education initiatives frequently stress the significance of treating everyone with respect and compassion". Therefore, the church plays a pivotal role in the character formation process as teachers are able to make references to the bible as a tool when addressing inappropriate behaviour exhibited by a learner to a student with disabilities. In tandem, 1 Corinthians 11:1, which requires one to "emulate Christ", inspires congregants to model Christ-like virtues in others. This expectation is consistent with the classical model, which is synonymous with the "Athens" school of thought. According to this model, theology reinforces virtues that mould the society (Banks, 1999: 132, 143; Kelsey, 1993). In his reflection, Wright wonders "What kind of mission waits me, and when should I ask God what he expects from me during the mission?" (2006: 524).

#### **Advocacy for Inclusive Policies**

Advocacy for inclusive policies refers to promoting and supporting laws that seek to build a more equal and inclusive society that guarantees equal access to opportunities and resources to all persons irrespective of their traits, history, and skills. A policy is a rule that emphasizes the need to advocate for and perform actions that address the diverse needs and viewpoints of different groups within a community. The key attributes of an inclusive policy are diversity, representation, social justice, education, and awareness. The Church has a substantial impact on policy advocacy at the regional and national levels in addition to local engagement. Numerous religious groups actively advocate for laws and policies that protect the rights of students and PLWDs, as well as other disadvantaged populations. Their advocacy work frequently complements larger social justice programs (Ireru et al. 2020).

The church has Christian-based advocacy groups such as American Christian disability advocacy group whose main objective has been assisting churches in removing physical, social and attitudinal barriers to accommodate persons with special needs. Furthermore, they provide consultation and educational conferences that certify PLWDs

to be members of the community. In doing so, the church engenders inclusion. Still, the church should propagate the gospel of inclusion through the social and mainstream media.

#### **Enhancing Accessibility**

A church is a physical location as well as a social community. The church has provided accessible spaces and has not endeavoured to remove barriers of architecture, communication and attitudes to take care of the needs of PLWDs. To eliminate the barrier on communication, the church has to take the necessary steps to communicate effectively with the congregation, including those with visual impairment, hearing impairment and speech disabilities. For instance, by ensuring availability of bibles in braille form so that persons with visual impairment can read the word of God independently. In addition, many Churches have not engaged sign Language interpreters to interpret the word of God whenever there is a Homily to cater for the needs of those with hearing impairment.

Using the Kenyan church as a context, it ought to show more commitment through construction of modern buildings that will consider the physical accessibility through provision of ramps, wide doorways, and adapted washrooms among others. Thus, enabling persons using wheelchairs to easily access places of worship. According to Hughes, breaking down attitudinal barriers commences with education and building relationships with PLWDs, both of which leaders in faith communities can intentionally nurture. Therefore, Hughes championed for breaking down attitudinal barriers by leaders in faith communities in order to enhance inclusivity.

Pinsky (2012:5), tells sixty-four different stories about the inclusion of PLWDs in faith communities by eliminating attitudinal barriers and moving towards the full inclusion of such groups. The church has to take a leading role by amending the internal topography of the church for instance: provision of a range of seating alternatives available for congregants, provision of spaces to accommodate people who are on wheelchair and most importantly, provision of chairs

with armrests for people who lack stability or require assistance to move from a sitting to a standing position. In addition, modifying the lighting in the church to accommodate people with low vision and minimise the risk of seizures for people with epilepsy.

### **Demystifying Disability through Liberation Theologies**

Liberation theology is a spiritual discourse that harmonises the economic dimensions of disability oppression with an appreciation of living experiences for PLWDs. Theologian and Sociologist of religion Eiesland (2009) developed a liberation theology of disability in her book. Eiesland (1994) centres the experience of PWDs—those with physical disabilities, in particular - by re-examining the character of God. Eiesland asserts that the Christian God, as embodied through Jesus, is a disabled God; as she says, “in presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God...A perfect revelation of true personhood compatible with the experience of disability.” (175). Eiesland (1994) further states that “our bodies participate in the image of God, not in spite of our weaknesses and contingencies, but through them... disability not only does not contradict the human-divine integrity. Rather, it’s a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.” Essentially, this image of the disabled God “ends human estrangement” and presents a sacred, yet, imperfect version of ourselves that extends to the locus of the human body (Eiesland 1994, 177).

According to Black (1996:29), she identifies John 9: 1-41 as being the text in the Christian Bible that is the most important for people in the disability community. In this story, Jesus encounters a man who is blind. When asked by his disciples whether the blindness was a result of sin, Jesus responded: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” According to Black (1996:29), this response is often quoted as assurance that disability is not necessarily a punishment for sin. Consequently, the above scripture asserts that PWDs are valued members of a community. The sacredness of the body

also extends to the metaphorical Body of Christ during His crucifixion and in the sacrament of the Eucharist, is broken. Eiesland provides a vision for the church, an “emancipatory transformation” free from sin and passivity that instead fully embodies Christ by seeking justice for all- in this case, PWDs. This future- and present- utopic transformation centres on PWDs and is barrier free and inclusive. Therefore, the image of the disabled God renews hope for PWDs. It accepts the limitations of bodies and of the human condition. This hope is located in justice- through access and removal of barriers, as well as in recognised dignity and integrity of PWDs.

### **Providing a Platform to Create Awareness**

The church needs to engender inclusivity by encouraging the congregation with and without disabilities to practice their faith and use their gifts and talents in worship, studying, and leadership. Furthermore, the church can promote inclusivity by providing a platform for PLWDs to worship and minister.

### **Pastoral Care and Counselling**

Churches ought to often provide pastoral care and counselling services. In the context of inclusive education, the church should provide a support system to parents of children with learning disabilities by enabling them to accept their children, and by offering them emotional strength to overcome daily challenges when upbringing such children. In addition, the church has to establish a prayer team responsible for supporting children schooling in some of the local primary schools through mentorship programmes.

The church creates diverse opportunities by providing outreach projects that provide hospitality and welfare to the local community. This is vital as Persons with Disabilities are part and parcel of this community and therefore are set to benefit out of this endeavour. For instance, St. Paul’s Manuka Anglican church has been proactive in this regard. However, more others need to duplicate the same in order to reach more people.

### **Collaboration with Educational Institutions**

The modern trend has shown that religious institutions now open schools. This should make it easy for Churches to establish inclusive places to improve educational possibilities for all students. This collaboration may entail offering facilities, supplying resources, or collaborating with educational institutions. Being in the position to make policies for schools, the Church should deliberately involve in all acts that will see those with learning disability not left behind.

### **Support for Special Needs Education**

It is possible that certain churches actively assist learners with special schooling needs. This support can come in the form of grants, volunteer work, or the creation of places in the church for educational initiatives that serve people with a range of learning needs. However, one is of the opinion that such assistance be institutionalized. This can be achieved by getting a waiver from the government, seeking Donors as well as organizing fundraising specifically for learners with learning disabilities.

### **Promotion of Inclusivity and Acceptance**

According to the National Council of Churches of Kenya, the Church of Kenya boasts of large followership. It has the wherewithal to instil Christian virtues to its congregants. The Christian-based organization registered in Kenya maintains that Christian virtues should foster an inclusive culture by encouraging compassion, tolerance, and acceptance among its members. Such virtues apply to the treatment and inclusion of PLWDs in community and religious events.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the historical foundations of the Church's involvement in holistic education traces the trajectory from monastic learning to the founding of universities, the development of Jesuit educational principles, and the global reach of missionary schools. Throughout history, the Church has consistently recognised the importance of caring for the whole person and contributing to the holistic development of individuals in the context of their communities and societies.

By drawing on its historical roots, dedication to social justice, involvement in the society, moral principles, and lobbying activities, the Church will more significantly contribute to the advancement of inclusive education. Recognising the on-going importance of religious institutions in advancing educational inclusion is crucial as society changes. The Church can continue to be a driving force in championing for access to quality education for all persons by collaborating with governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders. The establishment of an inclusive and encouraging learning environment can be greatly impacted by the church's multidimensional involvement in inclusive education. The church may make a beneficial impact on the academic journey of persons with different needs through its moral influence, community engagement, lobbying for inclusive policies, and support for special needs education. Furthermore, the church may be a key player in fostering a more inclusive society by fostering openness and acceptance, managing educational initiatives, offering pastoral care, and working with academic institutions. Acknowledging and capitalising on the church's strengths in these domains can augment the joint endeavours towards cultivating an educational framework that upholds diversity, accommodates individual variances, and guarantees parity of opportunity for every student. In the end, creating a society that is more compassionate and inclusive requires cooperation between educational authorities, communities, religious organisations, and individuals.

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