

# CAREFRONTING DISABILITY ISSUES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR MARKET

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## INTRODUCTION

The South African Government's policy and declared target for inclusion of people with disabilities in the country's labour market is 2%<sup>2</sup>. According to the South African Labour Guide the figure currently stands at 0.5% and is declining<sup>3</sup>. This article therefore explores this phenomenon and related matters such as affirmative action, defining disability, statistical difficulties, recruitment, access, mobility, education, training, stereotyping and discrimination.

The point of departure of the discussion is a critical-emancipative theology of involvement by means of pastoral engagement, inclusion in the pastoral community and prophetic justice.

## CONCEPTUALISATION

### Carefronting

The concept of carefronting was coined by Augsburger<sup>4</sup>. He applied it to family relationships and communication in the sense of caring enough to confront. In the context of this article carefronting is understood to mean pastoral engagement with people living with disabilities and

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<sup>2</sup> "SA Labour Guide. Your Guide to Labour Law in South Africa." Online at [www.labourguide.co.za](http://www.labourguide.co.za). Accessed :14 September 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "SA Labour Guide".

<sup>4</sup> Augsburger, D. 1980. *Caring enough to confront*. Glendale, California G/L Publications.

including them within the pastoral community and, as such, laying the foundation towards prophetic justice<sup>5</sup>. This implies a critical-emancipative theology of involvement<sup>6</sup>.

### **Disability**

During my forty nine years of living with a deteriorating visual disability, I have been involved in numerous debates and discussions regarding terminology. Much has also been written about defining and describing disability. Alternative words such as impairment and vulnerability were and still are promoted. The binaries of normality and abnormality and similarity and difference are inextricably linked to these “language games” as well as with the models they represent.<sup>7</sup>

I must admit that I’m none the wiser and find such exercises rather meaningless, both in terms of actual meaning as well as making a difference to the meaning of living with disability. To be blunt, people with disabilities do not have the energy or money or time to waste on such trivialities, because there is a life to be lived, work to be done, significant others to be loved and cared for, friends to socialize with, a community and country to be served and fun to be had. To me, disability is part and parcel of who *I am* and in this article I will therefore apply the concept of disability in various ways, leaving it up to the reader to attach whatever meaning he/she is most comfortable with.

I will also not venture into discourses either of trying to negate existing binaries or of reconciling any so-called dualisms concerning concepts. These apparently contradictory notions are integral creative tensions of what being disabled means.

In this regard, the concept of *Ubuntu*<sup>8</sup> is helpful, but then only so if understood as being much more than the mere superficial understanding thereof as “a person is a person through other people” The latter is indeed part of what *Ubuntu* entails, but only one part. In fact, *Ubuntu* does

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<sup>5</sup> Gerkin CV. 1991. *Prophetic Pastoral Practice: A Christian Vision of Life Together*. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press

<sup>6</sup> Gravett, I. 2008. *Narratives of couples affected by infertility : daring to be fruitful*. PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria. Online at <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis>. Accessed: 2 July 2011

<sup>7</sup> This was again very evident at the conference on Theology, Disability and Human Dignity of the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, 18-20 May, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Van Deventer, W.V.. 1998. *African Cosmology and Pastoral Family Therapy*. In *Missionalia*, 26 (2): 260-271

not consist of parts, as it is a complex dynamic of purpose relations and purpose relationships that fuse together the divine, the human, the self, fauna, flora, the natural and infrastructural environment, the unborn, the living and the dead into an integrated existential whole, unifying also seemingly opposing dimensions (e.g. medical, social and philosophical models). Herein lies the key of understanding disability as a given that is simply *present*: I am, because *I belong within Ubuntu, including belonging to disability and disability belonging to me* in the seen and the unseen within the all-inclusive circle of multiple but interactive realities.

### **Issues**

In many instances, people with disabilities and those without disabilities experience similar issues in the South African Labour Market. However, people living with disabilities experience additional challenges, while individual disabled persons experience unique problems due to their particular circumstances. This “add-on” principle applies in this article.

### **South African Labour Market**

For the purposes of this article the emphasis will be on the formal public and private sectors. In general, information is very scarce and confusing, but particularly so regarding disabled people’s engagement in the informal sector of the economy.

## **DISABILITY ISSUES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR MARKET**

### **The legal dilemma**

Strangely enough, our highly appreciated and valued South African Constitution, Bill of Human Rights<sup>9</sup> and Labour Laws, specifically our Employment Equity Act<sup>10</sup> constitute a serious problem for the disabled. The Employment Equity Act, in order to restore the imbalances of our apartheid past, makes provision for affirmative action based on race, gender and disability.

Thus far, and based on the justified legal principle of “substantive context”, the emphasis has been on race and gender, but it has resulted and still results in an under-emphasis on disability. The stated and publicized policy of government is that 2% of the whole South African Labour

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<sup>9</sup> 1996

<sup>10</sup> 55 of 1998.

Market should consist of people with disabilities. However, in a report by the South African Labour Guide, the figure of actually employed disabled people dropped from almost 1% in 2009 to 0.5% by September 2010<sup>11</sup>. Instead of moving towards the target of 2% the trend is moving in the opposite direction. There is however another side to this difficulty, namely the conceptualization of the term disability.

The Employment Equity Act describes the concept for the purposes of the application of the law by stating that disabled people are defined as a “designated employee”, entitled to equality and equitable treatment in the workplace.

A person is disabled for the purpose of the Act, if such a person has a long term or recurring physical or mental impairment which substantially limits their prospects of entering into or advancing in employment. For the purpose of the Act, the disability must have a substantially limiting effect<sup>12</sup>.

However academics and people with disabilities alike complicate the matter with our war of words, thus reducing our negotiating powers with the essential role players in the public and private sectors of labour. (Cf. the discussion on “Disability” under “CONCEPTUALISATION”).

### **A lack of evidence-based information**

Another aspect weakening our bargaining is the statistical confusion and fluidity regarding prevalence and employment. For the purposes of this article I have requested statistics from three national organizations representing people with disabilities in South Africa<sup>13</sup> as well as STATS SA<sup>14</sup>. I received four different sets of answers. The figures concerning the prevalence of people with disabilities in South Africa vary from 5 to 10 to 12.4 per cent, while STATS SA could not provide integrated figures. It was mentioned at the Conference on Theology, Disability and Human Dignity that the number of disabled people in South Africa has now stabilized at

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<sup>11</sup> “SA Labour Guide”.

<sup>12</sup> “SA Labour Guide”.

<sup>13</sup> Disabled People South Africa (DPSA), South African National Council for the Blind (SANCB) and South African National Council for People with Physical Disabilities (SANCPPD)

<sup>14</sup> Statistics South Africa

approximately two and a half million, over and against the four and a half million in 2001<sup>15</sup>. One can indeed cynically ask: what happened to the other two million within a period of only ten years?

As far as the number of people with disabilities who are employed is concerned, the South African Labour Guide indicates a figure of 1% of all persons living with disabilities<sup>16</sup>. However, it is not clear whether this statistic refers to all disabled people or to people with disabilities who find themselves within the economically active age group.

Leaders in business, commerce and government demand evidence based information in order to plan for action regarding inclusion of the disabled in the South African Labour Market, but as long as this confusion and fluidity exists, the South African disability movements' programmes promoting the employment of more disabled people are highly compromised.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment of people with disabilities for particular positions poses another challenge. The arguments in this regard are threefold.

- “We cannot recruit people living with disabilities as we do not have the necessary facilities, equipment and support services!”
- “We do not possess sufficient funds to implement the changes needed in order to employ disabled people!”
- “We would like to include people living with disabilities on our staff, but they are hard to come by!”

The first two arguments are directly related to access and mobility. In this regard there is no demand for extreme measures of access and mobility, but the reasonable and disability specific availability thereof. At the same time, for instance, it does not imply mere back door entry or an acceptance that persons in wheel chairs and with guide dogs will simply have to make do with uneven sidewalks. Access to buildings is also not confined to getting into a particular structure,

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<sup>15</sup> Mr Mzolisi ka Toni

<sup>16</sup> “SA Labour Guide”.

but having the same access as others working in that building, eg access to public amenities, colleagues' offices, staffrooms and, very importantly, escape routes in case of emergencies.

In addition, a disability-friendly environment is of essential value. This might imply getting to and into surrounding coffee shops, restaurants, shopping malls, etc. In the context of a tertiary institution, people with disabilities will also be required to attend meetings across the campus, enter the library and interact socially with personnel and students at various venues.

The planning and establishment of new buildings and surroundings is governed by laws that require proper provision of access and mobility for people with disabilities. Adaptations to existing infrastructure are costly, but taking into account that these changes benefit more than disabled people (e.g. older and temporarily injured persons), it is not such a big request to employers to budget accordingly. A step-by-step approach can also make the ultimate outcome more easily attainable.

The third argument concerning the availability or lack thereof of disabled people for vacancies in the South African Labour Market is directly linked to the challenges faced by disabled learners and students regarding basic and tertiary education and skills training<sup>17</sup>.

Education and training for learners and students with disabilities is expensive and therefore largely insufficient. Moreover, the concept of mainstreaming is gaining ground in South Africa, but not all educational institutions are geared towards such ventures, because of problems of infrastructure, equipment, support services and the costs involved. There are however learners that have the opportunity to study in mainstream and secondary schools for children with disabilities and who do indeed pass matric with or without the requirements to apply for studies at a tertiary institution.

No self-respecting learner with a disability who does not meet the necessary requirements would expect to be enrolled simply on the grounds of his/her disability, and they should therefore be assisted to channel their abilities in another direction that would prepare them for competition on the open labour market. Learners who do however meet the requirements of entering tertiary

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<sup>17</sup> "SA Labour Guide".

education should in no manner be withheld from such an opportunity because of a particular institution's lack of accessibility, mobility, etc. This unfortunately still occurs, especially as far as young people who are deaf are concerned, mainly because of the absence of sign language interpreters. To disallow students the opportunity of enrolment at any tertiary institution, simply because the institution itself is not adequately equipped, is to disable the already disabled even further.

A recent development concerning tertiary education could have adverse effects on disabled students. Previously, special state bursaries were offered to students with disabilities. Now they have to compete on an equal basis with non-disabled students for bursaries excluding the provision of funds for additional expenses like equipment<sup>18</sup>. The principle of equal competition for equal bursaries is to be welcomed, but the argument is that the respective tertiary institutions should assist with the additional needs of students with disabilities. Disabled students studying at mainline tertiary institutions will benefit, but students from remote areas who are dependent upon the smaller and more marginalized tertiary institutions will be disadvantaged. In this regard, the South African Disability Development Trust can be a useful resource<sup>19</sup>.

All basic and tertiary educational institutions are not equally equipped to accommodate learners and students across the whole range of disabilities or are financially capable of applying the necessary changes. An option in this regard would be that, for instance, schools, colleges and universities in a particular region share the relevant responsibilities.

### **Stereotyping and discrimination**

The South African Labour Guide also highlights the problem of stereotyping and discrimination<sup>20</sup>. Firstly, they state that there is the perception that disability refers to a person in a wheel chair. Secondly, they rightly point out that many employers are of the view that people

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication by Dr William Rowland, Resource Mobilization and Public Relations Manager of the South African Disability Development Trust, Honorary Vice President of the World Disability Alliance and former Director of SANCB.

<sup>19</sup> Formerly known as the Thabo Mbeki Disability Development Trust supplying specialized equipment and support services to disabled learners, students and employees on merit.

<sup>20</sup> "SA Labour Guide".

with disabilities are suited for only certain jobs, e.g. a person in a wheel chair can only work at reception or as a typist, a blind person is only suitable to operate the switchboard and someone who is deaf can only do manual or messenger work. In this regard, the South African Labour Guide points out that the biggest decline of persons with disabilities is in the category of higher positions of employment. Concerning the latter, it should be borne in mind that, as in the case of highly qualified and skilled professionals in general, people with disabilities also find employment opportunities elsewhere in the world.

### **A bridge too far?**

With the dawn of our country's democracy in 1994 we have taken on major and numerous challenges. Poverty, Hiv-Aids, TB, malaria, basic education for all, housing, restoring imbalances based on race, gender and sexual orientation are but a few. No wonder that disability issues in the South African Labour Market find it difficult to be a priority on our national agenda.

Thus far, the approach was that of awareness and education, but sensitizing, advocacy and pro-activism need to be added as part of a strategy to promote the employment of people with disabilities on merit, but also on grounds of ability and skills, not merely based on their disability.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article carefronted a number of the most pressing issues for people with disabilities in the South African Labour Market. Challenges related to law, conceptualizing disability, statistics, access, mobility, education, training, stereotyping and discrimination were addressed and placed within the context of the macro-problematics of our country.

As point of departure, a critical-emancipative theology of involvement served as foundation for dealing with the relevant matters. Within this context, disability issues in general, but particularly concerning employment, should therefore become an integral part of theological training and religious practice. In this manner the faith communities in our country can become agents of pastoral engagement and inclusion, voices of prophetic justice, concrete symbols of hope and examples to society as a whole, but more so, to the public and private sectors of labour.

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