

# Hope for the Global Disability Community

*By Rev. Steve Bundy*

Hope. It's what keeps life enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful. People build dreams upon it and wish for more of it. But for the one billion people in the world affected by disability, hope seems very distant.<sup>1</sup> The daily challenges, discouragement and abuse they face can strip away their hope, leaving them marginalized in society, as well as in their families and communities. We cannot discuss topics such as human trafficking, HIV Aids, poverty or injustice without addressing the needs of those most affected by these atrocities—people with disabilities.

In this paper, we'll tackle the real needs of the global disability community, the shocking statistics of our day and the stories behind the numbers. We'll also move beyond the despair and pain to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. This hope is available to everyone through his Word, his Spirit and his Body. It's a hope that promises peace, joy and community... a hope that goes beyond our suffering.

## **The Global Disability Community**

Disabilities impact millions of people in the world, but their effects are especially felt in developing countries. According to the United Nations, 80% of the estimated millions of disabled people in the world live in developing countries where resources are limited. Several million of them are children. According to Disability World, 97% of these children will suffer from abuse or neglect and most will never have access to health care or education.<sup>2</sup>

The World Bank reports that 20% of the poorest of the poor in the world are people with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> The statistics go on and on and include some of the most shocking numbers related to sex trafficking and abuse, injustice, discrimination and even euthanasia.

## **Hope in Christ**

It has been said that suffering is the common denominator among all humans. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:22–23 that all of creation groans with suffering and longs for redemption. Everyone will suffer in some way because we live in a fallen world. When we think about the ways that people suffer physically, emotionally, socially and of course spiritually, the statistics confirm that people with disabilities experience an aggravated degree of suffering in all of these areas.

In fact, people with disabilities have the least access to education, healthcare, vocational opportunities, community life and, unfortunately, church life. We simply cannot deny that suffering exists in the disability community, nor can we deny that a great deal of this suffering comes about not as a result of their disability, but because of the world we live in... a world of exclusion, oppression and rejection.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 Paul reminds us that our bodies are temporary “tents” which we dwell in on Earth. But we long for our permanent “buildings” prepared for us in heaven—that is, complete healing and restoration. What a message of hope Paul gives to those whose physical bodies or intellectual abilities—tents—are torn, broken and often twisted by suffering. In Christ their temporary dwellings are transformed into their eternal homes. There is forgiveness of sins and a relationship with our loving Heavenly Father awaiting believers.

## The Goodness of God

Our message is one of hope—that God loves every person and has a plan for them.<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:3–6 reminds us that suffering leads us to the hope found in Christ. Our hope is grounded in the promises and character of God and the redemption that is found in Christ Jesus.

When I think of people with disabilities who have experienced this hope, I think of a woman in West Africa named Tafilly. At an early age Tafilly was affected by polio and by her teen years, she had limited mobility in her legs. Tafilly was cast out of her family home because her father said he did not want to raise an invalid. Although she found herself living in the street, Tafilly did not give up. She wanted to learn and hoped for a better life for herself, so she gathered newspapers off the streets and practiced reading.

Whenever Tafilly came across a book that had been thrown away, she would pick it up and take it back to her dwelling place. One day, she came across a book with the cover torn off, and it was written in her local language. As she read it, her life was forever changed because the story spoke of hope . . . a hope that involved a loving God who had a plan for her life. His plan included forgiveness for her sins and a personal relationship with a Heavenly Father. Tafilly was amazed at how moved she was by this particular book. Then she learned it was written by someone who was disabled too, Joni Eareckson Tada.

Tafilly believed that if God had a plan for a disabled teenager named Joni, then he must have a plan for her as well. She gave her life to Christ. Today, Tafilly is married with a family and has a thriving disability ministry in her community. She has developed vocational training programs for the disabled and established Bible study groups to reach her city. She is having tremendous impact for the Kingdom. Tafilly found the only true hope in this world, the hope found in Jesus Christ . . . the hope that goes beyond suffering.

## The Global Church Luke 14 Mandate

There aren't enough of Joni's books to reach the 670 million people affected by disability around the world. But God has a plan to reach them nevertheless. His plan is clear, simple and includes the Church—your church and mine. He has given his Church a mandate detailed in Luke 14:12–24. In fact, we often refer to this passage as The Luke 14 Mandate. The language here is interesting because Jesus speaks directly to the host of a Great Banquet who represented the religious leader of the community, and tells him that he is to be an example of inclusion of those with disabilities. “You,” Jesus is saying, “are the representation of God in this world.”

When people ask about God's view of people with disabilities, the answer should be quite simple: Look at the church . . . look at the spiritual representation of God on this Earth, look at the spiritual leaders of our communities. What do their lifestyles tell us about how God views and treats people with disabilities? Are those with disabilities gathered around their tables?

This challenge was never as clear to me as when I met Sangyou. I want to tell his story by sharing a personal entry from my journal that I wrote shortly after meeting him.

“Sangyou has forever touched my life! His name, Sangyou, given by his parents, means ‘The Burden.’ He has carried the weight of that name for over 60 years. Born with cerebral palsy, he had no

access to medical care, physical therapy or adaptive equipment. Unable to care for his physical needs, Sangyou has spent most of his life on the ground. When I approached Sangyou, he was sitting in his own filth, covered with flies. The smell of human waste hit me in the face, and I felt an urge to withdraw, but just then a flood of love rushed through my body. I couldn't help but embrace the man.

Sangyou's smile made me forget about his deplorable conditions and see the gentle spirit of the man inside the twisted body. My heart instantly melted when I felt this thin frame of a man. I thought surely that is the love of Jesus and not my own. The religious beliefs of the villagers made Sangyou untouchable to others. I couldn't help but wonder when was the last time this man had felt the touch of another human being.

'The Burden!' His name kept ringing in my ears. As the father of a son with severe disabilities myself, I cringed at how his parents could give him such an awful name. What were they thinking, adding to the pain and social stigma their son would have to carry throughout his life?

Instantly, conviction pierced my heart. Am I not just as guilty... isn't the church which I represent and the society that I am a part of just as guilty of adding to his pain? Maybe not by what we have said or done directly, but we may be guilty by what we have not said and have not done. Are we not in fact calling Sangyou, calling those with disabilities 'The Burden' when our attitudes reflect an unwelcome spirit in our homes and churches? When we go out of our way to not interact with someone in distress? When our worship, evangelism and fellowship are all planned without the disabled in mind? Are we not saying in effect, 'you are a burden?'

Who am I to condemn Sangyou's parents who have brought so much pain by their words, when I, when we as a church are guilty of bringing so much pain by our lack of inclusion of those with disabilities?

I quickly learned that Sangyou's smile was one born in hope—the hope he found in Christ. Sangyou had given his heart to Jesus years before. And although he longed to be a part of the local church in his village, he was unwelcomed and had never participated in a church service or fellowship of any kind. He had never had access to the church, nor had the church ever come to him.

Before leaving, I prayed for Sangyou, and reminded him that in Christ he had a new name, he was no longer Sangyou, 'The Burden,' rather, he was Sangyou 'The Blessing' because God loves him and is delighted that he is his child!

Jesus' words to those present in Luke 14 was a mandate that the Sangyous of the world should be at their table. But it was more than just a mandate, it was a rebuke. In the days of Jesus, the culture surrounding him was much like cultures in today's world. People with disabilities were viewed as cursed, outside of the mainstream, marginalized and segregated. Jesus took these religious and cultural views and turned them on their head. He challenged barriers and revealed the heart of God... the heart of the King himself. Indeed, people with disabilities are central to the Kingdom of God.

True ministry comes out of our conviction, which is given by the Holy Spirit through God's Word. The Scriptures are full of commands to minister to the poor, weak, outcast and disabled, but instead of allowing ministry to influence our culture, we allow culture to dictate ministry. Can the Lord say about us what he said of King Josiah, "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:16).

The Holy Spirit is mobilizing the church globally and we are beginning to see a movement of disability ministry around the world like no other time in history. God is calling his Body to repent and obey his command to disciple and serve those with disabilities in every people group in the world. You cannot find a people group where the disabled do not exist... and many times they're just outside our doorway—a door wide open for evangelism.

In 1 Corinthians 12:22, Paul's message to the early church was that "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." In other words, the church can't fully function without them. Every member of the body of Christ has a contribution to make. When people affected by disability are absent from the body of Christ, the church is incomplete.

What is the church missing without Sangyou? What would the church in West Africa be without Tafilly? What would churches around the world be missing without Joni Eareckson Tada? Who is missing from your church?

If we are to reflect the Kingdom of God, we must reflect the King. We must work together to create strategies and partnerships for ministering to those with disabilities in this world. At Joni and Friends, we have found that the opportunity to reach a community for Christ is often through the doorway of ministering to those with disabilities. God's message of love, peace, redemption and hope is exalted through their lives. If God can give them hope in the midst of their pain, we can all trust that he will shower us with eternal hope that takes us beyond our suffering!

*This paper was first presented in part at the 2010 World Conference on Evangelism in Cape Town, South Africa.*

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## Notes

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1. 1 Billion People Are Living With Disabilities, <http://tinyurl.com/3usx3eg>
2. *Disability World*, Issue No. 9, July–August 2001, [www.disabilityworld.org/07-08\\_01/children/global](http://www.disabilityworld.org/07-08_01/children/global)
3. "Fact Sheet on Persons with Disabilities," United Nations, [www.un.org/disabilities/documents/toolaction/pwdfs.pdf](http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/toolaction/pwdfs.pdf)
4. Jeremiah 29:11

## About the Author

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**Steve Bundy** brings 25 years of experience in nonprofit leadership, both domestically and internationally. The last 17 years have been at Joni and Friends, where he has launched multiple initiatives and now leads our international efforts around the world. Previously he has served as an executive at the US Center for World Mission, as a missionary in Eastern Europe and as a pastor of disability ministry. He is a published author and co-author with Joni Eareckson Tada on projects such as *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View of Disability Ministry* and the Telly-Award winning television episode, *Making Sense of Autism*. He has also co-authored, *Another Kind of Courage: God's Design for Fathers of Families Affected by Disability*. Steve and his wife Melissa know firsthand the joys and challenges of parenting a child with disabilities, as their own son, Caleb, was born in 1999 with muscular dystrophy, intellectual disability, and autism. Their second son, Jaron, is a musician and produces Christian worship music. Steve holds a B.A. in Theology and Missions from Bethany Global University, an M.A. in Organizational Leadership from Biola University, and certificates in executive management from Harvard and Stanford.