



## **Building an Inclusive Community –**

**Moving beyond Accommodation to Affirmation and Advocacy with and for People with Disabilities.**

### **Conference Statement**

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, July 25, 2014**

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The Council for World Mission (CWM), a partnership of churches in mission, seeks to identify issues in which its constituents could be engaged in authentic response as part of their witness in the world.

In July 20 – 25, 2014, CWM and the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network (EDAN) brought together representatives from the 31 CWM member churches to engage with the issues of advocacy and affirmation with and for persons with disabilities. 15% or more of the world's population are persons with disabilities. The conference listened to personal stories, of hurt and pain, of rejection and marginalization with dismay. The conference also heard positive stories of the resilience and courage of persons with disabilities, which were received with joy. It became clear that all churches were being invited to strengthen their awareness of and increase commitment to action for justice that moves beyond accommodation to nothing less than inclusion and participation. It was recognized that such a new ethos requires an active partnership with persons with disabilities so that rights and independent living could be affirmed and fullness of life through Christ achieved.

The conference recalled the tragic history of the human story of relating to persons with disabilities. We understood the shame, for it was our story of relationships of fear leading to callousness with impunity. We were reminded how new-borns, infants, children, and adults with disabilities have been: abandoned and neglected; physically, emotionally, spiritually, and sexually abused; mocked, ridiculed, and shamed; institutionalized, sterilized, and experimented upon; aborted, disposed, and euthanized. These harms are rooted in ideological prejudices and the institutionalization of norms that have segregated humankind into two groups, "the normal" and "everyone else." Contrary to God's design for fullness of life, this ideology has distributed a power that privileges some as it disables most others. Epitomized by violence, this power perpetuates injustice, thwarts flourishing, amplifies the connection between poverty and disability and restricts friendships and communion in Christ and all humanity. For persons with disabilities, this history is a story of injustice and sin against God and all created in God's image.

In wrestling with the issues and listening to the experiences of harm, the conference affirmed the power of story-telling and its transformative and cathartic witness to the world. We recalled the power of the story of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection of Jesus, the spread of the good news and its impact. Speakers and participants narrated their experiences and encounters with disability to raise awareness of the relationship between this violent past and present oppression and Jesus' life and mission, so as to inspire advocacy in the struggles and hope for self-determination by persons with disabilities. These stories are and will continue to be critical in uncovering discrimination while they motivate the church and society to be courageous in protecting and supporting the dignity of persons with disabilities. The stories were an invitation and a challenge to the church about its role in being an inclusive community, where there is no one in the margins and the identity and dignity of each is affirmed.

We were also reminded of our collective human guilt in associating disability with sin and God's judgment. We explored John 9, which sets the scene for a dramatic debate between Jesus, his disciples, religious leaders, an individual with a disability and the wider community over the case of who is morally and spiritually responsible for the blindness of the man born blind. Was it himself or his parents who sinned? Jesus emphatically stated that the disability has nothing to do with sin. Rather what seemed a disability to the crowd was an opportunity for Jesus to manifest the glory of God: that this man came to see Jesus as a prophet and became his disciple while the religious leaders could do neither. Jesus did not avoid this man but identified with him in the vulnerabilities of the human condition and the diversities of creation. John 9 invites us to recognize the creative and redemptive power of God in every aspect of this diversity.

Moreover, the conference recognized that effective action towards a more inclusive church requires mutual accountability through existing and emerging structures. That action foreshadows the experience of God's justice for all in an inclusive church, affirms every human being as the image of God, supports a common life and participation in mission, and celebrates the interdependent diversity in all of God's very good creation.

Finally, the conference affirmed CWM for its role in raising awareness of the complexity of issues that persons with disabilities face. Guidelines were drafted to help constituent churches in their work to secure the God-given rights of persons with disabilities and promote their independent living. The conference recognized the value of building coalitions with ecumenical partners, other faith traditions and Non-Government Organizations in their advocacy of human rights with and for persons with disabilities. In addition, the conference called upon member churches to engage in nothing less than action for justice and embrace efforts in the community and wider society—to enhance the lives of persons with disabilities.