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**The Gift of Being**

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*Called to Be a Church of All and for All*

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## INTRODUCTION

1. In 2003 the World Council of Churches (WCC) published the document *A Church of All and for All* prepared by EDAN (Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network), which argued for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their respective churches and societies. With the publication of this document, WCC aligned itself with a broader global development toward a human rights approach to disability that had already been underway for some time.
2. Change is indicated in particular by the paradigm shift that appears in WHO and UN documents such as the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), and the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD). Known as the “social model” of disability, the changing views are reflected in the distinction between “impairment” and “disability.” This distinction marks the difference between impairing physical and mental conditions on the one hand, and the social and cultural responses to these conditions on the other.
3. Historically, “disability” has often been regarded from a negative perspective. Persons with impairments were ridiculed and bullied, and even without such degrading responses they were treated as incapable of living a fully human life. Overall they were excluded from interacting with other people on equal terms, even in their churches.
4. In this respect, things are beginning to change also in the context of Christian communities. The notion that disability is a punishment for a person’s sins no longer finds support in theological texts and ecclesial documents. This is not to say that such notions have lost their grip on people’s minds. The belief that disability marks a lack of faith that prevents God from performing a healing miracle is still alive. The same is true of the belief that disability is a sign of being possessed by demons that calls for exorcism.
5. By contrast, the notion of persons with impairments as human beings equal in worth and dignity is now firmly entrenched in official documents such as ICF and CRPD, which in many parts of the world are used as leverage for inclusive policies and practices in both church and society. These developments change the perception of persons with impairments from being the objects of pity to being respected as citizens in their capacity as bearers of human rights.
6. Christian communities participate in this global shift toward a human rights approach. At the same time, their theological reflection on what it means to be church, on its nature and mission in the world, leads to new understandings of disability. Religious understandings of disability in terms of divine punishment or demonic activity are abandoned. Churches are learning to see that persons with impairments have much to give to their communities, and are to be recognized as part of the life and the witness of the church.
7. Seeing the beginnings of change, EDAN started a process of reviewing its first document, which led it to conclude that while many of its observations and assumptions remain valid, the signs of change open up new perspectives. In many ways, persons with impairments and their families are still marginalized, but the burden of proof has shifted.
8. This means that where the previous document aimed at theological arguments in support of inclusion, the present document expresses the view that inclusion does not need an argument. Our Creator made *all* human beings after God’s image and likeness, not only some human beings. From the perspective of the church it is *exclusion*, not *inclusion*, that requires an argument.
9. Opening up a new perspective has implications for the use of inclusive language. The document *A Church of All and for All* used first-person-plural language – “we,” “us,” “our” – primarily to refer to EDAN’s members as self-advocates. We wanted that document to be recognized as testimony of the importance of speaking with our own voice. It sent the message that it should no longer be valid for Christians to speak *about* persons with disabilities as if we weren’t already present in the church to speak up for ourselves. At the time, it was important to underline that as members of EDAN we had become the agents of change.

10. Speaking of the burden of proof that has shifted, however, has enabled us to turn the issue of inclusive language upside down. The present document uses first-person language in inclusive ways to invite all Christian churches to join us in listening to and reflecting upon the experience of members with impairments in their midst. Since we have all been created as finite beings, we all live with limitations of various kinds.

11. With this new document, EDAN hopes to assist the ecumenical family in learning to see the unholy consequences of maintaining segregating distinctions in the way that we shape our practices and institutions. As we all know, our churches still have a long way to go before they can truly claim to be a church of all and for all.

## I. VALUING HUMAN DIVERSITY

### ***Being Created in the Image of God***

12. We acknowledge that some theological viewpoints interpret human createdness in ways that are not favourable to persons with impairments, particularly cognitive impairments. Looking for ‘the seat’ of the image, some theologians asked wherein, the divine the image was to be found. The notion of being created in the image of God in terms of the human intellect came with considerable costs. It implied that human beings with profound intellectual and developmental impairments were not recognisable as truly human.

13. As life expectancy is increasing in many parts of the world, our churches and societies find themselves increasingly challenged by growing numbers of persons in advanced stages of dementia. Decline of their “powers of the rational soul” puts these persons at risk of being regarded as people for whom the notion of being created in God’s image has lost its meaning. In many ways, this notion appears to be appropriated by the temporarily abled-bodied.

14. Looking at the biblical evidence in both the Old and the New Testament, attempts to identify where the image is “seated” remain highly speculative. Following the New Testament, there is a clear view of whom the notion of the divine image applies. For Paul, only Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col.1:15). It is only through him that sinful human beings are restored in their relationship with God the Father, because “they are now justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”(Rom.3:23-24).

15. Thinking about the image along Pauline lines, we discover that the question is not *where* but *how* the image is found, which in the letter to the Colossians is answered by referring us to God’s saving grace. “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col.1:13-14). If Christ is the true image of God, then what is imaged in each of us is the fact of being constituted, and then restored, in the relationship with our maker.

16. Thus understood, the image is not an intrinsic quality of human beings, but is a quality of the relationship that is inaugurated by God’s act of creation. It transcends the meaning of all other facts about our actual existence as the particular human beings that we are. God’s relationship with human beings is grounded in the act of creation. As we all are created in God’s image and likeness (Gen.1:26-27), there is no difference in view of the relationship that God the Creator maintains with each of us.

17. This biblical view warrants the unity of humankind. It allows for the celebration of the widest possible diversity among human beings because in the eyes of God there are no human beings of a lesser kind. Differences between God’s creatures have no distinctive significance in the eyes of God, including the differences between kinds of abilities and disabilities. All human beings are created equal in view of God’s loving kindness, no matter what differences their bodies and minds may exhibit.

## ***The Value of Life***

18. With regard to the value of life, it is decisive for Christians that human life is created as part of the economy of grace. Life is not valuable because it enables the pursuit of happiness, or freedom, or even virtue. That is to say, the value of life is not dependent on particular goals that it enables us to pursue. In this connection, the notion of “quality of life” (to which we will return more extensively later in this document – see §§58 ff) has been presented as criterion to determine which lives are “truly” human. From a Christian perspective, however, human life derives its value from the fact that it is God’s gift.

19. From the perspective of the gospel, therefore, there are no human beings whose lives are of lesser value, because God’s purpose for earthly creatures does not depend on their capacities and abilities. The gospel proclaims that Christ fulfils God’s purpose for his creatures. In Jesus’ own words: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me”(John 14:6). Whatever incapacities and inabilities we may have, they will never eliminate the relationship that our Creator maintains with us. Being the fountain of all that is good, God does not abandon the work that his hand began.

20. The theological reason for affirming the value of life, then, lies in its creatureliness. The Christian faith affirms the value of life independently of its state or condition. It does not distinguish between human lives that do and human lives that don’t measure up against a prevailing account of “quality.” God created human beings in his image; he did not create only some human beings in his image. Nor did God divide humanity in distinct categories. In God there is diversity, but no division.

21. We conclude that grounding the value of life in an account of the quality of human lives is invalid, theologically speaking. Regardless of the state or condition of our bodies and minds, we live in the economy of grace. God does not abandon human beings when their human faculties are diminished, not even when they appear virtually extinct. As God’s creatures, we will always be valuable in the eyes of our maker.

## ***The Language of “Disability”***

22. Human diversity is constituted by, among other things, both talents and limitations. These conditions are part of how we are created. Recognizing limitation as part of creation has important implications for how we speak about “disability” in the church. It means we cannot speak indiscriminately about “the disabled” as if the individuals identified by this label are all alike in this one respect.

23. When persons with different impairments are lumped together as “the disabled,” as if they were a homogeneous group, we disrespect differences. Even when we lump together persons with the same impairment as a homogeneous group, we disrespect individual differences. Persons with impairments differ from one another as much as people in any other segment of society differ from one another.

24. It is important to expose the political nature of disability discourse. This discourse shapes a category of people whom society considers to be in need of help because of a particular condition. Speaking indiscriminately about “the disabled” is a strategy that society uses to control its fear of facing the limitations that living with impairments entails. People being labelled as “disabled” are set apart from mainstream society as people with “special needs.” To “take care” of their special needs, they are referred to all kinds of “special” arrangements, such as special institutions, hospitals, and schools. This strategy has marked the lives of persons with impairments at least since the late nineteenth century.

25. As a result, these persons have one experience in common that most other people are not familiar with, which is the experience of being set apart from other people. In this way their existence has been marginalized because of their impairments. This is the one condition that changes “impairment” into “disability.” Unsurprisingly, persons with impairments of various kinds have organized themselves in many countries into powerful advocacy groups that work together for the equal rights of all.

26. Criticizing the language that lumps them together as “the disabled,” disability advocates have coined their slogan, “Nothing about us without us,” claiming the right to tell their own stories rather than being told by others what their disability “means.” Telling one’s own story is the appropriate way for a person to account for what they are capable of doing, rather than having others identify them through what they cannot do. In this connection, it is often said that dividing human beings into distinct categories fails to recognize their personhood, as well as their individual identities. It fails to recognize the fact that they, no less than other persons, are the “authors” of their own lives.

27. There are two sides to this. From the perspective of the church, the notion of human persons being the authors of their own lives appears at best to be only partially true. From a theological perspective, the question “Who am I?” cannot be separated from the question “Whose am I?” Knowing that God creates all human beings, Christians believe that human beings do not possess the authorship of their own lives.

28. But there is another side to this as well. When the question “Who am I?” cannot be separated from the question “Whose am I?”, theologically speaking, this also implies that other people cannot speak definitive words about our lives. This is very important for persons with impairments. Where others frequently present the view of disability as a tragedy, it is crucial that each and every one has the right to tell the story of their journey in life from their own perspective.

29. Herein lays the partial truth, then, of the claim that we are the authors of our own lives. It marks the authority to speak in our own voice over against other people who are imposing their views upon us. It is important to oppose generalizing and degrading language in how we think and speak about the meaning of impaired or limited conditions of human existence. In determining what such conditions mean, we can only say that they mean many different things to many different people. In this respect, the task in life is the same for everyone, which is to find our ways in view of our possibilities and limitations.

### **Supporting People**

30. Sometimes human limitation – such as caused by physical or cognitive impairments – affects our enjoyment of our talents, sometimes it stimulates the development of them. Whatever the case may be, there is ample reason for recognizing individual support needs, particularly within church communities. The way supports are shaped to address categorical needs, however, has often lead to segregation. Many instances of ignorance, neglect, and abuse have been part of this history, which is not to deny that many instances of positive dedication and commitment can also be found in places of segregation.

31. At the same time, we recognize that while the principle of segregation of persons with impairments should always be questioned, segregated settings may have different functions in different societies, depending upon their socio-economic and cultural circumstances. In any circumstances, though, churches cannot evade the question of appropriate supports. There must always be ample room for church members with impairments to come forward and tell their own stories. This is the least we can expect from Christian communities: that they create space for each and every one of their members.

32. As Paul’s image of the members of the church (1 Cor.12) has taught us: within the sacramental unity of the body of Christ, no one can say, “I have no need of you.” As there are no members of this body without gifts, there is also no one who is not in need of others.

33. In the context of socio-economic policy, however, things are oftentimes less clear. The level of support that different people need varies significantly. As a result, the question of how they are best served depends upon the context. Socio-economic and cultural differences can lead to different assessments of what society should provide. As far as the church is concerned, however, there can be little doubt about its vocation, which is to be a community *with* its members with impairment, acknowledging the gift that each member has to contribute.

## II. CREATION AS AN ACT OF LOVE

### ***Being God's Creatures***

34. When God looked upon creation, God saw that it was good, an affirmation that is repeated throughout the creation story in the book of Genesis. Therefore, it is befitting to start our reflections on disability with the same affirmation. Creation is an expression of God's love. The goodness of being God's creature lies in the relationship with each of us that is inaugurated by the triune God. Herein lies the foundation for the unity of humankind. It exists in the fact that we are all God's creatures. In reflecting on disability, this affirmation lays the ground for anything else that can be said.

35. The Christian tradition confesses that creation is a wilful act of love. God calls each and every one of us into being. The purpose of our being is to respond to the loving relationship that God offers to each of us, which is best expressed in the biblical notion of communion.

36. Affirming that being created is an expression of God's love means that in the eyes of a loving God there are no categories of human beings divided according to status, race, gender, age, or ability. There are only human beings who are God's children. To be God's creature, then, entails being offered the loving kindness of our maker. This is the gift of being. It is offered to anyone, whether black or white, male or female, young or old, with or without impairment. The first act toward each of God's creatures is this gift.

37. As it was recognized in *A Church of All and for All*, a powerful image in this connection is Paul's message to the Ephesians that Christ has come to tear down the walls (Eph.2:14). Divisions between "us" and "them" are the mark that such walls continue to exist. Although persons living with impairments are less and less kept behind walls in segregated places, the walls of fear and prejudice remain, even within the church.

38. Particularly in the church, other people's stares are often more painful than inaccessible stairs. Looking at others as though they are not part of "us" conflicts with the fact that God has called them to be faithful children as well. It also contradicts Christ's ministry of restoring all of us in God's communion. Therefore the community of the church is called upon especially to tear down walls of prejudice and fear that maintain the division between "us" and "them."

39. As a document addressing the family of ecumenical churches, the present document seeks to be in dialogue with the WCC's *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, with its emphasis on the notion of communion as a central image.<sup>1</sup>

As a divinely established communion, the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom. (§13)

40. Viewing limitation as part of the world that God created, the church has every reason not to exempt living with these conditions from its mission. This conviction was already expressed in *A Church of All and for All* in the words, "The Church is by definition a place and a process of communion, open to all and inviting all people without discrimination. It is a place of hospitality and of welcome" (§85). This inclusive understanding of the church's nature and mission points to the main thrust of the present document.

41. The affirmation of limitation as part of the world that God created does not deny that the experience of limitation shares in the ambiguity that is part of our existence. But it is to deny that it is peculiar to the existence of only *some* human beings. As Paul puts it: "The whole of creation is groaning in labour" (Rom.8:23). To be human is to live a life that is marked by the brokenness that is part of our limited existence. Like all human beings, persons with impairments experience both sides of life: the sorrow, loss, and grief as well as the joy, the happiness, and the blessings. In the eyes of a loving God, the categorical

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<sup>1</sup>*The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and order Paper, 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

distinction between human beings with and those without impairments is irrelevant.

42. Our aim in this respect is to assist the ecumenical family in learning to see the unholy consequences of maintaining this distinction in how we shape our practices and institutions. As we all know, our churches still have a long way to go, notwithstanding some inspiring initiatives. Much remains to be done with respect to working toward a church of all and for all.

### **Community and Communion**

43. All things are created in Christ, and in him all things hold together (Col.1:16). This confession provides the context for determining what it means to say that the church is called to be a community of all and for all. As it is stated in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*: “Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing” (§1).

44. This gift of communion is anticipated when the church confesses that we are created *in Christ*. Being thus created does not only imply that God wants us to be for the purpose of responding to his love; it also implies that God fulfils this purpose through Christ’s work, as the church confesses it. This is the heart of the gospel on which the church is grounded.

45. Having been offered the gift of being, we are asked to respond to God’s invitation, which is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). Our journey in life is to seek to live in responsible obedience toward this purpose. Often it is a journey with conflicting tasks arising from the fact that we are finite beings: the tasks of both accepting and resisting; the tasks of both learning and teaching; the tasks of both reconciling and struggling. We know that community of human beings is often disrupted amidst these ambiguities, which frequently results in the exclusion of particular people.

46. The church knows that God persists in faithfulness despite human disobedience. When human beings disrupt community, God calls upon the church to restore it by offering the church the gift of the Holy Spirit. We appreciate that the church, in finding its way in restoring community, has learned that much is to be gained by listening to marginalized voices in its midst. This wisdom also pertains to the voice of persons with impairments in their respective church communities.

47. Once churches learn to listen to this voice, they will discover the many gifts these persons have to offer, some of which have emerged from the experience of living with impairment. They include talents and skills developed through education and training, in various academic disciplines, business, as well as the arts. Other gifts are also offered, for example, of persons with profound intellectual or developmental impairments who bring the gift of attachment and presence to those who provide care and support. As disability advocates, we hold the presence of these persons in particular to be a gift that is crucial to the life and communion of the church.

### **The Body of Christ**

48. God’s gifts to the church include each and every one of its members, then, even though some of its members may appear to be insignificant in the eyes of others. We already referred to the meditation on the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. As a body, the church is made up of many members, all of whom bring different contributions to the whole. Some parts are perceived to be stronger; others are perceived to be weaker.

49. In Paul’s language, the body has parts of which those who consider themselves to be superior are ashamed; parts they rather would cover up (1 Cor.12:23). God has so arranged the body of Christ, however, that precisely these parts become indispensable. Therefore, they are to be especially honoured and respected, and their essential contribution is to be acknowledged (12:24).

50. Given that God has thus arranged the body of Christ, it is very important to understand that 1 Corinthians is not sketching a moral vision or some kind of ideal for the church. As *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* states: “Christians believe and confess with the Creed that there is an indissoluble link between the work of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and the reality of the Church” (§3). Proclaiming the church as the body of Christ is not a moral vision, therefore, but a confession of what we have received.

51. This all-inclusive understanding of the Body of Christ as the reality of God’s gift rooted in the communion of its members with God impels Christians to stand with the downtrodden and the outcasts.

The world that “God so loved” is scarred with problems and tragedies which cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians. The source of their passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ. They believe that God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, can work through them, in the power of the Holy Spirit. (*TCTCV*, §64)

Consequently, as disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians cannot but challenge political authorities when their decrees show little respect for human dignity.

52. In view of this calling, Christians confess their shortcomings and failures and pray for the forgiveness that the gospel promises. This confession includes acknowledging that we oftentimes fail to grasp what it means to be a forgiven people. It also means acknowledging that in church communities we continue to erect or maintain walls and barriers to exclude other members from the body of Christ.

53. However, since we are a forgiven people, there is no need for walls of separation, because there are no differences between human beings that we need to be afraid of. In order to learn the skills of a forgiven people and gratefully receive the gift of human diversity, we need God’s communion as the sacramental gift of the Holy Trinity.

54. This sacramental gift is the body of Christ that has been broken for us all. In the liturgy of the Eucharist we are invited to lift our hearts to the Lord and give him praise. If we have failed so far to be inclusive communities of the body of Christ, the Eucharist as the sacrament of communion will remind us of what we have received. “So then, brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Cor.11:33). Moreover, in order to offer our gifts to God, we are requested first to reconcile with our brothers and sisters: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift”(Matt.5:23-26). How then can we offer our praise, prayer, and gifts to God if we remain in conflict with our brothers and sisters, discriminating against them, isolating or mistreating them?

55. Accordingly, Christians are called to overcome all kinds of divisions in the Eucharist. As the WCC stated in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*: “Christians are called in the Eucharist to be in solidarity with the outcast and to become signs of the love of Christ who lived and sacrificed himself for all and now gives himself in the Eucharist.” This is the offer of God’s communion by virtue of which the church lives.

56. Without the incorporation of all God-given members, the church does not reflect the body of Christ. When Christians deprive others of gifts that God intended to be part of creation, they fall short of the glory of God. The recognition of those who are experienced in living with impairments ensures that the church will be faithful to its calling. Working to overcome every form of exclusion and discrimination among God’s people is a part of the unity that the church seeks, and that Jesus prays for, so that the world may believe (John 17:21).



### III. THE GIFT OF LIFE

#### ***Giftedness***

57. The affirmation of our createdness as an expression of God's love extends itself in the notion of giftedness. Christians confess that life comes from God and that God intended it for us as a gift. In the present connection, "gift language" can be a very powerful expression, but it is not without its problems. Is the impairing condition that one is born with a gift? Some persons living with impairment say it is; others say it isn't.

58. Affirming the giftedness of impairment is often done through the notion of personal identity: "My blindness is not a condition that I have. I am a blind person, and that's who I am." Something similar can be said with regard to conditions such as Down syndrome. One cannot separate the person from the syndrome, because without it, that person would cease to exist as who they are: they would lose their identity.

59. Others disagree, however: "Even when I have fully accepted that my cerebral palsy is part of me, it doesn't mean I see it as a gift. Certain things that are important to me remain quite difficult because of my impairment, such as adequate speech."

60. Perhaps an attempt to broaden the question can be helpful here. The language of "gift" in this connection does not necessarily refer to a *particular* condition. A broader perspective would encourage us to recognize that the gift is (in) the person with the impairment rather than in the impairment itself. Persons with impairments are much more than their impairment, whether it is Down syndrome, blindness, cerebral palsy, or any other.

61. Focusing on the person rather than its impairing condition enables us to recognize that all human beings have gifts and talents that allow them to respond to their circumstances, whatever their particular condition may be. Looking at impairment along these lines we will discover that every human being is gifted in a way that others may need. This recognition in turn highlights the communal aspect of gift language. We are gifts to one another.

62. Gift language can be taken in a yet wider sense, however. It may not regard a particular condition, or even the person with that condition, but *life itself*. Taken in this sense, the gift of life refers to the condition of "being alive." It is important to realize, however, that this condition never comes in isolation. The gift of life includes family: a place where we feel at home and people whose acceptance means that we belong with them. But it also comes with ambiguities, limitations, and sorrows.

63. For some persons their potential barely exceeds the condition of being alive, as in the case of profound intellectual and developmental impairments. Even in these cases, there may be gifts that others are in need of, for example the gift of one's presence, or of one's capacity to respond to attention or to exhibit some sign of attachment, or to have one's body respond peacefully to the care received from other people.

#### ***Socio-economic Deprivation***

64. In recent history the segregation of persons with impairments from the rest of society has been governed by, among other things, the perception that they are unable to be productive members. Until the present day, disability rights are perceived within the purview of economic conditions.

65. In view of policies that marginalize persons with impairment for economic reasons, however, Christians know, or should know, that the economy of production is transcended by the economy of God's grace. In the divine economy, people's gifts and talents are not measured according to economic productivity, but according to their role in the realization of God's purpose in creation. As stated in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*:

The Church is comprised of all socio-economic classes: both rich and poor are in need of the salvation that only God can provide. After the example of Jesus, the Church is called and empowered in a special way to share the lot of those who suffer and to care for the needy and the marginalized. (§66).

66. Human lives always have these two components then: first, the potential of the individual human being, and second, the circumstances in which it needs to be developed. While these two components can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. They are often intertwined and interdependent. Children who are malnourished have a greater risk of physical and mental impairments due to their family's poverty, in which case their damaged brain is the result of a social condition. In this way cognitive impairments in many children are causally linked to social rather than natural conditions. As Christians we need to ask ourselves to what extent we are responsible for upholding these repugnant social conditions.

67. In the same connection, living in urban societies rather than in rural areas comes with different hazards. It makes us collectively responsible for injuries to innocent children sustained through such things as landmines, substance abuse, or HIV infection. In general there is a collective social responsibility for the injuries of children born in conditions of deprivation. In all parts of the world church communities try to find ways to share in bearing this responsibility.

68. When people are suffering from socio-economic deprivation, the meaning of gift language comes under pressure. Gifts are typically appreciated for the particular experience they promise. But what is the gift of life when a person is born under negative social and economic conditions? What if a person is born into extreme poverty, in the midst of genocide, or to drug-addicted parents? Living in such conditions cannot but raise the question of what the gift of life *is for*?

69. Answering truthfully we must say that the gift of life does not save human beings from the experience of brokenness. Nor does it shield against injustices. Family, neighbourhood, community, nation, state, and society at large—each in turn can fail to provide what is necessary for a decent human life. But seeing human life as God's gift does shield against indifference and prejudice. The gift of being materializes when God's creatures accept their responsibility in supporting others to develop their gifts and talents.

70. In view of these responsibilities, we need to acknowledge that most persons with impairments are economically disenfranchised and experience some level of deprivation in their standard of living or employment opportunities. When social support is unavailable, their families have to make considerable sacrifices. Bearing responsibility for a person with impairment takes its toll in terms of time and resources, and will limit their parents' and siblings' opportunities to earn an income.

71. Poverty and lack of opportunity are the realities of the overwhelming majority of persons with impairments and their families today. The ramifications of this fact cannot be properly considered, however, in isolation from the effects of economic disparity between societies.

72. The disparity between the well-being of a person with impairment in the economic North and that of a non-impaired person in the economic South, for example, is such that on average the former may be "better off" than the latter. At the same time, persons with impairment in the economic North experience a huge gap in well-being compared to the average member of their own society.

### **Medical Technology**

73. Issues of social justice also pertain to other aspects of personal well-being. Persons with impairments may face many barriers to appropriate health and medical care, particularly in areas of disaster and violence. Much the same is true for the accessibility of education. Bereft of the opportunity to be trained in an occupation, people find that their gifts and talents go to waste. Here we can make the same point about the relative deprivation of persons with impairment in their own societies. Equal opportunities are mostly wanting.

74. A particular concern with regard to justice is the rapid global development of medical technology in the areas of artificial reproduction. Combined with genetic screening and testing, artificial reproduction gives prospective parents the option of “informed choice” about specific genetic characteristics of their offspring.

75. In the bioethical literature that deals with the moral issues attached to this development, the justification of screening and testing frequently focuses on what are called “genetic defects” and argues in favour of these practices based on the notion of “quality of life.” Quality of life arguments are troublesome, however, when they are produced to support the claim that some impairing conditions result in human lives that are not worth living.

76. Some bioethicists in the Western world make this case on the basis of the distinction between “being alive” and “having a life.” While being alive is a condition that holds for all living creatures, having a life is a condition that only holds for human beings. The latter is distinguished by the faculties of reason and will, which enable the bearers of these faculties to set goals, make plans, reason about them, change them, pursue them, and so on.

77. Based on this distinction it is argued that the value of life for human beings is dependent on the condition of “having a life” because it constitutes human beings as individual selves. What makes human life valuable is the capacity to pursue one’s own goals as the expression of what one values in life. The value of life, in other words, depends on the capacity of valuing one’s life.

78. The implication of this argument is that the condition of “being alive” has no value in itself. Life is valuable for human beings because of what they are capable of doing with it. Therefore, following these bioethicists, the notion of the “sanctity of life” must be abandoned because it is taken to stake the value of life on the condition of “being alive.”

79. Christian views opposing this bioethical position sometimes do take the notion of the “sanctity of life” to mean that life as such is sacred. However, this view tends to overlook the distinction between the creature and its creator. The value of human life is derivative. It is grounded in the fact that it is God’s gift to humankind. In this sense, the doctrine of sanctity of life retains its significance in Christian theology.

80. The church confesses that all things are created in Christ, and that in him all things hold together (Col.1:16). The purpose of our lives, then, is in God’s act. Therefore, the faith of the church proclaims the goodness of “being.” Focusing on human life as God’s gift in creation, the present document questions the bioethical position that grounds the value of life in the qualities of our bodies and minds. Instead, we take the position that the quality of our human lives is extrinsically grounded in the love of God. Without proclaiming the goodness of being, our faith loses the ground on which the language of hope can only begin to make sense.

81. Meanwhile, the effect of trading the notion of “quality of life” for the notion of “sanctity of life” should not be underestimated. The bioethical argument referred to above is produced in the cultural context of a free market economy, which allows for the “production” of “designer babies.” In this context, abortion rates can be staggeringly high, as is presently the case for unborn children diagnosed with Down syndrome.

82. These developments in artificial reproduction cannot but send the message that “disabled lives” are unwelcome and ought to be prevented from coming into being. Defending these developments as a matter of “reproductive freedom” tends to ignore the effects of that message for persons with impairments and their families.

83. In view of these developments, the church must take upon itself the role of advocacy for the social position of impaired human beings and their future in society. Human reproduction is invaded by the commodification of “preferred” children in a market economy, which in fact introduces a trend toward “eugenics from below.” In view of the apparent rejection of genetics as a possible source of division and

conflict, we call upon the WCC to take responsibility on this issue, reminding what was stated in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*:

The Church proclaims the words of hope and comfort of the Gospel, engages in work of compassion and mercy (cf. Luke 4:18-19) and is commissioned to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to serve God in the ministry of reconciling those divided by hatred or estrangement (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-21). (§66)

#### **IV. VULNERABILITY, LIMITATION, AND HEALING**

##### ***Accepting the Human Condition***

84. The trend in reproductive technology betrays the apparent inability in contemporary society to face vulnerability, limitation, and loss as an ineradicable part of human existence. This explains the fear of living with a disability. In the public eye, persons living with impairment betoken vulnerability, which society seeks to compensate by accounting for these persons as people with “special need.”

85. Inadvertently, the institutional arrangements based on the perception of “special needs” tend to reinforce the widespread belief that vulnerability is a categorical distinction that applies to a particular group of people. It is not. Vulnerability is inherent to the human condition. Human beings as such are vulnerable. To ascribe vulnerability to persons with impairments serves the false belief that people without impairments are strong and self-sufficient.

86. The response from the disability rights movement to this false belief has been that “ability” is not a permanent condition for anyone. There are only “temporarily able-bodied” human beings. Most of us, if not all, will face impairment at some point in our lives. This is why it is in everybody’s interest, so the argument runs, to include persons with “disabilities” in society on the basis of equality. However, instead of justifying the goal of inclusion on the basis of enlightened self-interest, Christian theology has taught that “ability” cannot be a permanent condition of human beings because of the transience and finitude of all creatures.

##### ***Limitation***

87. All this is not to say that “vulnerability” is a non-issue for persons living with impairment. People often seek to hide their vulnerability from themselves as well as from others. Wounds and bruises are painful, and there is no reason to deny this. There is certainly no point in romanticizing the wounds people carry. We did already refer to the groaning of all of creation in Romans 8 (see above §42). Human existence is characterized by the labour that comes with its being finite. The promise of a new creation has not yet been fulfilled. The “not yet” of this promise is exemplified by the fact that as human beings we still face hardships, fall ill, and die.

88. These reflections take us again to the question of limitation. We cannot speak about the “gift of being” without addressing the limitation of our being as God’s creatures. Equally, we cannot speak about it without recognizing the suffering and lament of all of humanity. This indicates why limitation is the ground of our need for each other and of our need for God. It does not merely affect certain individuals, but involves all of us together as the people of God in a broken world.

89. This is what the Bible means when it says that we all hold the treasure of God’s life in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). For the church it is crucially important to note that we hold it together. As it was said in *A Church of All and for All*:

In our attitudes and actions toward one another, at all times, the guiding principle must be the conviction that we are incomplete, we are less than whole, without the gifts and talents of all people. *We are not a full community without one another.* Responding to and fully including people with

impairments is not an option for the churches of Christ. It is the church's defining characteristic. (§87)

90. Acknowledging limitation that is part of our being as God's creatures, then, implies accepting that contingency is part of our experience. We are subject to all hazardous eventualities that can befall finite beings. This is no less true of "temporarily able-bodied" people as it is true for people living with impairment.

91. At the same time it is true that persons living with impairment and their families often have a stronger sense of the experience of contingency than other people may have. They know what it is to have one's life turned upside-down by the unexpected. As it was noted in *A Church of All and for All*:

We have found ourselves in that liminal space between what is known and what is yet unknown, able only to listen and wait. We have faced fear and death and know our own vulnerability. We have met God in that empty darkness, where we realised we were no longer "in control" and learned to rely on God's presence and care. We have learned to accept graciously and to give graciously, to be appreciative of the present moment. We have learned to negotiate a new terrain, a new way of life that is unfamiliar. We have learned to be adaptable and innovative, to use our imaginations to solve new problems. (§54)

92. Knowing what it is to live with ambiguity in the midst of this paradox, many persons with impairments have learned to be resilient. But such accomplishment does not come easy. The confrontation with impairment can be very painful – not necessarily in a physical but in a psychological sense – particularly in its early stages. It frustrates people's expectations, or the expectations of their families. Regardless of its particularities, impairment always means that some possibilities are irreversibly foreclosed.

93. In view of these experiences, we affirm that *every* person living with impairment may find peace in seeking God. In one way or another, all have wrestled with God intellectually and physically to achieve this peace, and whilst some have been privileged to write intellectually about it, others exhibit this peace in their innate gift of grace shown in the love and affection for those who support them. Persons without apparent intellectual powers may also find peace in God. If so, as we believe, the church surely can find ways of accepting the gift they have to offer. God loves each and every one and extends to all the opportunity to respond to that love.

94. In this connection, we are reminded of the story of Jacob wrestling with God (Gen.32: 24-6). In their wrestling with God, persons living with impairment ask the same questions: Why me? Is there a purpose to my condition? In view of these questions, having a "disability" is often considered to be tragic, even though many persons with impairments live reasonably happy lives, not unlike other people. However, it sometimes takes time to discover and acknowledge that impairment is not necessarily tragic.

95. Given varying cultural backgrounds, people come to accept their impairments by diverse routes. Some have had impairments since birth, either by congenital conditions or by a traumatic birth, whilst others have been victims of accidents, or have developed conditions later in life. Tragedies of lost hopes and expectations are overcome by learning to find a new self. This can be the result of a painful struggle, the outcome of which is unknown and feared at the time the impairing condition imposes itself. Therefore, the experience of tragedy is real at realizing that the impairment is inevitable, because it is prior to discovering a way in which that experience can be overcome.

96. Churches must take seriously this experience and sustain people in their lament of being hurt by life's contingencies. The experience of grieving can be very real, which is especially true when people suffer from acquired impairments such as traumatic brain injury. In such cases, life as one knew it is gone, and what the future will bring is frighteningly uncertain. This may also be true for parents whose child develops a physical or intellectual impairment. Grieving loss takes time, which makes the presence of patient friends particularly important. Many people have reported being disappointed in their faith communities in this respect.

## **Vulnerability**

97. The first thing to say in this regard is that in Jesus Christ, God has assumed the life of a human being. This is expressed by the notion of the incarnation. By taking upon himself the mission of living among his creatures and then dying for them, God in Jesus Christ embraces the vulnerability of human existence in order to redeem it. In sending his son because of his love for the world (John 3:16), God has accepted the limitations of being finite as inherent to human existence.

98. In the incarnation, we see how God's vulnerability is connected with love. When God accepts and heals us in our self-incurred afflictions, it is done through God's love, in which God becomes vulnerable to the possibility of being betrayed. Therefore, it is said that we are healed by God's bruises (Is.53:5).

99. God is love (1 John 4:8). This means that God is exposing himself to vulnerability. There are many passages in the Bible, particularly in the books of Israel's prophets, where we hear about God grieving, or being infuriated in being rejected. "I will punish her for the festival days of the Baal, when she offered them incense, decked herself with jewellery and went after her lovers, and forgot me"(Hos. 2:13).

100. What pertains to the connection between God's love and God's vulnerability also pertains to human beings. Part of what it means to love is that we make ourselves vulnerable to the other. When we give ourselves in love, we do so because of the desire to be loved in return. Another person's love cannot be commanded, however, which means that when in love we are always at risk of being ignored or rejected. Since to love is an act of freedom, there is no guaranteed loving response.

101. Vulnerability, then, is at the very heart of God's world. This is testified in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he writes about his own impairment:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak then I am strong. (2 Cor.12:8-10).

102. Living in a state of vulnerability, then, a person with impairment is not an exception to an otherwise untainted existence. "The power of Christ" that dwells in the apostle stems from acknowledging that the "thorn on the flesh" is part of his creatureliness. The same message is found in his hymn in Philippians, where he features Christ by saying that "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness"(Phil. 2:6-7).

103. When the power of Christ dwells in us, then, we will wilfully acknowledge that human life exposes us to the vulnerability that is inherent in our creatureliness. Consequently, the argument to include persons living with impairment and their families in our midst out of enlightened self-interest misses the point. God himself has embraced finite human existence with all of its frailness and limitations.

## **Charity**

104. Traditionally, the most important of motive for serving people with special needs has been charity. They were looked after and taken care of as a way of practising charity. In this way, persons in need of support came to be regarded as "vehicles of charity." They were seen as God's gift that enabled members of the church to grow in the practice of Christian virtue. As has been widely testified in recent decades, being a vehicle of charity has not been a blessing for persons with impairments and their families. More often it has been degrading and humiliating.

105. Self-advocates tend to resent the notion of charity, also within the church. They want to be appreciated for what they have to contribute, rather than being welcomed as people in need who create opportunities for others to practice Christian virtue. Here again, the church has much to benefit from the image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians.

106. Put in terms of Paul's metaphor: the eye does not welcome the contribution of the ear because it will improve the capacity for seeing, but because together with all the other members, they are the body of Christ that they are called to be. The church's vocation is to be the sign and servant of God's design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the lordship of Christ (see Eph.1:10). The church will only be able to live this vocation when it learns to appreciate the gifts from all its members.

## **Healing**

107. A recurring theme in religious thinking about disability is the question of healing. Given the continuing witness of persons with impairments as a gift to the body of Christ, how can healing be an issue? What are we to make of the fact that many of these persons themselves witness that they neither want nor need to be cured of their impairment?

108. In view of these questions many people are struggling with what are called "the healing narratives" in the New Testament. Not only do the gospels tell stories about Jesus' ministry of healing, they also indicate that this is very much a part of his mission. The question needs to be asked, however, whether this was also Jesus' understanding?

109. Next, there is the persistent popular view among religious people that connects disability with sin. When theological reflection has abandoned this connection, as is true for most of contemporary theology, does it follow that the healing narratives have nothing more to say? Are they indeed stories about healing as cure, as is oftentimes assumed, or are they about healing in a different respect? For example, are they stories of faith and healing as the restoration of communion with God in Christ as sign of the kingdom and the new life, where bodily limitations of time and space are transcended?

110. Furthermore, connecting disability with healing as cure also entails connecting it with a life full of suffering, which may be a presumptuous imposition. As we have seen, self-advocates have responded to this imposition with the slogan "Nothing about us without us" in order to claim the right to tell their own stories.

111. Many faithful persons with impairments have testified that the healing narratives and their interpretations have been a reason to turn away from the church. These stories have been used to treat people with disabilities and their families as objects of pity who need to be cured and forgiven. From what has been said in this document thus far, it is clear that regarding these persons as objects of pity because of their impairing condition is theologically unsound. All of us are human beings created in the image of God, and therefore we all, including persons living with impairment, exist within the economy of grace, which no condition of impairment can change.

112. Moreover, if, from the perspective of the gospel, cure was a necessary element of healing, we would have to conclude that Paul's account of the body of Christ needing the gifts of *all* is in fact empty. In view of this consideration, the need for healing is better understood as pertaining to the restoration of the community with God. "Healing" refers to wounds that are incurred by the violence of excluding people by sending them away. In terms of Paul's image, "healing" is needed when despised members have been cut off from the body of Christ.

113. As we have argued in the previous chapters, the church knows, or must know, that as a forgiven people it cannot exclude some as unwanted members. This pertains to all persons living with impairment, among whom persons living with cognitive impairment should be mentioned in particular. It is part of the mission of the church to welcome each and every one with, rather than in spite of, the impairing condition.

114. To illustrate the view we are presenting here, we will turn to the story of the man born blind. Jesus' friends also apparently assume a link between disability and sin. However, when they ask the question, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?", Jesus gives them no answer. Instead he says, "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:2-3). Traditional readings have assumed that "God's work" anticipates the fact that later in the story Jesus heals the blind man. As the narrative unfolds, however, something else is revealed.

115. The Pharisees accuse Jesus that in healing this man he failed to observe the Sabbath. They try to persuade the blind man to testify against Jesus, which the man refuses several times. He even dares to make fun of them: "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" (John 9:27). They get angry and throw him out of the temple.

116. When Jesus is informed about this, he goes out to find the man, and when he finds him, he asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answers, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus then reveals himself, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he," upon which the man responds, "Lord, I believe" (John 9:35-38).

117. So the man confesses to believe that Jesus is the son of man. Up to this point in the gospel of John, this confession has been the heart of the matter. The Pharisees have been emphatically opposing Jesus' account of his mission. In their view, his "father" did not send him as he claims, because there is no communion with God other than by Moses' law, which it is their duty to guard.

118. The conflict about Jesus' mission shows how the man born blind reveals the work of God, namely by confessing that Jesus is from the Father. Since this is precisely what the Pharisees deny, Jesus tells them that despite their knowledge of the scriptures, they are spiritually blind: "If you were blind, you would not have sin, but now that you say 'We see' your sin remains" (John 9:41). In denying Jesus' mission, they testify to have no true knowledge of God.

119. The central question with regard to the healing narratives then is: What is Jesus healing in people? We suggest the answer is that he heals their broken relationship with God. People who are "defiled" by impairment are thrown out of the temple and excluded from their religious community. Jesus restores them in these relationships. To be healed is to be restored in a relationship of communion with God and one another.

120. With regard to the healing narratives, then, we may look at religious and social rather than medical woundedness. No doubt people in these narratives perceived particular medical conditions as part of the impairment. But this does not alter the fact that the healing narratives are primarily concerned with the restoration of relationship, first with God and then with the community. This can be seen in the story about the man with leprosy who asks Jesus to make him clean (Mark 1:40-45), and in the story of the Jesus meeting the man who was paralyzed (Mark 2:1-12).

121. Healing narratives in the gospel provide a lens for rethinking "disability" as it has been understood traditionally in most religious communities, inside and outside Christianity. In reading them as reports about curative medicine in biblical times, many communities have made "healing" a very painful and frustrating topic for persons living with impairment. It did not occur to readers that these "disabled" figures needed more to be healed of their estrangement from God and their fellow believers than of their impairment.

## **V. CALLED TO BE A CHURCH OF ALL AND FOR ALL**

### ***The Good News***

122. The good news of the gospel is that the Jesus restores us as God's creatures to communion with



God. Whatever reasons people may have had for excluding others from this relationship, inside or outside the church, have become obsolete. The gospel challenges the faithful not to drive out from their communities all those whom God already has accepted.

123. Jesus often describes the renewal of creation announced by gospel as a reversal of the ways of the world—for example, when he compared God’s kingdom with a banquet for the poor. In making this comparison, he was perhaps remembering the passage in Isaiah where the prophet announces: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” (Is.25:6). In Matthew’s account, the king’s elite guests are too caught up in their affairs to honour his invitation. The king does not postpone the banquet. Instead, he invites people from the streets, who live on the margins. Jesus does not say that God’s reign is for a future world. Instead, he says, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” It is offered to us all as a present reality (see §73 of *A Church of All and for All*).

124. The document *Together Towards Life* states:

The church is a gift of God to the world for its transformation toward the kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world. We must participate in God’s mission in unity, overcoming the divisions and tensions that exist among us, so that the world may believe and all may be one (John 17:21). The church, as the communion of Christ’s disciples, must become an inclusive community and exists to bring healing and reconciliation to the world. How can the church renew herself to be missional and move forward together toward life in its fullness? (§10)

In view of this statement, we ask what hope this message entails for persons living with impairment and their families. What can we expect from the church when it is called to embody the kingdom of God?

125. When all who want to come are indeed invited to this feast – to this church – it will include people who at times feel they are looked upon as a disgrace to their community. Along with people who are poor, homeless, sick, in prison, or struggling with addictions, we will find persons with impairments. They are members of the body of Christ, but in our churches they are sometimes referred to as people who need to be prayed for.

## **Liturgy**

126. As well-intended as such prayers are, they nonetheless send the message that the role of some is to pray for the good of others, while the role of these others is to be the beneficiaries of their prayers. This is not how we understand the presence of persons with impairments in our church communities. They are not merely the passive recipients of the prayers of other members. Instead, they hope for and expect a church community in which the category of “disability” no longer means anything. This expectation pertains to what the church preaches, to how it celebrates its liturgy, and to the ways it seeks to practise the gospel.

127. The most visible expression of church as communion is when it gathers in worship to give thanks for the paschal mystery. The Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all God’s children. It commands the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic, and political life. It points beyond the communion of the church toward the whole of creation. As we read in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*,

All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ. Through the Eucharist the all-renewing grace of God penetrates and restores human personality and dignity . . . As participants in the Eucharist, therefore, we prove inconsistent if we are not actively participating in this on-going restoration of the world’s situation and the human condition.(§20).

128. In celebrating communion with God and one another, the Eucharist opens up the vision of the renewal of creation, of which it is a foretaste. In the celebration of communion, the world is represented in that we give God thanks for signs of this renewal wherever human beings work for justice, love and peace (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, §22).

129. At this point it is especially relevant to focus on persons with cognitive impairment. They are left out of worship services as a matter of course, with the assumption, “They don’t understand what is happening, so why bother?” This insensitive attitude toward these persons and their families is unholy. It ignores the fact that the experience and expression of the liturgy engages the whole person: not only their intellect, but also the senses: through music and singing, liturgical gestures such as kneeling and bowing, as well as art and the use of incense, each of which indicates the participation of the body in the liturgy. Persons with cognitive impairment are not oblivious to these expressions. They respond to the integrity of the liturgy in which they are invited to participate. They pick up the real and true involvement of those around them and respond to their devotion.

## **Mission**

130. In its document *Together Towards Life*, the WCC has stated that guided by the Holy Spirit, its mission aims at the liberation and reconciliation of the whole of creation:

The mission of the church is to prepare the banquet and to invite all people to the feast of life. The feast is a celebration of creation and fruitfulness overflowing from the love of God, the source of life in abundance. It is a sign of the liberation and reconciliation of the whole creation, which is the goal of mission. (§101).

We ask the church to invite persons living with impairment and their families to participate in this mission. True support will be based on the affirmation of the life of each person as a child of God, with or without impairment. True support for persons living with impairment, then, does not focus on their needs, but invites the contribution of all that enables the church to be the body of Christ. That is how the needs of all God’s creatures are served.

132. This document professes the call for the church to be *a Church of all and for all*, where the contribution of persons living with impairment are valued, where they are respected for who they are, and find support in their communities. We ask the church to acknowledge and practise the equality and dignity of all human beings as the central task of living the gospel, and give witness of its message in all her work.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

When the *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network* (EDAN) prepared its first document *A Church of All and for All*, it took the lead in the struggle against oppression and segregation of persons with impairments in their respective churches and societies. With the publication of that document in 2003, the WCC recognized the importance of EDAN’s work in this respect.

In the years since then EDAN has learned that *A Church of All and for All* has been useful to many of WCC’s member churches, and that theological seminaries have used it widely in their teaching. Persons with impairments have grown in their capacity as agents of change, also within the ecumenical community. EDAN’s position has changed in this respect. We are no longer demanding recognition from the margins of WCC. Even though for many persons living with impairment and their families the struggle for being included and accepted in their church communities continues, there are promising signs that inclusion and participation by all is more positively affirmed as part of God’s gift.

These observations brought about the need for updating the first document. Our first consultation on the question took place in May 2013 in Nunspeet (The Netherlands). We concluded that in view of shifting positions it would be better to write a new document, and to opt for an approach in which the realities of

“disability” experience are interpreted from the perspective of creation, making the notion of human creatureliness central to our theological reflections. Taking a different approach is not to deny the fact that many observations and assumptions in the previous document are still valid, and that marginalization and exclusion are far from being overcome. But it is to affirm the beginnings of changes that have occurred. Returning to Nunspeet in October 2014 for a second consultation, we found ourselves in full agreement with the notion of creation as the centre of our theological reflections on impairment and “disability.”

This document is addressed to the ecumenical family of churches and their communities. We hope this new document will once again inform communities of faith, their leaders, students in theology, and their teachers, and inspire them to continue the work of becoming inclusive church communities. Much remains to be done in this respect. Our greatest hope is to be part of a church whose communities know how to receive the gift of being the body of Christ, and celebrate the rich variety in the giftedness of *all* of its members.

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