

Grounded Theology and Disability in Western Kenya

Abstract:

Kenya still faces challenges in protecting the rights of persons living with disabilities. Although the government has come up with policies to protect the rights of persons living with disabilities, sociocultural beliefs and perceptions of disability have remained a barrier leading to discrimination and stigmatization of persons living with disabilities. To describe these cultural beliefs and perceptions in Western Kenya, this paper focuses on methodological issues engaging African realities relating to disability. It highlights persons living with a disability in Western Kenya to take into account theological engagements in social-scientific integrated approaches. This paper explores the usefulness of grounded theology, with the goal of engaging creative and original findings on living with disability in present-day Western Kenya and demonstrating the potential of theological creativity from the bottom-up, as opposed to a top-down approach. Methodologically, this paper emphasizes how grounded theology is compatible with grounded theory as a method for discovering hidden patterns and meanings and as a way to unearth stories informing the everyday lives of persons living with a disability. In this paper, grounded theology therefore relates the sociocultural beliefs and misconceptions to the transcendent, as generated from fieldwork on disability. Further, it demonstrates creative explorations of approaches informed by understandings of persons living with disabilities in Western Kenya.

Keywords:

grounded theology, persons living with disabilities, discrimination, stigmatization and inclusion

1. Introduction

In Kenya, people with disabilities face many forms of discrimination such as lack of access to meaningful participation in many cultural and religious activities. Chapter 4, Section 54 of the Constitution of Kenya makes provisions applicable to persons with disabilities and protects the rights of persons with disabilities. It stipulates in part that anyone with any disability is entitled, first, to be treated with dignity and

respect and to be addressed and referred to in a manner that is not demeaning; second, to have access to educational institutions and facilities for persons with disabilities that have been integrated into society to the extent compatible with the interests of the person; third, to have reasonable access to all places, including public transport, information and the like. However, sociocultural beliefs and negative perceptions continue to be a barrier to the freedom of persons with disabilities, who still experience challenges, including being locked up and other forms of discrimination. Thus, there is a clear need to re-examine how to engage African realities with such disabilities. In this article, we study African realities for persons with disabilities in Western Kenya using grounded theology as a methodological approach.

In grounded theology, the theory may be initially generated from the data relevant to theology, or if existing theories seem appropriate, they may be elaborated and modified with existing data. The emphasis here lies on the interplay with the data collected from actual research. Further, such an inquiry explores social or human problems, as the researcher builds a complex and holistic picture, analyzes texts, reports details of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell 1998:15).

For this article, fieldwork was undertaken considering the religious engagement in several churches in three subcounties, namely, two Salvation Army Churches in Lurambi Subcounty, two Anglican Churches of Kenya from Butere Subcounty, and two Pentecostal Assemblies of God Churches from Malava Subcounty. This research serves to demystify the social-cultural beliefs on disability in these Churches drawing from connections in grounded theology. Further, it offers a description of these beliefs and perceptions in Western Kenya, while paying close attention to methodological issues. It also highlights the usefulness of grounded theology, thus demonstrating theological creativity from the bottom up. Methodologically, it emphasizes how grounded theology can unearth stories informing on the everyday lives of persons, in this case persons living with a disability.

2. What Is Grounded Theology?

Grounded theology denotes the use of grounded theory in studies relevant to theology. Further, these grounded theologies focus on worldly concerns, whether by attempting to create consensus among different positions through dialogue or by imposing a political regime to eradicate religion altogether (Tse 2014).

In this paper, grounded theology is suggested as a useful methodological approach that is in touch with the realities of the religious arena. The exploration of grounded theology in data generation derives from research on sociocultural beliefs of disability regarding the Churches in Kakamega County. Realities in the

contemporary African context demand reliance on data systematically collected from the field and a sensitivity to the beliefs of both the wider community and Church members.

The role of the Church in beliefs surrounding disability was behind the need to use grounded theology as a method for seeking hidden patterns and meanings. Grounded theology thus adds to the theological reflection, which has been somewhat limited when traditionally using grounded theory (Stevens 2017:201-206). According to Stevens, as a methodology grounded theology is postmodern. It constructs and incorporates different perspectives; it listens. The central focus on the contributions of those interviewed was to analyze and understand what the participants provided as *their* understanding based on their actual life experiences and principles of understanding.

Grounded theology applies grounded theory in studies relevant to theology. Grounded theory is an important approach to data collection in qualitative research methods, relying totally on data collected inductively rather than try to relate data to theory deductively (Khan 2014). According to Strauss and Corbin, as a general methodology, grounded theory develops theory based on data systematically gathered and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin 1998:273). A central feature of this analytic approach is constant comparative analysis with results from earlier rounds of analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967), which makes grounded theory analysis highly iterative: Core concepts and theory can emerge only after multiple rounds of data analysis. Similarly, such constant comparison allows the analysis of data against other data to identify any similarities, differences, or consequences surrounding key events as well as incidents and patterns in the data. In general, constant comparison advances the coding, categorization, and conceptualization of data (Timonen et al, 2018).

Grounded theology uses qualitative data to investigate the process of believing and finding what is of ultimate meaning. This employs a range of strategies to gather rich data, and it allows the emergence of conceptual categories through careful analysis to produce explanations and potentially new theories that prove relevant to theology (Stevens 2017). Grounded theology reveals places and networks as constituted by practices informed by understandings of the transcendent.

As a type of research-grounded theology, it looks at the context in which religious activities, thoughts, and practices take place. It is an inductive, rather than a deductive, approach that begins by examining the data emerging from a situation and formulating respective theories afterwards. It is concerned especially with the context in which it expresses itself. In general, the grounded approach allows researchers to develop an understanding of how social lives and meanings are continually constructed.

3. Earlier Research on Disability

This section explores selected literature to point out the constructivist nature of disabilities as explored in disability studies. The complexity of disability is referenced given the limitations that face the disabled. It further explores the movement away from a strictly medical definition to one that is more sensitive to environmental determinants and in tune with how people actually experience disability. The literature highlighted also explores the perception of disability in Africa, as being constructed and partly informed by naive religious perceptions. It ends by discussing several theoretical approaches to disability as proposed by various scholars.

Goodley et al. (2018) highlight disability studies as important to reframing the focus along the lines of capacity, potential, interconnection, and possibility. Critical disability studies cover many critical theoretical developments, which offer alternative ways of understanding disability. These include understanding power dynamics and focusing on constructive positive conceptions of disability rather than pursuing a critical perspective on how disability is constructed. According to Goodley, attitudes toward people with disabilities across cultures suggest that social perceptions and the treatment of persons with disabilities are neither homogeneous nor static (Goodley et al. 2018).

Oliver (2012) asserts that there are marked social gradients in disability across the lifespan with evidence of enduring effects associated with childhood circumstances. To him, society has continued to disable the physically impaired by imposing disability on top of their impairments by isolating them and excluding them from full participation in society. This includes proximal risk factors such as lack of physical activity, alongside broader determinants associated with employment opportunities, poverty and poor housing, and inequitable access to services. These environmental disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities are, in turn, disabling themselves and create even further barriers. Therefore, in the studies on disability, we need a paradigm shift involving a shift away from focusing only on the physical limitations of people with disability and excluding the social context.

Swain and French (2012) write about disability as a tragedy in the sense that there are many widely accepted beliefs about what life with a disability is like for children and their families. They include assumptions that people with disabilities lead lives of relentless agony and frustration, and that most marriages break up under the strain of having a child with a disability. Their book, through a concept of the trussed model of disability, argues that many people's perception of disabled people is always negative. These include notions of inferiority, inadequacy, sadness, evil, and disgust.

Berghs/Atkin et. alt. (2019) clarified that the public face of impairments is also challenging previous perceptions by encouraging a more encompassing understanding of being disabled. Therefore, studies on disability have necessarily moved

away from a strictly medical definition, where disability is caused by functional deficits such as physical injury or intellectual disability, to one that is sensitive to environmental determinants and more in tune with how people experience disability in their day-to-day lives (Fougeyrollas et al. 1995).

In Africa, disability was perceived differently in various cultural setups. According to Barbara (2011), disability was socially constructed through the beliefs and actions of society by erecting barriers and structures that limit the ability of disabled people to function normally in society. Therefore, perceptions on disability in Africa were pegged to fears and misunderstandings, stereotyped individuals with disabilities exposing them to prejudice, discrimination, and ultimately to denial of the rights and resources afforded to all others.

Igaga and Mbikusia (1982) emphasize that, in Africa and from an African traditional religious perspective, all abled people were catered to except for people living with disabilities who were either killed by their parents or isolated from society. This traditional African religious perspective posits disability being connected with the stigma of what was believed to be a punishment or a curse from God. Igaga and Mbikusia further observe that, in Africa, whenever disability was detected in a child, there was no provision for rehabilitation or social integration. Therefore, the birth of a handicapped child disturbed the institution of marriage, which is why disabled children in Africa were either drowned or hidden because of the stigma or discrimination of living with a disabled child.

According to Eisland (2004) and Kamba (2013), ability is a temporary characteristic of the human body; all human bodies have a disability whether apparent or not. The lack of knowledge about disability in turn creates a fear of disability. Chisale (2018) refers to this sort of disability as a disability of phobia, which develops because of various negative perceptions of disability constructed and informed by naive traditional African religious and cultural hermeneutics. Based on the foregoing information, it becomes clear that there is a need for a paradigm shift in the way disability is perceived.

From the foregoing, it can also be argued that, in Africa, disability was strongly detested in the community, and that traditional African religion did not care for people living with a disability. Eisland (1994) emphasizes that people of faith, however, should embrace people with disabilities as a first step toward seeing the disabled not as passive victims or objects of pity or charity but as equal and active participants in everyday life, including the life of faith. She argues that God fully embraces all people including those with a disability. She further observes that the foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, although seldom is the resurrected Christ recognized as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. Therefore, the resurrected Christ of the Christian tradition can be understood as a disabled God. Eisland suggests that theology has yet to fully embrace disabled people.

According to Sheeren (2013), theological issues and especially Biblical interpretations can become a hindrance to the complete inclusion of people with disabilities. Sheeren further advises that, in order to achieve total inclusion of people with disabilities, theologians must address the lack of understanding of biblical teachings on disability. Chisale (2020) argues that the fear of disability is perpetuated by naive hermeneutics, particularly of the Hebrew Bible on disability, and the ambiguity of African spirituality on the connection of ancestors with disability.

Amanze (2019b) agrees with Chisale, stating:

[...] the negative attitude toward PDWs [people with disabilities] in the African church is thriving on “negative theology of healing” that focuses on biblical texts that negate their humanity, considering them as “sick people” and in need of deliverance, spiritual as well as physical. (Amanze: 2019b, 131).

Amanze (2019b: 127) notes that the causes of disabilities were seen as ranging from God’s punishment for sinning, witchcraft, demons, and anger of ancestors, to the breaking of family and societal taboos and adultery. In other societies, such as in Kenya, people go so far as to treat people with disabilities as things and not as human beings. At the same time, Amanze brings to sharp focus that being disabled is part of God’s diversity in creation, so that Christians should welcome people with disabilities who are an integral part of God’s creation (Amanze 2019b: 135). This is why Amanze argues that “it is incumbent upon the Church to change this by developing a new theology that is liberating and life-affirming.” (Amanze: 2019b, 131).

Goodley (2011: 35–40) articulates the idea that, to deconstruct asymmetric power structures and the systematic dissemination and oppression perpetrated against the disabled people, society must recognize their voice and accept them as equals. Goodley dismisses the assumption of any inferiority associated with those born with disabilities. This is a steppingstone to positively shaping the social world.

In summary, several theoretical approaches to disability include religious, medical, social, and biopsychosocial models, among others. In the foregoing, we referenced the religious model – the oldest model of disability and one found in several religious traditions, including traditional African religion and the Judeo-Christian tradition. It views disability as a punishment from God for a particular sin committed (Pardeck & Murphy 2012). The medical model views disability as a feature of the person, caused directly by disease, trauma, or some other health condition requiring medical care. The social model sees disability as a socially created problem and not as an attribute of an individual (Barnes & Shakespeare 2010). The biopsychosocial model integrates the medical and social models and provides a coherent view of different perspectives of health: biological, individual, and social

(Olkin 1999). In recent decades, there has been increased emphasis on the social model of disability rather than the medical model (Barnes & Shakespeare 2010).

Although the authors quoted above have made the effort to identify how several rights of disabled people have been (and still are being) violated, how individuals with disabilities can participate in a broad range of educational and community settings, how there's been a shift from a strictly medical definition of disability, an outlook of other ways in which disability can be understood, there are still too few studies on the sociocultural beliefs and perceptions on disability in Kenya using grounded theology as a methodology. That is the contribution of this paper.

4. Grounded Theology Design

The study utilized grounded theology, obtaining data systematically and descriptively based on the unfolding experiences in the phenomenon under study. For this paper, we draw upon grounded theologies because they involve some view of the transcendent; they are grounded insofar as they reflect immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formation of political boundaries. In general, grounded theologies include the practice of specific narratives regarding divine action, transcendent presence, or supernatural reality in the immanent world.

Primary data were also obtained from a sample size using interviews and observation methods, which enabled the researchers to determine whether the findings were substantiated as per the research questions. The area of study was Kakamega County, which has 12 subcounties. Of these 12, three were sampled which had a larger presence and dominance of the selected Churches in the area, namely Salvation Army, The Anglican Church of Kenya, and The Pentecostal Assemblies of God.

The sociocultural beliefs and perceptions on disability were studied using grounded theology with an emphasis on the position of these Churches. Of the three selected Christian Churches, two pastors were expressly sampled from each one of the two Churches per subcounty, resulting in a total of six pastors who provided information on Christian teachings on disability and the ability of the Church to mitigate social-cultural perceptions and beliefs on disability. From each Church, we sampled two church leaders, totaling six church leaders who provided more information on Christian teachings on disability. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to reach elders in the region who could serve as respondents on the sociocultural perceptions currently in place. The data collection process took 4 months.

Grounded theology enlarged the database for theological reflection in religious spaces and brought theological voices within the respective context to the fore.

As an offshoot of grounded methodology, grounded theory is a process that involves collecting and concurrently analyzing in a cyclical fashion to produce concepts from which a theory evolves (Pulla 2016: 80). Since this study points to participants' experiences and perspectives, the phenomena are construed for what they are in their own right, rather than being inferred based on parameters of some predetermined theory.

At the time of the study, according to Wekesa (2017:210–216), Kakamega County had come up with a strategy to register persons with disabilities at the Gender and Social Development Offices. It was therefore possible for the researchers to learn the status of disability and access information at the same time. The study delineated the experiences of people with disabilities as well as those of the leaders in the three selected Churches in this setting. While undertaking the study, we observed the followed ethical considerations. First, the researchers received informed consent from everyone involved in the study and also treated the subjects humanely and on par. Second, we remained impartial and kept respondents and their responses confidential. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Kenya National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation.

5. Sociocultural Beliefs and Perceptions of Disability in Kakamega County

This paper concentrates on the religious and the social model rather than on the medical model of disability in its descriptions of the impact of the same in the community. As a social problem, the effects of disability are reflected upon as a social problem, not a medical problem – and not as an attribute of an individual. The religious model obtains inferences from the church leaders in their reflection. With this in mind, it was possible to consider sociocultural beliefs on disability gathered from the field, using grounded theory in Kakamega County in the Western part of Kenya. What follows is the presentation of the empirical data divided up into five main themes.

5.1 Disability as a Curse

Most respondents observed that disability is seen because of a curse. It was believed that this curse can affect the whole family and even run from one generation to the other. For instance, if one makes fun of, laughs at, or mocks a disabled person by calling them names or imitating their state of disability, it is believed that the person will give birth to a child with the same disability. Similarly, this curse follows their family from one generation to the other.

During an interview, one of the respondents, an elderly woman in her 50s, gave an example of a woman who mocked and laughed at people with disabilities by

calling them names because of their disability. There was a disabled man who moved by crawling using his hands in the village. Anytime the woman saw him approaching, she mocked and imitated his disability by saying *weilikava yetsanga*, a name given by the Abawanga (the people of the Wanga Subtribe of the Luhya group) to a disabled person who moves by crawling using their hands. According to the respondents, it did not come as a surprise when one of her sons was late in learning to walk, and finally the boy started to move by crawling on his knees. To date, the woman's son is living with a disability like that of the man she used to laugh at. Among the Abawanga, any person who laughs at a disabled person automatically receives the curse. The curse can only be removed if the person immediately goes to ask for forgiveness from the disabled person.

During field research in the subcounties, respondents noted that, if a disabled person is mistreated and by bad luck he or she dies, the curse that follows because of their death affects the entire family. They are attacked by mysterious diseases, and some members of the family acquire similar disabilities of the dead people.

Most of the respondents stated that a curse from a disabled person is believed to be very bad. Therefore, to avoid such a curse, any person living with disabilities should be treated with great care. Respondents further stated that some disabilities have a hidden reason. It was also revealed that, when a child is born, one of the ancestors demands for the child to be named after them. If the parents refuse, the ancestor can strike the family with a mysterious disease including disability. According to the respondents, this is believed to be a curse from the ancestor who was not named as required.

Research findings also revealed that most of the people in Kakamega believe that a curse from God or ancestors causes disability. According to the respondents, people believe that, if one does something that triggers the anger of God or ancestors. The most serious punishment they receive is a curse (Mugambi & Kirima 1976). These authors confirm the foregoing sentiments when they observe that every community has its own beliefs and rules that guide them in order to live in harmony. Wachege (2012) observes that, in many African communities, the fear of curses and cursing is real. A curse is disturbing anguish in life and in the living.

Historically, theologians are believed to have had varied interpretations of the Bible scriptures on disability. In a rather similar vein as that found in the field, disability was believed to be a curse and punishment from God (Amanze 2019). A person living with disabilities was also believed to have been punished because of the parents' sin. Similarly, the Bible links disabilities with uncleanness, sin, and possession by the evil spirit. In Kakamega County, disability is still viewed as a curse, a punishment from God or ancestors, and punishment for someone who engages in evil acts such as witchcraft or murder. Given this link to evil in life as one of the primary causes, sociocultural beliefs and perceptions have continued

to be a barrier for persons living with disabilities to fully enjoy their rights. The disabled have continued to be stigmatized and discriminated.

It was established that, in Kakamega County, even when a person gets converted to Christianity, sociocultural beliefs embedded in the cultures of Western Kenya cannot be discarded or abandoned completely. The study showed that most Christians still held onto their sociocultural beliefs, which include beliefs on disability. Therefore, beliefs and understanding of disability in society were also evident within the Church. Most church members still viewed disability negatively.

5.2 Disability Acquired Later in Life

The research findings revealed that, in Kakamega County, any person who is born without a disability but acquires it later in life is viewed negatively. Most respondents think that God reveals Himself only through persons who are born with a disability but not those who acquire it later in life. Therefore, a person who is born without a disability but later acquires it is believed to have engaged in evil activities together with their family.

Respondents noted that people believe that disability is associated with a family that engages in evil activities. Such a family is usually identified by mysterious happenings among the family members, including attacks from jiggers, disability especially mental challenges, and recycled poverty within the family. It was revealed that persons living with disabilities are always targeted and killed for different reasons. However, God is never happy with such happenings and punishes the offender. In the same vein, Mugambi and Kirima (1976) observe that human life, which came from God through the spirits and ancestors, was considered sacred and was held in great reverence. It can therefore be argued that it is an abomination to mistreat someone because of their disability. The following verse from the Bible was read by the respondents to support the fore going claim (Gen 1:27): “So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female.” Therefore, whether a person is without disability or has a disability, all are equal in the eyes of God. However, this theological approach did not turn out to be predominant in the results from the study.

5.3 Disability at Birth

Our research findings revealed that a congenital disability is believed to be the plan of God. Therefore, such a disability is not viewed as a curse but as the creation of God. According to the respondents, a child born with a disability is to be well taken care of to avoid the wrath of God. Hence, it is believed that God reveals himself through most of the persons born with disabilities. One of the respondents in her late 40s in Navakholo Subcounty narrated a story of what happened to a neighbor

who had a child with disabilities, took care of the child, and how God had blessed the family through the child. According to him, when his neighbor gave birth to a child who was physically challenged and took a long time to learn to talk, people in the community sympathized with them. However, to them, the child was believed to be a blessing, and God was testing their faith. They took good care of the child, and to date, he is running his own business and his parents are proud of him. His siblings were also successful in life. Respondents attributed their success to the good care the parents gave to their brother who was born with a disability. Therefore, not all persons living with disabilities are a liability. If well natured and taken care of, they can become great people in society.

According to the respondents, people in Kakamega believe that any person born with a disability should be taken well care of. This enables other children born without a disability to be successful in life. It was further revealed that people believe that God plans on how to protect persons living with disabilities, which is why even those born with mental challenges hardly fall sick because God protects them.

5.4 Disability and Witchcraft

During our interviews with respondents, it clearly came out that people in Kakamega County believe that families who engage in witchcraft activities do it mostly to destroy other people in the community. However, it was revealed that, for the witchcraft activities to be more powerful, some evil spirits have to be consulted frequently as they are viewed as the source of power to do evil. According to one of the respondents, one person in the family is often sacrificed and made available to the evil spirits to live in. This is the person who later acquires a disability because of being the host to the evil spirits.

The people in Kakamega strongly believe that a family that engages in witchcraft activities cannot succeed completely in harming others before harming their own. Hence, they cause trouble in families, including causing disability, a condition they must first fulfill to sacrifice their own to the evil spirits in order for their engagement with witchcraft activities to succeed.

One of the respondents, an elder among the Abamarama in Butere Subcounty, stated that some families with great wealth are associated with the type of witchcraft believed to be a source of wealth to the family. Unfortunately, these spirits demand to live in the human body as they feed on their blood. According to the respondents, while living in the person, they confuse them, and in most cases, the person loses their mind and hence becomes mentally challenged. In most cases, these people are kept out of the public domain depending on the instructions from the evil spirits or for the fear of stigma.

Mbiti (1991) supports the foregoing information when he says, “some spirits help diviners, mediums, oracles and medicine men in their work.” (Mbiti: 1991, 80) These are consulted as the need may arise. They are more or less the tools of their users. On the other hand, the spirits that cause misfortunes, sickness, and even death may be used to do these things by human beings who have the power to do so, most often by witches, sorcerers, or evil magicians (Mbiti 1969). Therefore, not all people, also in Kakamega County, engage in witchcraft to harm others but for their own personal gain.

In Kakamega County, witchcraft is generally associated with disability. During interviews with respondents in Butere, one of the respondents in her 40s noted that families who practice witchcraft usually sacrifice one of their children to their ancestral gods to live in. These ancestral gods are believed to have been inherited from their ancestors and transferred from one generation to the other. Therefore, the ancestors are believed to provide the necessary power when performing witchcraft activities.

Similarly, our research findings among the Abamarama in Butere Subcounty revealed that the child who is sacrificed to be the host for the evil spirits becomes the most beloved child in the family. This was confirmed by one of the respondents among the Marama, who said “the child offered for ancestral spirits to live is so much loved in the entire family”. According to the respondents, such a child is well taken care of by the whole family by making sure that they are well fed; their health is a concern for everybody in the family. It is believed that, if the child in any way gets mistreated, the ancestral gods living in them become angered and devise a plan to strike the person who mistreats them by punishing them with a deadly disease or giving the person a disability that is worse than the one who was mistreated had. Therefore, everyone in the family is concerned with the well-being of such a child in the family to avoid tragedy. Similarly, the respondents observed that such a child is never allowed to go out in the public domain but is confined to the home for fear that, if anything bad happens to them, it might provoke the anger of the ancestral gods living in the child and cause a calamity in the family. Similarly, the person is confined to the home and out of the public domain for fear of stigmatization in the community. Hence, respondents observed that the families who live with persons living with disabilities have their own hidden story about the disability. Therefore, people fear to freely associate with them.

From the foregoing discussion, we see that people in Kakamega County fear being associated with disability; they try their level best to appease God and the ancestors to avoid curses that can cause disability. However, some of the activities depict the practice of witchcraft. On the same note, Ashforth (2005) observes that, in parts of Africa, engaging with the spirit world pervades the events of daily life. Stigma and prejudice continue to be a factor in the daily lives of millions of persons living with disabilities together with their families because disability is linked with

witchcraft. Our research findings revealed similar information in Kakamega County concerning disability.

5.5 Disability Related to Incest

The research findings in Kakamega County revealed that people believe that incest was one of the factors contributing to children being born with disabilities. Culturally, incest is a taboo in Kakamega County, and breaking that taboo brings very harsh consequences that become worse if a child is born from incest since the child is believed to be a bad omen and an outcast in the community. Field research revealed that children born out of incest are called *omwana wo luswa* among the Kabras, meaning a bad omen.

During field research in Malava, Butere, and Lurambi, respondents stated that children born of incest were believed to be a bad phenomenon in the community. According to the respondents, such children were born with disabilities and could sometimes be the cause of the parents' premature death. Respondents in Butere Subcounty said that such children are viewed as *abana bo luswa* among the Abedakho and Abamarama, meaning children of bad omen. To avoid bad calamities befalling the family, they were never allowed to survive.

Despite the taboo associated with incest, some people do engage in incestuous relationships resulting in the birth of offspring (Willner 1983: 134–159). According to Lumsden and Wilson (1980), historically speaking, the social incest regulation, which generally culminates in the prohibition also known as the incest taboo, has been considered culturally universal. Similarly, the universality of incest prohibition is based on sociocultural basis of each culture. The incest taboo is one of the most widespread of all cultural taboos, both in present and in past societies. Children of incestuous relationships were regarded as illegitimate and are still regarded as such in some societies today. This was confirmed in Kakamega County in the Western part of Kenya.

Shorter (1998) shares the foregoing information when he says, "Children born of relatives develop physical defects." In Kakamega County, people fear and avoid being associated with disability, which is why incest among the people of Kakamega is not accepted. The foregoing beliefs on incest related to disability in Kakamega County are one of the main causes of stigmatization among persons living with disabilities together with their families and especially in rural villages of Kakamega County. As Goodley (2017) asserts, "Disabled people constitute a huge problem for non-disabled society precisely because they disrupt the normative individual." (Goodley: 2017, 79) The findings from incest-related disability as a sociocultural perception depict the disabled person as disrupting a culture that emphasizes bodily control and associated cultural norms concerning manners, convention, sexuality, and bodily compartment. The study shows that these perceptions have crept into

the Churches and made the restrictions on incest relations even more pronounced – to the greater disadvantage of persons with disabilities.

6. Results from the Grounded Theology Study About the Influence of Biblical Teaching Regarding the Discrimination and Stigmatization of People Living with Disability

In what follows, we endeavor to look at the context in which these religious thoughts and responses take place according to the grounded theology approach. First, field research revealed that sociocultural beliefs and perceptions of disability had extended into the Church arena, which also referenced Biblical texts. Although the Church and a society that includes persons living with disabilities are considered to lie within the mainstream society, persons with disabilities still find themselves isolated. Currently, there are still practices of discrimination, stigmatization, ignorance, and cultural misunderstanding especially on disability among the people of Kakamega County.

Second, the grounded theology approach increased the available data for theological reflection on disability in religious spaces and brought to the forefront of theological voices in the Kenyan context. Above we explored the causes of disability from the sociocultural context and showed the connection to the religious nature of the society. The belief in God and ancestors is emphasized in the explanations of how disability comes about. The theological import here is that the worldview of the respondents has a strong attachment to the supernatural with a lingering belief. This import based on the an grounded theology approach was possible only through a systematic generation of data across subcounties, which availed diverse material for comparison, the reflection of similarities and differences, and the emergence of patterns.

Third, the theological importance of the data from the respondents obtained from the church setting was as follows: Church leaders observed that most church members have yet to truly understand Biblical teachings on disability, which is why most church members have continued to argue that anyone with a disability should not be allowed to move closer to the pulpit or take up any role to serve God. They further confirmed that God does not like anything with a disability as an offering. This finding aligns with the religious model of disability. This is illustrated by case that the respondents referred to. In this case, a priest in the Anglican Church was not fully accepted by most church members and was viewed as a sinner because of his disability. Unfortunately, when he started ailing and later passed on, his death was a confirmation to some of the members that God did not want him to serve in Church as a priest because he was disabled. According to these respondents, it was wrong for the late priest to preach at the pulpit, which is believed to be the holiest

and most sacred place in the Church. His ailing and later passing were believed to be punishments from God.

Misinterpretations of the Biblical texts have contributed to the stigmatization and discrimination of persons living with disabilities in Kakamega County. Hachalinga (2017) shares the foregoing information when he observes that the healing stories of Jesus have also served as proof for the moral imperfection of persons living with disabilities. According to some respondents within the church leadership, it is believed that people acquire disability because of their sinful nature. To them, the Bible concurs with the following information from the book of John (5:14): Afterward, Jesus found him in the Temple and said, "Listen, you are well now, so stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." This is a story about Jesus healing a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Such texts give people the basis to believe that disability results from sin. Therefore, to them, theologically speaking, disability is viewed as a punishment inflicted upon an individual or a family by God because of sin. Consequently, among the people in Kakamega County, disability stigmatizes not only the individual but the whole family.

According to the respondents, persons living with disabilities are not supposed to serve God in any leadership position but to remain simply members of the Church. Hull (n.d.) observed that physical disability is seen as an impediment to the exercise of the priestly office. Hull further observed that Jesus uses the expression "blind" as a term of abuse in the Gospel of Matthew that is used by the Church in their teachings to stigmatize persons living with disabilities. In the Good News Bible, Matt. 23:24, we read: "Blind guides! You strain a fly out of your drink but swallow a camel!" According to Hull, Jesus attacks and rebukes certain groups of people using disability terms, to stigmatize persons living with disabilities. However, research findings revealed that people have negatively misinterpreted these teachings regarding disability, which is why persons living with disabilities have continued to be discriminated and stigmatized by some teachings that negatively relate to disability. The foregoing discussion indicates that some of the church teachings drawn from the Bible have had a negative influence on persons living with disabilities by discriminating and stigmatizing them because of their disability.

According to Groce (1999), holiness finds physical expression in wholeness and normality. Physical disability is seen as evidence of someone's sin and a sign of punishment by God. Therefore, bodily perfection is a symbol of the perfection of the soul. Groce noted that people living with disabilities are viewed as socially unworthy. Unfortunately, our study shows that the same extends to the place of worship, the Church. It was revealed that negative perception of disability in the Church is sometimes made clear through the testimonies people give in the Church. A respondent living with a disability narrated the following testimony a Church member gave in Church: "I thank the Almighty God for giving me both eyes, hands, and legs. I am able to run my own businesses without any challenge because I have

no disability.” This example demonstrates that persons living with disabilities in Church can be stigmatized and made to keep away from the Church.

We want to conclude this part with an example that illustrates the social consequences of stigmatization in the Church. In one of the congregations, there used to be a teenage girl who was mentally challenged and who was fond of accompanying her grandmother to Church. However, at some point during the service, she would stand up and walk to the front, especially when the preacher stood up to preach. When she failed to find a chair, she would go ahead and sit on the floor right at the front. According to the respondents, her behavior irritated most of the members, and some of them would shout in Lwidakho *murulitsiyo! Asumbula*, meaning “Remove her from there! She’s disturbing.” According to the respondents, such comments annoyed the grandmother and caused her to skip several services, revealing the social model of disability where the actions of people make disability a socially created problem with related challenges.

7. Conclusion

This article considered grounded theology as a methodological option for fieldwork on persons living with disabilities in present-day, in our case in Western Kenya. It demonstrated the use of grounded theology as a theological method from the bottom-up, as opposed to a top-down approach, in seeking out hidden patterns and meanings and unearthing stories informing on the everyday lives of persons living with a disability. Using grounded theology, we discovered a clear relationship between sociocultural beliefs and misconceptions concerning the Church. For a grounded theology on disability, within the Kenyan context, these experiences remain critical for analysis, so that at an advanced level they can be mainstreamed into theological discourses at the intersection between theology and disability.

The methodological approach used in this paper shows that grounded theology points to participants’ experiences and perspectives, even as phenomena are construed for what they are in their own right, rather than being inferred based on parameters of a predetermined theory. The grounded-theology approach reveals practices informed by respondents’ (mis)understandings of the transcendent within religious spaces. We considered grounded theologies as a methodology because they involve some view of the transcendent; they are grounded insofar as they inform about immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries.

Church leaders and church theologians need to sensitize more church members in Kenya concerning disability. The Church should always respond to issues of disability, since walls are present that separate people with disabilities from nondisabled persons. Church congregations can be welcoming to people with disabilities

by accepting and affirming them by freeing them from the rejection, discrimination, and stigmatization they experience in most Churches. Further, the Church should be cognizant of family members of people living with disabilities.

Our study based on a grounded theology approach shows that the Church needs to embrace the fact that *everybody* has a place in the Church. Church leaders should be on the frontlines welcoming persons living with disabilities by making them feel accepted. Many people living with disabilities have meaningful contact only with their family and possibly with paid caregivers. They rarely have the opportunity to form lasting friendships in the Church. This is an area where the Church should step up. Acquiring knowledge on disability helps to mitigate sociocultural beliefs and furthers understanding of persons living with disability in the different regions. Similarly, it helps church members in Kenya to better understand Biblical texts positively, which in turn helps to mitigate the negative interpretations of Biblical texts on disability.

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