


Black Theology and the unheard cry for *impilo* of people living with disabilities

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This article aims to address the importance of Black Theology of Liberation mainly focussing on the unheard cry of people living with disabilities. Black Theology in its origin is linked to communities of black oppressed beings; its task is to seriously consider the experiences and situation of those who reside in the zone of non-being. In this article, people living with disabilities represent those who reside underside modernity and history, which simply entails that people living with disabilities lack the quality of being recognised as human beings, but as sub-humans who are lifeless. Some scholars of Black Theology eloquently wrestles with the lifelessness fruit which the empire continues to bear by arguing that the Black Theology of Liberation is a theology that aims to give life to victims of lifelessness. It is argued that people living with disabilities in black communities experience a lack of accessibility to transportation, the health sector, education, and building infrastructures in South Africa. The lack of accessibility to opportunities and resources for people living with disabilities portrays a denial of human rights and equality; it instead, promotes the state of lifelessness to people living with disabilities.

Contribution: The article adopts 'The Cry for Life' declaration which stresses the affirmation of life to all human beings despite their disabilities. The cry for *impilo* [life] by people living with disabilities is what makes Black Theology an epistemological tool that is derived from below in the search for *impilo*.

Keywords: disability; Black Theology; *impilo*; lifelessness; Vuyani Vellem; experiences.

Introduction

The database gathered by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2011:XI) estimates that globally there are close to one billion people living with different forms of disability. The Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997:2) estimates that between 5% and 12% of South Africans are living with a disability. Census 2011 data shows that the gender most affected by disability is female with 8.5% out of 1682071 compared to their male counterparts at 6.5% out of 1188059. Moreover, Emmett and Alant (2006:447) add that 'women with disabilities are more disadvantaged than men with disabilities; women continue to struggle with the oppression of being women in a male-dominated society'.

According to the Census 2011, black Africans are the most affected with 7.8% out of 2381668 compared to their white counterparts who are 6.5% out of 211502. The abovementioned census also suggests that in South Africa, people living with disabilities are labelled as the most vulnerable beings, especially black African women who are prevented from participating in the activities of their society because of their disabilities.

It is interesting to note that the Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997:4) also expresses that most people living with disabilities experience exclusion from mainstream communities and have encountered challenges in accessing fundamental rights that aim to promote *impilo*. The United Nations (2013) affirms the issue of exclusion of people living with disabilities by attesting that people living with disabilities represent vulnerable beings who seek to be included as role players to access economic, and political opportunities.

This paper aims to address the unheard cry for *impilo* of people living with disabilities; the *discrimination against accessing fundamental rights* by people living with disabilities continues to run into their everyday life and simply reflects the unheard cry for *impilo*. McClain (2002) is of the view that people living with disabilities are independent beings who require equal accessibility to

Note: Special Collection: Unthink the West, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

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opportunities and resources that will allow them to be responsible citizens. The lack of access to opportunities and resources seeks to dehumanise people living with disabilities.

The denial of access to opportunities and resources for people living with disabilities can be labelled as a betrayal of their constitutional right to life. The South African Constitution of 1996 (1996:6) states that 'Everyone has the right to life'. It encourages citizens to be mindful that 'No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on more grounds in terms of subsection' (3). It is imperative to note that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) published by the Government of Australia advocated for persons living with disabilities to be protected and respected for their inherent dignity. Marumoagae (2012:354) believes that Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 'recognises that discrimination against people living with disabilities violates their inherent dignity and worth of the human person'. The crucial cry of people living with disabilities is that of being excluded from exercising their constitutional rights of being treated as human beings who have access to life-giving resources.

What is disability

The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016:7) defines 'disability as a complex and evolving concept'. Stubbs (2019:8) is of the view that there are numerous definitions of disability addressing different aspects of how disability should be understood. For instance, the WHO (2011:4) suggests that 'disability can be a consequence of an *impairment* that is physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional and developmental'. Reynolds (2012:25) argues that disability has been interpreted as an inability, a correction that needs to be restored to its original purpose. The common definition of disability simply implies that people living with disabilities are not able to do things for themselves or their inability to do what another human being can do, rendering them as incompetent and dysfunctional.

Disability has always been defined as a condition that affects an individual rather than a contribution to the entire community. According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), disability can be defined as the 'outcome of the interaction between a person with impairments and attitudinal, environmental barriers that hinders the full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. If the disability is to be understood as an act of communication between people, this plainly means that disability cannot be defined as a personal tragedy or self-inflicted impairment.

Models of disability

The models of disability aid a better insight into understanding how these models shaped the reality of people living with disabilities. Retief and Letsosa (2018:2) mention that there are nine models of understanding how disability has been viewed regarding people living with disabilities. In this

paper, two models, that is, a medical model and the social model will be employed to address the reason why people living with disabilities continue to experience lifelessness within our communities.

Medical model

The medical model mainly deals with the abstract notion of disability; it argues that individual impairment is a medical problem. Bagenstos (2003:649) states that the representation of disability sends a narrow communication to society that the cure to any form of disability is by treating the individual as the problem, rather than transforming societal institutions. Stubbs (2019:18) also stresses that the 'biomedical describes disability as an illness or impairment which needs to be cured'. People living with disabilities in the African contexts have been stigmatised mostly as individuals who need traditional and medical help. For instance, a person diagnosed with mental illness is generally titled based on the diagnoses they undergo; in a rural setting, for instance, such a person is labelled as 'umntu ongaphilanga'. The isiXhosa word 'ongaphilanga' suggests that society believes that most people with disabilities are seen as incapable, unfit, and in need of serious intervention that will make them be seen as complete human beings. One of the disadvantages of the medical model is that it continues to maintain a position that disability is a serious disease which portrays an individual as a less able human being. Reynolds (2008:187) in his work mainly advocates for people with disabilities who are described as less able beings, by reminding us that people with disabilities also carry the precious image of God.

This is one of the realities that people living with disabilities have experienced and some continue to believe that they are less human being because of their impairments. The inability to cure the impairment results in removing the person with disabilities from their communities. Mutlaneng (2020:17) argues that disabled people are seen as burdens to society; in black societies, most people living with disabilities are locked up in toilets and secret rooms by their family members and most families identify such loved ones as a burden who need to be segregated from society. The researcher observes that this model is mainly responsible for the establishment of institutions of exclusion that deprive people living with disabilities of fully participating in the society and live a productive life. For instance, an institution such as Life Esidimeni revealed the darkest side of how people living with disabilities are ill-treated. The medical model tends towards being dismissive of the untold personal narratives of people living with disabilities.

Social model

Mutlaneng (2020:18) posits that the social model seeks to discover the origin of disability within the society rather than focussing on the individual being as the problem. It aims to liberate and remove societal barriers. Ndlovu (2019:3) submits that it is a society that constructs how

1. A sick person.

people with disabilities are to be treated. This simply entails that it is the society in which the people living with disabilities live in that disabled them, not the impairments. People living with disabilities in black townships continue to face barriers which deprive them of participating fully within the structure of the society. Most families deprive the participation of family members living with disabilities by locking them in secret rooms so that they may not shame the family. There is a superstition among black townships which states that the body parts of members living with disabilities can make a person wealthy and powerful. One of the reported cases by the Citizen newspaper (2020) is that of a father who killed his mentally disabled son so that he may gain powerful *muti*. Such events reveal that though the role of society is to promote and protect the integrity of people living with disabilities, black communities continue to be sites of lifelessness towards such people.

Some of the social barriers that isolate people living with disabilities can be found in faith communities that have expressed the notion of inaccessibility instead of promoting a welcoming attitude towards people living with disabilities. In the faith communities, people living with disabilities experience a lack of accessibility because of scarceness of ramps at both the entrance doors and the communion rails. One of the discriminating factors that people living with disabilities continue to experience is that of being labelled as members who require serious prayers of healing. Masango (2019:3) also agrees with the researcher by positing that 'each time they come to church; they are visualised as people who are seeking healing'. This promotes the exclusion of people living with disabilities within the church. It entails that they cannot fully participate in the church as disciples of Jesus Christ, even though Jesus told his disciples to make disciples, and to teach and baptise all in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church has behaved as an institution of the able-bodied which rejects the unheard cries of people living with disabilities as members of the body of Jesus Christ. Keum (2013:15) states that the role of the church is to embrace marginalised people within its communities, to confront and transform all that denies life. Boesak (2008:1) argues that the only alternative way the church can be relevant to the cry of people living with disabilities is for it to stand where God stands. The church is called to safeguard the life of people living with disabilities; it aims to wrestle with all forms of forces that deprive equality and participation of people living with disabilities in the church.

Oliver (1996:32) shares his observation about the struggles of lifelessness that people with disabilities experience by arguing that society should be accountable and responsible for failing to be serviced to the basic needs of people living with disabilities. The social model can be viewed as a framework that can end the social oppression of people living with disabilities. This model is in solidarity with those who are oppressed, as in this paper people living with disabilities represent those who are oppressed by society.

Entities of nightmare that deny people living with disabilities *impilo*

Here the researcher will discuss the failure of constitutional institutions which are obliged to promote human rights in the context of the threat to the fullness of life through the deprivation of education, health and transport provision.

Disability and education

The education sector in South Africa has been a place of nightmare and segregation for people living with disabilities. Interestingly, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996) section 29(1) states that 'Everyone has a right to basic education' (Republic of South Africa 1996). The Constitution not only expresses the right to education but also stresses vividly the ways for accessibility to quality education for all people living with disabilities in South African schools. The right to quality education requires schools that can accommodate learners in safe spaces of learning and having excellent infrastructure for accessibility by all learners with and without disabilities alike.

The saddest reality, however, is that the right to quality education is unfortunately the source of inequality and discrimination for learners living with disabilities. All the policies that were drafted for inclusive education have given false hope to learners and parents of learners living with disabilities. Du Plessis (2013:203) paints the reality of hopelessness that pupils with disabilities experience by exposing that the number of pupils with disabilities in non-special schools is unknown. Borman and Donhue (2014:1), concurring with Du Plessis, state that in South Africa '70% of children living with disabilities are out of school'. This calls for a serious intervention by the Department of Education to ensure that all children receive quality education as per the requirements of our Constitution. Consequently, the denial of not offering equal opportunity to pupils with disabilities simply shows that the education system in South Africa is biased towards able-bodied learners.

Historically, the education system in South Africa has reflected inequality since the apartheid regime with white pupils being favoured and receiving what we understand as *quality education*. Meanwhile, black pupils received 'Bantu Education' what was understood as secondary education, the lesser form of education. From the lens of disability education, it is important to stress that the creation of special schools did not solve the problem of segregation among children with or without disabilities, as special schools were mainly formed to sideline children who were seen as incapable of receiving the quality education same as that of their able-bodied peers. Du Plessis (2013:204) mentions that the worst aspect of special schools in South Africa is that there was segregation based on race. For instance, a special school in Beacon Bay 'Parkland Special School' may be equipped to cater for children with various disabilities regarding infrastructure and learning equipment, while

special schools such as Khayaletu Special School may suffer based on the lack of quality infrastructure and learning equipment for the learners with disabilities. The Department of Education (2001) clearly expressed that 'people living with disabilities must be given a fair opportunity that focuses on accessing the higher education sector without being discriminated'. The government should be reminded of its policies and implement such policies for the betterment of the education of people living with disabilities. It must reposition itself concerning the notion of special schools; the government must create schools that will also be friendly and conducive to the condition of children with disabilities. Special schools in a way deny and unconsciously promote the invisibility of learners living with disabilities, especially in mainstream schools.

Moyo (2019:19) states an interesting point by positing that education is a key human asset that can positively contribute to change in the lives of disadvantaged people. Children with disabilities are simply denied the possibility of changing their lives for the better. This denial of access to education for children with disabilities amplifies the root cause of poverty. The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) advocates the participation and inclusion of people living with disabilities within our education system by arguing that 'if children with disabilities have access to education (schooling) it reduces the likelihood that they will live in poverty as adults' (Department of Social Development [South Africa] 2015:90).

Disability and health care

The access to healthcare for people living with disabilities is amended by the Constitution of the RSA which is the cornerstone of our democracy. According to section 27 (1), 'every person has the right to have access to (a) Healthcare services including reproductive healthcare, (3) No one may be refused emergency medical treatment' (Republic of South Africa 1996). *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2015:87) states that 'Health is a human right issue, which stresses that person with disabilities have the right to the conditions and resources that promote and facilitate a healthy life'.

These clauses from the Constitution, however, do not reflect a true image of what people living with disabilities are experiencing concerning healthcare. The healthcare services in South Africa continue to deny accessibility to citizens who reside in rural areas, the lack of implementation results in forms of delivery which are both unfair and unjust. McKinney, McKinney and Swartz (2021) assert that the:

[D]ifficulties facing people living with disabilities living in rural areas are made worse through a lack of healthcare facilities and personnel, travel distances, inaccessible terrain and increased stigma attached to disability. (p. 1)

One of the contemporary challenges for people living with disabilities in rural areas is that while clinics are available, there is a lack of service for people living with disabilities.

McKinney et al. (2021:2) observe a challenge that is experienced by many people living with disabilities in healthcare by arguing that 'patients may not be accompanied by friends when assessing health'. According to the researcher, this is one of the critical obstacles that people living with disabilities experience in healthcare facilities. The reality is that majority of patients with hearing impairment will find it difficult to communicate with the health workers because their primary medium of communication is sign language, and most health workers are not trained to understand and use sign language. This creates unnecessary barriers which may lead to medical complications. McKinney et al. (2021:3), however, found that most patients with hearing impairment do not use sign language but rely more on lip reading. This calls for an inclusive model which will allow the participation of family members of the patient with disabilities to assist the health workers who find it hard to comprehend sign language.

The WPRPD (Department of Social Development [South Africa] 2015:87) laments that healthcare should ensure that information is easily accessible. For people living with visual impairment, this has been one of the greatest challenges since there is a lack of information in braille. The inaccessibility to information for a person with visual impairment leads to the conclusion that our health care promotes discrimination and inequality. McKinney et al. (2021:3) found that people living with disabilities experienced discrimination and inequality concerning information regarding the prevention measures of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak. Newspaper and television advertisements were released, but there was a lack of access to information for people living with disabilities, especially visual impairment as there was no such information in braille.

Disability and transportation

Transport in South Africa has been one of the leading factors that contributes to the lifelessness of people living with disabilities and stopping them from participating fully as citizens of our society. Snyman (2004:49) mentions that the accessibility of transport to all citizens is essential if they want to participate fully in society. For people living with disabilities, transportation has been an obstacle that prevents them from experiencing quality of life as citizens. According to the researcher, access to transport allows people living with disabilities to gain access to services and unforeseen opportunities that lead to the independence of an individual. Lack of appropriate transport for people living with disabilities adds to the challenges they face by depriving them of access to life enhancing health and educational facilities.

The struggle for transportation faced by people living with disabilities in urban areas cannot be compared to that of such people residing in rural areas. South Africa Department of Transport (2001) states that in 'both urban and rural areas the transport system fails to serve the needs of the majority of

Persons with disabilities'. This is not to suggest that people living with disabilities in urban areas do not face challenges in accessibility to transport services, but it is to stress that access to transport in a rural area is much more grievous and serious issue that has been neglected by government stakeholders. Sajib (2022:1) affirms that 'city's struggle by stating that public transport services in cities cannot provide safe and easy mobility' for people living with disabilities. For instance, while in both rural and urban areas people living with disabilities face various challenges such as those related to vehicle design and taxi operators, transportation in rural areas is far more difficult for people living with disabilities. The vehicles usually lack suitable space that can accommodate wheelchairs for people with physical disabilities. The attitude displayed by taxi operators towards people with disabilities also does not help reduce the stigma and discrimination they experience in taxi ranks. Ndebele in her work titled (2020:98) *Neglect and discrimination: A tale of Zimbabwe's inaccessible public transport system* claims that:

... the exclusion of people living with disabilities from the transportation system in Zimbabwe is the result of vehicles that are not conducive, and that the cost of transportation for people living with disabilities continues to play a critical role in excluding them from accessing the public transport service.

Dhunpath and Lister (2016:32), in their findings, state the reason behind the exclusion of people living with disabilities is that 'taxi operators may poach certain routes to ignore the elderly, women, children and people with disabilities'. The reason behind such exclusion is to maximise profits. During peak hours, people living with disabilities are left behind because of the assumption that they are viewed as burdens that waste taxi drivers' time in making more money.

The abovementioned suggests that the transportation system in South Africa is for the able-bodied people who can provide more profit to the taxi industry than people living with disabilities. Such a transportation system simply restricts the constitutional rights and freedom of life of people living with disabilities.

The next section discusses the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians' (EATWOT) document which articulates the neglected cries for *impilo* from those who have been oppressed in the world. This cry for life is what people living with disabilities are striving to communicate within our communities.

Cry for life: Unheard cry for *Impilo*

Thirty years ago, the EATWOT assembled in Kenya for the third general assembly. According to Vellem (2015:1), the assembly met after 'the dethroning of the apartheid government and the fall of the Berlin Wall'. It was during the moment of change after the dethroning of the abovementioned Empires that stripped God's people of their identities promoting the state of lifelessness that evoked the cry for life. The gathering in Kenya by theologians who came from

different countries and experienced different forms of oppression characterised hope for all who have been victims living in the underside of the lifeless state of the empire, which continues to this day to deny life in full abundance.

The declaration of the EATWOT (1993) assembly was titled 'A Cry for Life':

[T]his cry for life portrays the cry for courage, for hope, for the forest, for the stream, bodies may die, the spirit never dies, in our struggle, we burst in songs, as a new day dawns, we will shout in joy. (p. 46)

Henkel (2006:19) postulates that the EATWOT was in search for a new method of doing theology, mainly focussing on developing a radical break in epistemology. This was a moment of denying Western epistemology that muted the voices of the interlocutors in this paper – the people living with disabilities who have been silent for decades. Freire (2005:30) argues that oppression creates a culture of silence; by this he means the oppressed become powerless to a point where they do not speak against the systems of oppression that dehumanise them. According to Freire (2005:32):

[T]he oppressed individuals is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. The epistemology of the empire is final; it calls for a dialogue that will allow the oppressed the right to speak for life in the presence of lifelessness.

The EATWOT (1993:46) alludes that the marginalised have in a way realised their collective authority and role since their communal cry for life creates authentic space for equal participation in decision-making structures. The cry of people living with disabilities is that of representation of self rather than the other; such representation allows people living with disabilities to be storytellers of their struggles. This is a cry for life that leads to participation in the school governing bodies of their communities; this cry for life leads to avenues of permitting people living with disabilities to be part of the decision-making about their lives. It is vital to state that the empire has denied many people living with disabilities access to *impilo* in the following spheres: political, economic, and ecclesiastical participation and decision-making.

Kobo (2018:2) in, *A womanist exposition of pseudo-spirituality and the cry of an oppressed African woman*, posits that the EATWOT statement 'A cry for life' exposes oppressive systems, which neglect and discriminate against mothers living with disabilities, failing to provide reproduction health care. Ganle et al. (2016) share their findings on maternal healthcare in Ghana by arguing that 'the maternal healthcare services lack the flexibility to meet unique maternity care needs of women with disabilities'. The inability to access much needed maternal healthcare has resulted in the many premature death reported. Yet inspite of this harsh lived reality, the EATWOT (1993:47) argues that the cry of the third world have not resigned themselves to the passive cry of hopelessness'.

The statement of EATWOT spoke against all systems that dehumanised God's promise for the world; the interesting part of this statement is that it also addressed the behaviour of the church, especially in the hour of oppression of the other. The EATWOT (1993:50) states that amid the cry for life, there are churches 'which tend to be elitist, racist and sexist; these churches have lost credibility to respond to the cry of the world for life'.

Kobo, in one of her Bible studies at the South African Council of Churches (SACC), had this to say:

... there are temples that oppress and exploit the poor of the poorest, that is a life killing temple. She suggests that a credible temple must be life giving to all Gods people including people living with disabilities. (Kobo 2021:7)

Buthelezi (in Henkel 2006:46) argues that the church during the apartheid regime was mandated to penetrate the wholeness of life to those who experienced lifelessness. Buthelezi challenges the church to be present in the struggle of people living with disabilities to gain full access to church infrastructures that continue to marginalise them from being full members with duties to execute. Buthelezi (in Henkel 2006:45) raised the insightful question 'How can it be that the church is free while the people are not'? He further mentions that the 'Church must become the people of Soweto' (Henkel 2006:1); it must become authentically human so that it may incarnate and share in the consequences that people living with disabilities experience due to their disabilities. Buthelezi wrestled with the false consciousness that the church continued to proclaim. Vellem challenged the life-killing systems of the European church in *Unshackling the Church*. One of Vellem's main concerns with Eurocentric ecclesiology is that it lacked the passion for discerning the cries of the black people who were oppressed. Vellem (2015) argues the task of unshackling the church:

[F]ocuses on the church that is a response to the denial of African identity, the denial of African history and the totalising violent logic of ontological denial of black Africans by Western Eurocentric categories. (p. 2)

The church cannot be a life-giving sector if it refuses to shape its theology from the experiences of people living with disabilities; it becomes an ecclesia with credibility when it identifies with the experiences of those who are oppressed. According to Vellem (2015:5), the church must be unshackled from its false consciousness; he further argues that 'the subversive character of the church is in the memory of the miserable, the condition'.

Black Theology and Black Consciousness as a site of life amid lifelessness

In this section, the researcher will embark on the importance of Black Theology as a theology of marginalised, downtrodden, displaced, and disowned beings in search of *impilo* and focus on Vellem's contribution to Black Theology as a theology of life, the zone of non-being as avenues that aim in disclosing untold epistemologies residing at the margins.

What do Black Theology and disability theology have in common?

Xhinti, in '*Revisiting Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa: Through "new voices" of women black theologians*' acknowledges that the place of inauguration of a Black Theology of Liberation was the United States of America:

... it emerged as a radical theological discipline that aimed to re-address the crisis of oppression that black people were experiencing such as racism that dehumanised the dignity of the oppressed.

Reddie (2020:2) shares the same sentiment as Xhinti that 'the United States of America represents the beating hearts for the central lifeblood and existence of Black Theology'. Kobo (2018:289) postulates the reason behind the formation of such a radical theology by stating that James Cone struggled to comprehend a theology that neglected the experiences of the oppressed; his main lament was for Black Theology to become the voice which represents the lived experiences of black oppressed beings. Cone (1970:17–18) argues that the uniqueness of Black Theology stresses taking into consideration the experience, humiliation and marginalisation of black people seriously. What makes Black Theology life-giving in the context of people living with disabilities whose experiences are devalued is that it treasures untold experiences which have been unheard by the empire. Swinton (2011) states that Disability Theology is contextual as it emerges from the theological reflection on quite specific forms of human experience; he further argues that Disability Theology parallels Black Theology as it:

[A]ims to recognise that people living with disabilities have been at best minority voices in the development of theology and practise and worst have been completely silenced within the conversation. (p. 274)

Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) in South Africa and the United States of America (US) wrestled with the similar demon of racism. Vellem (2007:5) endorses the same sentiment by stating that racism has become a common thread between the US and South Africa. Allan Boesak (2020:2), who is the father of Black Theology in South Africa, mentions that in the South African setting, Black Theology was born in the heat of struggles for justice, freedom and dignity for the oppressed. Boesak further argues that the scholars of BTL responded to the ongoing experience of genocide, dehumanisation, dispossession, oppression and endless exploitation. Black Theology can be defined as situational and contextual theology, 'which seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that the situation that black people find themselves in makes sense' (Boesak 1977:17). Moore (2018:98) also argues that 'Black Theology is about black people interpreting the gospel in the light of black experiences'. This definition of Black Theology by Moore indicates that it is more concerned about the people who are created in the image of God; people living with disabilities who live in oppressive situations are still viewed as people rather than objects.

Black Theology as a situational theology aims at doing exegesis on the blackness of people living with disabilities; its objective is not to exclude people living with disabilities but to discern the cause and nature of their suffering in black communities. The fact that the situation and context of oppressed black people was not known or understood gave birth to innovative epistemologies within the terms of reference of European epistemologies? Vellem (2007):

Black Theology Liberation (BTL) was rooted in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed, it sought to employ different epistemological tools from those of traditional Western theology such as the Black Power and Civil Rights movement. (p. 5)

Black Theology of Liberation employed Black Consciousness as its epistemology which aimed at reawakening the dead consciousness of black people.

Black consciousness and Black Theology as a resuscitating epistemology amid castrated identities (people living with disabilities)

The fusion surrounding Black Theology and Black Consciousness mainly expressed the meaning of blackness and stressed the total liberation of black people who lived in various conditions that devalued their identities. Vellem (2007) comments that:

[I]t is imperative to grasp the fact that Black Theology harnessed Black Consciousness philosophy to define a particular consciousness that could be used to liberate black masses from their inferiority complex. (p. 4)

Tshaka and Maokofane (2010:534) state that Black Theology and Black Consciousness are inseparable and aim to set free the oppressed from the bondage of racial oppression. The question that the researcher poses is what does Black Consciousness have to do with people living with disabilities?

Vellem (2017:1), on the fusion of Black Theology and Black Consciousness towards ongoing social illness, the oppression of people with disabilities, states that Black Theology and Black Consciousness is a profound expression of good news for the oppressed. Kobo (2018:65) also stresses that 'black consciousness is good news from a black theological perspective'. Black Theology and Black Consciousness aim to resuscitate people living with disabilities who are castrated; they are dysfunctional within our black communities. Castration in Fanon's (1952:140) language symbolises that people living with disabilities are lacking, are displaced, and silenced by the oppressor who promotes the lifelessness condition of the other. Black Theology and Black Consciousness contest the state of castration which is lifelessness that people living with disabilities have accepted as their lifestyle in a black township. Therefore, the crux of Black Consciousness in the presence of lifelessness according to Biko (2012:31) aims to bring back the true meaning of *impilo* in the lives of people living with disabilities; people living with disabilities are reawakening to find their lost identities in themselves, and are challenged by Black Consciousness to be an agent of their liberation.

Vellem – Black Theology of liberation: A theology that gives life

Vellem (2007:5) clearly stressed in his work that BTL can be interpreted as a 'theology from below *vis-a-vis* the theology of above'; its methodological purpose was to take seriously the unheard voices of the marginalised being. This introduced a new paradigm shift which can also be seen in Vellem's 'Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century'. For Vellem the game changers of Black Theology were those who were oppressed and marginalised by the empire (Vellem 2020:4). The BTL according to Vellem (2020:4) did not represent the 'Western common of knowledge, but the embers of hermeneutics in the zone of non-beings' (Vellem 2020:4). This entails that Black Theology as a theology of life creates an authentic space to discern the unheard stories of those who have been silenced by the empire. Hook (2020:360) states that Fanon argued that the oppressed were not treated fully as human beings; they were viewed as less being that were locked in a zone of non-beings. In this state of the zone of non-beings, zones that locate people living with disabilities below are zones that disapprove of the state of *impilo* and approve of lifelessness as the order of the day. One of the incidents is that which was reported by 'Sowetan Live' about Nondumiso Zondi who died a lonely death in a shack, while he was locked up for years. This simply paints the reality of the zone of non-being that people living with disabilities endure; they are treated as non-persons deprived of access to *impilo*.

For Vellem (2020:3), BTL chose the non-person (the oppressed) as its interlocutor. The quest for the total liberation of the non-person in Vellem did not depend on representing the poor; this was one of the models used by Western theologians to mute the voices that emerged from the zone of non-beings. Vellem (2012:6) debunked the notion of representation; he further cautions us that representing the cry of the poor can end up promoting our desire, rather than the interest of the poor; representation is ultimately violence. Biko (1987) in 'I Write What I Like' shares the same sentiment as Vellem on the notion of representation of the oppressed, for Biko warned the black oppressed against white liberals who want to represent the cry for life of the oppressed, he advocates for an authentic epistemology that is owned by the oppressed: 'the blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves'. Vellem (2015b:5) believed that the oppressed beings were not defeated being on the underside of the empire by arguing that 'the oppressed are subjected to the Empire, but confessing a God of life, evokes a deep cry for this God to be who this God is'. Spivak (1988:277) in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' aims at resurrecting those who have been locked up in the dungeon of lifelessness in search of *impilo* by sharing that the oppressed are not defeated beings but argues that the oppressed subject can speak, and act and know. In the zone of non-being, the oppressed being formulates a new form of linguistics that can be

interpreted by them to the world. This gives birth to new voices that speak and act on how their path to total liberation that leads to *impilo* must look based on the perspective of the zone of non-beings.

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher discussed the challenges that people living with disabilities experience in black communities that have played a massive role in their exclusion from participating fully within the church and society. The lack of access to education, healthcare and transportation system is a nightmare that promotes the state of lifelessness for people living with disabilities. Black Theology continues to be of importance to the life of people living with disabilities as it advocates for the inclusion of their experiences that will assist in constructing a new epistemology that will emerge from the zone of non-beings. The article concludes that the BTL is a theology of life; it continues to discern the unheard cry for *impilo* in a condition that is life-killing.

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