


Pentecostal theology regarding disability in African neo-Pentecostalism



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The Pentecostal approach to disability is currently informed by the imposed healing, deliverance, and performance of other miracles, particularly among neo-Pentecostals in Africa. This is also informed by the neo-Pentecostal pastor's radical approach to the aspect of healing in Pentecostal theology. Therefore, instead of addressing disability from the point of environmental, social, and technological aspects, neo-Pentecostal pastors either impose healing on the disabled body, or blame them for a lack of faith. This in a way presents some power dynamics between the abled neo-Pentecostal pastors' bodies and the disabled congregant bodies. This article uses a critical theory, to argue that the development of the Pentecostal theology of disability should take cognisance of the environmental, social, and technological factors. When this is done, a Pentecostal setting in the form of a church service, crusade, or revival will not become a place of imposed healing and deliverance, but an environmentally, socially, and technologically friendly one, that is conducive to those living with a disability.

Contribution: This article highlighted the importance of the environmental, social, and technological factors in the construction of a Pentecostal theology of disability among the neo-Pentecostal churches, in an African context.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; Pentecostal theology; disability; critical theory; healing.

Introduction

Neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa rely strongly on the Pentecostal theology of healing, deliverance, and the performance of other miracles (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a; De Witte 2005; Meyer 2007). This should be understood in the context of the African belief system of the miraculous and the magical powers, that exist in the spirit world (Anderson 1991; Meyer 1995; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005b). However, Anderson (2018) contends that the Pentecostal movement is not always in continuity with the popular religions in Africa in the performance of miracles, but in discontinuity of the same, through the power of the Holy Spirit. To a certain extent, the emphasis on healing, deliverance, and performance of other miracles has implications for the Pentecostal theology of disability. One of the challenges identified in this article, is that there is an imposed healing upon the people living with a disability among neo-Pentecostal churches. In addition, people living with a disability would be blamed for their lack of faith, when they do not receive their healing. There is also an exploitation of people living with disabilities, as objects for the practice of faith among neo-Pentecostal pastors in Africa. Furthermore, the environments in Pentecostal settings in the form of church buildings, tents, and so forth, are not conducive to the congregants living with disabilities. This calls for a new approach to the Pentecostal theology of disability, particularly among African neo-Pentecostals. Such a theology should take cognisance of the environment, social context, and technological aspects in assisting people with disabilities to fellowship in a conducive environment, as opposed to imposing healing upon them.

This article uses a critical theory in the development of the Pentecostal theology of disability among the African neo-Pentecostal churches. This is done, with the reference to the biblical texts that are relevant to the theme of disability. The article will firstly introduce critical theory in the context of disability, to challenge the current practices in African neo-Pentecostal contexts. The current practices of healing about disability, will be highlighted to identify the gaps that exist among African neo-Pentecostal churches. The article will proceed to highlight the power dynamics that exist between the neo-Pentecostal pastors of abled bodies, and the neo-Pentecostal congregants of disabled bodies. The aim is to propose a Pentecostal theology of disability, that will bring balance to these power dynamics. In addition, the Pentecostal theology of disability should be able to recognise the environmental, social, and technological factors to be relevant to the believers

living with a disability. When this is done, the Pentecostal settings, church buildings, and any other place of fellowship, will become conducive for persons living with disabilities. In the next section, the article introduces the critical theory as a framework for the study.

Framing a critical theory in the context of disability

Critical theory, which is used in social and human sciences, argues that societal problems cannot be solved by only focusing on individuals facing the same problems, but also concerning the social structures where these individuals are located. Barnard (2010) explains that:

[C]ritical theory argues that social problems are created and maintained by the structures of society and the cultural assumptions generated by dominant groups oppress and subordinate individuals and groups. Individual, psychological motivations are less important than the structure of society and focus on structural rather than interpersonal and personal explanations of societal problems. (n.p.)

Critical theory therefore, becomes a theory that assists in the identification and the confrontation of societal challenges (Shaw, Orme & Briar-Lawson 2009:59). In this article, critical theory suggests that the discussion on the theme of disability should not only be centred on individuals with a disability but should also look at the social aspects of the same. In addition, a critical theory is relevant for the confrontation of the power structures, because of its ability to critique the powers that be (Feenberg 2002). In the end, critical theory becomes the theory of the oppressed, that they can use to confront the oppressor. In this article, a critical theory is relevant for the confrontation of the power structures that arise within the context of disability in African neo-Pentecostalism. In other words, this theory will be used to address the power dynamics between the pastors with abled bodies, and the congregants living with disabilities. It will be a relevant theory, in assessing the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed, about the Pentecostal theology of disability. In the next section, the article looks at the current practices of healing the disability, among the African neo-Pentecostal churches and the neo-Pentecostal pastors.

The current healing practices regarding disability in neo-Pentecostalism

The neo-Pentecostal churches emanate from the Pentecostal movement, but with some different characteristics when compared with classical Pentecostals. These churches have grown to great numbers in Africa and have changed the religious landscape on the continent. These churches, unlike the classical Pentecostal churches, do emphasise the performance of miracles, healing, and deliverance (Banda 2022). It is this quest for the miraculous, that has caused some of these churches to be involved in one controversy after the

other (Banda 2020b; 2021). Some of the neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa have direct links with the faith movement of Kenneth Hagin, and therefore emphasise the gospel of prosperity (Kgatle 2022). Some of the neo-Pentecostal churches do believe in the use of healing products, such as water, and oil, particularly the New Prophetic Churches. These products have become popular and commercialised among these churches (Benyah 2018). The aspect of healing and deliverance, also applies to the followers and members of these churches living with disabilities. Among some of these churches, there is also an abuse of the people living with disability, as will be discussed below.

Some of the current healing practices among the neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa have some challenges. The first challenge is that healing is imposed on people living with a disability. In one of the Sunday services of the Enlightened Christian Gathering, led by Shepherd Bushiri, a woman is shown in a video, screaming for the prophet to heal her son. The woman screamed and said that her son was born paralysed but could walk using crutches. The mother has tried to seek medical help but was not helped. The boy was taken to the podium where the Prophet Shepherd Bushiri began to pray in other tongues, and sing the song, *'There is victory in the name of Jesus'*. The prophet went further to pray for his legs, saying that one of the legs needed to grow as the two were not of the same length. In the video, the boy is seen struggling to walk, in the claim that he was healed, but he was later given back the crutches (Prophet Shepherd Bushiri 2019). In a similar incident by Pastor Chris Oyakilome, one of the popular neo-Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria, a woman whose spine was broken, is shown sitting in a wheelchair. The pastor reaches out to her to pray for her healing, she stands, and tries to walk but fails, ultimately, she is shown just dancing around without making any steps to demonstrate that she is healed. Pastor Chris Oyakilome then moved away to pray for the next person (Zion Praise 2021). These are just but a few examples, showing that sometimes healing of those living with disabilities does not take place, but rather it is imposed among the believers. There are numerous incidences of healing ministers who impose healing upon people living with disabilities. Ministers such as Pastor Benny Hinn, and others have claimed healing on people, that later went back to using their crutches and wheelchairs (Bowler 2018).

The second challenge is that people living with disabilities are sometimes blamed for their lack of faith, in receiving their healing. The healing ministers would try to put people with disabilities into a faith programme to receive healing. Healing ministers such as Pastor Chris Oyakilome in Nigeria, has a healing school where people living with disability are taught how to exercise their faith (Nyamnjoh 2019). At the healing school, the people living with disabilities are taught about the power of God that can heal any kind of sickness, including disability. In addition, healing meetings, or revivals are labelled meetings of faith, with themes such as 'today is your day for healing', 'rise and walk', 'miracle night', 'healing night', 'night of bliss', and so forth. However, the challenge is that often when people living with disabilities do not receive

their healing, they are blamed for a lack of faith (Mwale & Chita 2016). These healing ministers would never take the blame, when people living with disabilities are not healed, because they always want to appear as powerful before the congregants (Otieno 2009). In the end, the people living with disabilities, are blamed for a lack of faith, or little faith.

The third challenge is, that people living with disabilities are sometimes used as objects for the practice of faith, by neo-Pentecostal pastors and healing ministers, in the performance of miracles (Sande 2018). Meaning, that it is not necessarily the focus on their healing, but to demonstrate that the healing minister is powerful and can heal people with disability. Hence, they do not care when the same people, whom they claimed to have healed, go back to their crutches or wheelchairs. Because the intention sometimes is not necessarily their healing, but to use them in demonstrating their powerfulness. In this case, at times even people who do not have any disability, are often used to sit in wheelchairs and hold crutches in pretence, so that healing ministers can claim to heal them. But even in this scenario, it is an unfortunate act towards the real people living with disabilities, when abled bodies pretend to be living with a disability. This presents some form of exploitation of the community of the people living with disability, in the first instance when they are used to demonstrate the pastor's powerfulness. In the second instance, the abled bodies pretending that they are living with a disability, while they actually are abled bodies.

Lastly, some of the places of fellowship among neo-Pentecostal churches, in the form of buildings, are not environmentally friendly for the movements of the persons living with a disability. Most of the buildings used for church, do not have easy access for someone in a wheelchair, for example to easily access the premises (Nakua, Yarfi & Ashigbi 2017). However, during healing sessions, the healing ministers would ensure that the people in wheelchairs and crutches are pushed into the building. This means that people living with disabilities, are brought to such places for them to receive healing, and not for them to have fellowship with others. In addition, most neo-Pentecostal churches do not have a sign language interpreter, in case if someone who is deaf, is in the service (Yong 2010). This means that the people living with deafness, would not be part of the neo-Pentecostal service, given their disability. But again, such people would be called to the front, to be prayed for by the healing minister, even if their needs are not taken care of. Therefore, the environment in some of the neo-Pentecostal churches is currently not conducive for people living with disabilities, to fellowship. Rather, the environment is conducive for them to be prayed for, to claim that they are healed by the healing minister.

Power dynamics in the practice of healing claims, among disabled bodies

The healing claims by neo-Pentecostal pastors, present some form of power dynamics, particularly when looking at the

demographics of the persons living with disability. Firstly, there are power dynamics between the people living with disabilities, and the neo-Pentecostal pastors, who in the majority, have abled bodies. Most of the pastors who claim to heal the people living with disabilities in neo-Pentecostal churches, do have abled bodies, presenting a power dynamic (Parsitau 2018). This means that the pastor or healing minister with the abled body, is in a way taking advantage of the people who are vulnerable and cannot help themselves. In some incidences, the family member, or a relative of the people living with a disability, would be paid money so that they can present themselves in the church to receive healing (Acheampong et al. 2023). This, in a way, presents some form of abuse of the people living with disabilities, by the powerful healing ministers and pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches. This presents another form of oppression, between the powerful healing ministers, and the vulnerable people living with a disability. It is this oppression, that requires a confrontation through a critical theory, as suggested in this article.

The second power dynamic, in the practice of healing claims among people living with a disability, is gender. Most of the healing ministers, such as Shepherd Bushiri, Chris Oyakilome, and others, are male using female bodies as experiments for healing (Parsitau 2018). Most of the people in wheelchairs and crutches in the neo-Pentecostal churches, are female, particularly old African women. In very few cases it would be a man looking for healing, from the healing minister. In addition, the female pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches, seldom engage in the claims of healing people living with a disability. This presents this challenge to be between male pastors and female, or women living with a disability. In the case of children whose parents are the ones who present them to the healing ministers, they too cannot speak for themselves, as they are vulnerable. Children are used by neo-Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches, for disability miracles. Children are taught to respect their parents, hence even when they abuse them by using their disabled bodies as experiments of healing, they end up complying. This calls for a new approach to the practices of healing, for persons living with a disability. The next section develops the Pentecostal theology of disability, among neo-Pentecostal churches, using the critical theory.

Pentecostal theology of disability: A critical theory approach

The Pentecostal theology of disability is expected, not only to look at the individuals living with disability and blame them for their lack of faith. The parents of people living with disabilities, should equally not be blamed for their children's condition (Machingura & Museka 2018). In Matthew 19:14 Jesus said: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'. This means that there should never be any obstacle for children to come to Jesus, including those living with disabilities. And when coming to church, the children are coming to Jesus, not to be exploited by some neo-Pentecostal

pastors in the claim of miraculous healing. In addition, the Pentecostal theology of disability is expected to take cognisance of the church environment, in ensuring that it is friendly to the people living with disabilities in neo-Pentecostal churches (Yong 2007a; 2007b). These churches should be designed such, that it is easy for people living with disabilities to access them. In addition, there should be a sign language interpreter, who can help translate the sermons for people living with deafness (Barclay, Rider & Dombo 2012). There are also other numerous efforts, that the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches should make, to ensure that the people living with disabilities are safe and sound, during the services. Therefore, people living with disabilities should not be seen as recipients of healing but be accommodated in their disability. The church should accommodate them as they are, in the same way that Christ loves them as they are. People living with disabilities do not have to change their identity, to be accepted at the church service, but should be loved, and accepted in the same condition.

If we observe the ministry of Jesus in terms of healing, there is a clear mandate to minister to people with disabilities, in terms of their social needs, even before healing them (Keener 2011; 2012). Jesus always had compassion on the crowds, and he would provide food before he start to minister healing and miracles. In Mark 8:22–26 it is stated:

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?' He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around'. Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything. Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Don't even go into the village'.

It can be noticed here that Jesus did not rush to immediately heal the blind man, but he was willing to lead the way for the blind man, thus creating a conducive environment. In addition, Jesus took the man through the various steps of faith, until he finally got his healing. Therefore, a Pentecostal theology of disability should be first considered for the people living with disabilities, rather than always imposing healing on them. This can be learned from the life and ministry of Jesus, who always had compassion upon the people, including those living with a disability.

The Pentecostal theology of disability is expected to consider the social factors, affecting the people living with a disability. Healing should firstly start by ministering to the hearts of the people (Strydom 2013). According to Vondey and Mittelstadt (2013:148), this will help us 'to open up a world of possibilities for people with disabilities and also to free people not considered disabled from many oppressive characteristics of the dominant social imaginary'. In other words, when the church has various programmes for alleviating poverty, and other social ills in the community, the first target should be the people living with a disability. Some of the people living with disabilities, are not able to work again, because of their level

of disability. Therefore, people living with disabilities should be the first ones to receive help and social care, not only from the government, but also from the church (Begg 2012:27). Therefore, it is pivotal for Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches, to look at these factors, instead of always looking at the people living with a disability, as objects for healing and the performance of miracles (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005c). It is also important to assess how many people living with disabilities, work for the neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa. How many people living with disabilities are working as pastors, church administrators, youth leaders, worship leaders, and so forth in these neo-Pentecostal churches? Or are the people living with disabilities not found worthy to work in the churches? Answers to these questions will help us to conclude whether the Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches are dealing with the social ills among their members living with a disability, or not.

Again, Jesus is the epitome of dealing with social ills such as poverty, even before addressing the challenges of disability. It must be reiterated, that Jesus fed the sick even before he could heal them. The Pentecostal theology of disability is not only about healing the people living with a disability, but about taking care of their other needs in life. These needs include providing appropriate shelter, food, and security. The zeal and passion to heal them, should not come at the expense of taking care of their various needs in life. Equally, the disciples of Jesus in the early church, did not only preach the word and pray for those who are living with disabilities, but they also ensured that they minister the needs of the people. Acts 2:42 states very well: 'And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need'. Therefore, texts such as Acts 3:6: 'Then Peter said, silver, and gold have I none; but such as I have, give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise, and walk', should not be used out of context to avoid responsibility towards those living with disabilities. If neo-Pentecostal pastors in the 21st century can offer financial assistance to the person living with disability, they should do so.

The Pentecostal theology of disability should also look at the technological development, in the construction of its theology (Clifton 2020). Technological help is pivotal in assisting people living with disabilities, to deal with their challenges, instead of spiritualising them. This means that people living with disabilities should be helped in the acquisition of wheelchairs, crutches, and other technological assistance they can get, instead of always praying for them to receive miracles. With the use of the latest technology, people living with a disability can receive proper help, in acquiring modern wheelchairs that are friendly to use (Rashid et al. 2017). People living with a disability can be grouped during a church service, not to pray for healing, but to help them receive the sermon of the day. Such a room full of people living with disabilities, should be comprised of the latest technology, in the zeal to help them receive the message of the day. This will not only help in making the people living with disabilities feel welcome at the church service, but it will also assist them to be part of the church service, rather than to

be only objects of healing and miracles. Hence, it is important for the Pentecostal pastor in neo-Pentecostal churches, not to only focus on healing and miracles, but also to look at how people living with a disability, can feel welcome in the church service (Clifton & Wells 2020). Jesus did the same, even though he lived before technology, but he was always concerned about how people sat comfortably in his sermons. He would order his disciples to arrange seating accordingly, even before he would start to minister to the people.

Lastly, Pentecostal theology of disability is expected to find a balance, between those offering to heal and those looking for healing, in neo-Pentecostal churches (Shanduka & Togarasei 2018). The Pentecostal theology of disability is expected to confront the oppressive powers that exist in the church setting, particularly those perpetuated by Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches (Banda 2020a; 2022). The relevant Pentecostal theology of disability is the one that uplifts the people living with a disability, instead of perpetuating abuses by the Pentecostal pastors. Jesus' ministry always uplifted the sick, the people living with disabilities, the palsy, the possessed, the leprosy, the tormented, the lunatic, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the deaf, and so forth. He did not use their conditions to further oppress them, but rather to uplift them. Therefore, voices of people living with disabilities, should be heard, and acknowledged in the construction of the Pentecostal theology of disability (Mbao 2020). In other words, it should be a theology of those who are found in the margins, the oppressed, and the downcast, which include the people living with a disability. Any theology that does not minister the needs of the marginalised, is irrelevant in the 21st century. Therefore, a relevant Pentecostal theology of disability is the one that puts the people living with disability at the centre, not the periphery (George 2011). It is a theology that seeks to uplift the people living with a disability, rather than the theology that continues to undermine them. For this to happen, such a theology should be able to strike a balance between the ministry of healing and the dignity of the people living with a disability. The quest to demonstrate the power of God, and exercise faith in neo-Pentecostal churches, should not be done at the expense of the human dignity and integrity of the people living with a disability.

Conducive environment for people living with disability

A relevant Pentecostal theology of disability among the neo-Pentecostal churches in the 21st century, is expected to create a conducive environment for people living with a disability. The ability to look at the environmental, social, and technological factors in the Pentecostal theology of disability, will create an environment that is conducive to believers living with a disability. Pentecostal theology of disability through critical theory, is expected to deal with challenges presented by these factors rather than use them against the people living with a disability. A relevant Pentecostal theology of disability thrives to deal with impediments, that

hinder people living with disabilities, so that they have fellowship with the people with abled bodies. A Pentecostal theology of disability does not seek to create a distinction between those with abled bodies and the people living with disability, in a discriminatory way. Taking care of the needs of the people living with disabilities among neo-Pentecostal churches, is an opportunity to create a conducive environment for them, to fellowship with others. Healing or claims thereof, should not be an escape from taking care of people living with disabilities. On the contrary, if Pentecostal pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches are genuine in seeking healing among people living with disabilities, they should be the first to take care of them.

In addition, a conducive environment is created, when the people living with disabilities, are not forced to act like they are healed, even when they are not. When this is done, it sometimes adds more pain to the people living with disabilities, as they are forced to perform beyond their ability. The people living with disabilities are not objects of healing, or actors in the experimentation of healing powers by pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches. Healing should not be an imposition, but a real act of God through faith. In addition, Pentecostal pastors should not engage in controversial miracles, to prove that they are powerful, at the expense of people with disabilities. Jesus did heal people in his ministry, but it was not an imposition but a healing through faith. However, even before God almighty heals the person living with a disability, it is the responsibility of the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches, to take care of the persons living with a disability. Living with a disability does not make any person less of the image of God. All human beings have been created in the image of God, including people living with disabilities.

The emphasis on miracles and healing in the Pentecostal theology of neo-Pentecostal churches, should not come at the expense of neglecting the people living with a disability. Rather, the more there is a desire for them to be healed by God, the more there should be a desire for them to live in a conducive environment. The issue of disability should not be over-spiritualised, but rather be looked at from all angles or areas of life. The social, psychological, environmental, and technological aspects of life are important in the construction of the Pentecostal theology of disability among the neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa. The Pentecostal theology of disability should bring balance between the practice of miracles, and the love, and care for the people living with disabilities. Yes, miracles and healings form part of the Pentecostal theology in neo-Pentecostal churches but should not be performed in a way that undermine the people living with disabilities. Therefore, people living with disability should be prioritised over and above the performance of miracles, in the development of the Pentecostal theology of disability in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This article worked within the theoretical framework of critical theory and argued that the Pentecostal theology of

disability should not only blame the individuals living with a disability but should also include other factors. This is because the current practices have a propensity to blame the congregants, or even impose healing upon them. To deal with these challenges, this article proposed a theology that recognises the different factors around disability. Firstly, the environment in which the believers living with disabilities, are fellowshiping should be conducive, meaning it should have demarcations or easy access for people living with disabilities. Secondly, there are many other social factors that a Pentecostal theology of disability should consider in its construction. In the African context, these include poverty, unemployment, and other inequalities. Thirdly, the technology that should assist the believers living with a disability, such as wheelchairs, should be explored instead of blaming these believers. Summarily, the Pentecostal church environment should be a conducive one for people living with disabilities in the development of the Pentecostal theology of disability.

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Author's contributions

M.S.K. contributed to the conceptualisation, formal analysis, and writing of the article.

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