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DISABLED PERSONS IN THE CHURCH: THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVE CHURCH AND ITS ACTORS

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Streszczenie. Istnieje wciąż znaczna liczba osób z niepełnosprawnością, do których Kościół nie dociera z Ewangelią, podobnie wciąż jest duża przepaść pomiędzy osobami sprawnymi i niepełnosprawnymi w zakresie uczestnictwa we wspólnocie Kościoła. Celem artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytania: czym jest aktywny Kościół? Kto powinien być inicjatorem zmiany, aktywności, włączenia w ideę aktywnego Kościoła? W artykule zaproponowana została autorska koncepcja aktywnego Kościoła (KAK), będąca odpowiedzią na powyższe pytania. KAK powstała w oparciu o doświadczenia badanych osób niepełnosprawnych i ich opiekunów (badania jakościowe) oraz duszpasterzy (badania ilościowe). Koncepcja aktywnego Kościoła wskazuje na trzy podmioty odpowiedzialne za aktywny udział osób niepełnosprawnych w Kościele.

Słowa kluczowe: osoba niepełnosprawna, duszpasterz, Kościół, wspólnota parafialna, aktywny Kościół, włączenie, inkluzja.

Abstract. There are still a significant number of people with disabilities who remain beyond the Church's evangelical reach, and there is still a large gap between able-bodied and disabled people in terms of participation in the community of the Church. The aim of this article is to answer the following questions: What is an active Church? Who should be the initiator of change, activity, and inclusion in the idea of an active Church? The article proposes an original concept of an active Church (KAK), which is an answer to the above questions. KAK was created on the basis of the experiences of surveyed people with disabilities and their caregivers (qualitative research) and ministers (quantitative

research). KAK points to three entities responsible for the active participation of people with disabilities in the Church to meet the assumptions of experienced belonging.

Keywords: person with disability, minister, the Church, parish community, active Church, inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to outline a model of the Church open to people with disabilities were made, among others, by J. O. Enyinnaya¹, L. Wen-Pin², J. M. Hull³, E. W. Carter⁴, R. Dennis, T. Murdoch⁵, M. LaRocque, or R. Eigenbrook⁶. All around the world one can find attempts to implement special programmes relating to the appropriate and complete inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the Church community⁷.

Before the concept of Active Church is outlined and discussed, it is important to ask whether people experiencing disability find their role in

¹ See: John O. Enyinnaya, 'The Church's Ministry to People with Disability', in *Going and Making Disciples of all Nations*, ed. by Emiola Nihinlola (Publisher: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary 2016), 149–155, accessed at file:///C:/Users/Dell/AppData/Local/Temp/paperondisability.pdf.

² See: Leow Wen-Pin, *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches, Disability Ministry in Asia* Vol. 1. (Graceworks, 2021).

³ See: John M. Hull, *Disability: The Inclusive Church Resource*, (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014)

⁴ See: Erik W. Carter, "A Place of Belonging: Including Individuals With Significant Disabilities in Faith Communities," *Inclusive Practices* 1, no. 1 (2022): 6–12. DOI: 10.1177/2732474520977482; Erik W. Carter, "Research on Disability and Congregational Inclusion: What We Know and Where We Might Go," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 27, no. 2 (2023): 179–209, DOI: 10.1080/23312521.2022.2035297.

⁵ Rea Dennis, Trish Murdoch, "Disability Focus Groups: A Strategy for Including People with Disability in Parishes, Religion," *Disability & Health* 5, no. 4 (2013): pp. 45–59. DOI: 10.1300/J095v05n04_04.

⁶ Michelle LaRocque, Rick Eigenbrook, "Community Access: A Survey of Congregational Accessibility for People with Disabilities," *Religion, Disability & Health* 9, no. 1 (2005): 55–66. DOI: 10.1300/J095v9n01_04

⁷ For example, in the USA, *The Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) regulates all forms of accessibility; churches – as well as other public institutions – operate on the basis of this document, access: <https://www.ada.gov/>. More: Trent Broussard, "Including Disabled in the Church: More Than a Ramp," 2022, accessed: <https://artistictheologian.com/2020/05/08/including-disabled-in-the-church-more-than-a-ramp/>

the Church: do they feel invited, wanted; do they find a role to play and an area of their activity, so as not to be reduced to 'recipients,' but that they could equally function as 'givers' and 'doers'; do they feel understood by the Church? Who should initiate change, activity, inclusion for people with disabilities? Seeking answers to these questions, nationwide qualitative (among people with disabilities) and quantitative (among pastoral ministers) research was carried out, to find out the needs declared by the participants and to determine the role of people with disabilities in community space in the Catholic Church in Poland. It must be kept in mind that the word "space" needs to be understood in two ways here: literally, as a physical space, and metaphorically, as a space of interpersonal and transcendental community⁸.

The literature on the subject and the documents of the Church dedicate more and more space to active presence of people with disabilities in the Church⁹. One reason for this growing interest is the increasing prevalence of the idea of inclusion in many areas of the daily functioning of the disabled. It is important to emphasise that the change in focus on the disabled in the Church is significant and leads to many good practices. However, it is still the case, as reported by J. L. Cunningham, B.A. Mulvihill, P. M. Speck, that many Church representatives are unaware of the number of families in their local communities who are affected by disability, which is a clear indication that the idea of inclusion is far from being implemented exhaustively. The authors of the aforementioned study note that as many as 65% of local churches in the USA fail to provide pastoral care to people with disabilities, while almost 89% of them do not seek in-

⁸ For more details, see: Witold Janocha, "Marginalisation and Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities from Areas of Social and Religious Life," *Annals of Family Science and Social Work* 4 (2012): 375–392; Ross E. Hamilton, "The Inclusion of People with a Learning Disability in the Church: A Case Study," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 19 no. 2 (2019): 117–130. There are a number of third sector actors engaged in the area of inclusion of people with disabilities in the church in Australia, such as CBM; for more detail, see: <https://www.cbm.org.au/about-us/what-we-do/field-programs>. A good case in point can be a model of activity developed in the UK by the Church of England, whose service contains a range of information and guidance for those who pursue the idea of inclusion; for more details, see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/barrier-free-belonging>.

⁹ Worth mentioning in this contexts are research contributions by Rev. Rev. Dariusz Lipiec, Witold Janocha and Andrzej Kiciński.

clusion of people with disabilities in parish activities¹⁰. Pope Francis raises similar issues in his letter to persons with disabilities, stating that:

Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities, and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside. The forms of discrimination listed – the lack of listening, the violation of the right to choose where and with whom to live, the denial of the sacraments, the accusation of witchcraft, abuse – and others, describe the culture of rejection towards persons with disabilities. They do not arise by chance, but have in common the same root: the idea that the lives of persons with disabilities are worth less than others.¹¹

Thus, the answer to the question whether and in what aspects the Church is an institution open to all, gives meaning to a declaration made by John Paul II, who refers to the Church as a “hospitable home”¹², also opening a space for discussion on the Active Church Concept.

1. METHODOLOGY

A synthetic approach proposed in this article is based on the results of a nationwide sociological study conducted with the disabled and the ministers of the Catholic Church, carried out as part of the project

¹⁰ Jill L. Cunningham, Beverly A. Mulvihill, Patricia M. Speck, “Disability and the Church: How Wide Is Your Door?” *Journal of Christian Nursing* 26 no. 3 (July/September 2009): 140–147.

¹¹ Francis, *Message of the Holy Father Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities*, 2022, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20221203_messaggio-disabilita.html

¹² In his homily for the Jubilee of Persons with Disabilities, John Paul II addressed persons with disabilities with the assurance that he was aware that indifference aggravates suffering and loneliness, while charity supported by selfless help multiplies strength and gives meaning to life. It was then that the commitment resounded: “In the name of Christ, the Church commits herself to becoming ever more a hospitable home for you.” John Paul II, *Jubilee of the Disabled. Homily of John Paul II, Sunday, 3 December 2000*. accessed at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20001203_jubildisabled.html

entitled *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the context of the Legislation and Pastoral Practices of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland*, funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The project involved a detailed analysis of the correlation between the provisions of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the documents and pastoral practice of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

A nationwide qualitative study using the focus group interview (FGI) was conducted among people with disabilities. People with mobility impairments, deaf and hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired and affected by intellectual disabilities were invited to participate. The research was preceded by a pilot survey to develop the final version of the scenario used in the interviews. Purposive sampling was used in the qualitative research. The adopted research procedure was to ensure maximum sample variability so as to capture the variation and diversity within the field of research. Thanks to this assumption, it was possible to find out areas of religious activity of people with different types of disabilities and with different severity levels, who live in different types of localities. Due to the subject of the study, it was assumed an invitation to participate in the qualitative research be addressed only to the disabled who declare to be Roman Catholic faithful. At the same time, the level of religiosity of the respondents was not assessed at the recruitment stage because studying the intensity of religious activity was part of the research. The research material in the form of transcripts includes 49 individual in-depth interviews conducted in five respondent groups: (a) deaf people (number of interviews conducted - 7); (b) people with motor disabilities (4); (c) the blind (5); (d) people with developmental disabilities (24), (e) carers of people with disabilities (9).

Research conducted among the ministers of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland used quantitative methods and employed the PAPI technique: paper interview questionnaires conducted directly with the respondent. The tool used for this study was a survey questionnaire consisting of 41 items. These were largely closed questions with suggested options, but three questions gave the respondents an opportunity to speak freely.

The working hypothesis made for the research is that parishes are not prepared to cater for comprehensive inclusion of people with disabili-

ties, although the level of inclusion will depend on variables such as parish size, parish type and diocese. Full participation of people with disabilities in the life of the parish also depends on the parish priests, hence another working hypothesis that they too are not fully prepared and lack experience in working with people with disabilities. Yet, as in the former case, it is assumed that the role preparation and experience of priests will depend on the role they hold (parish priest, vicar, other) and their pastoral work background.

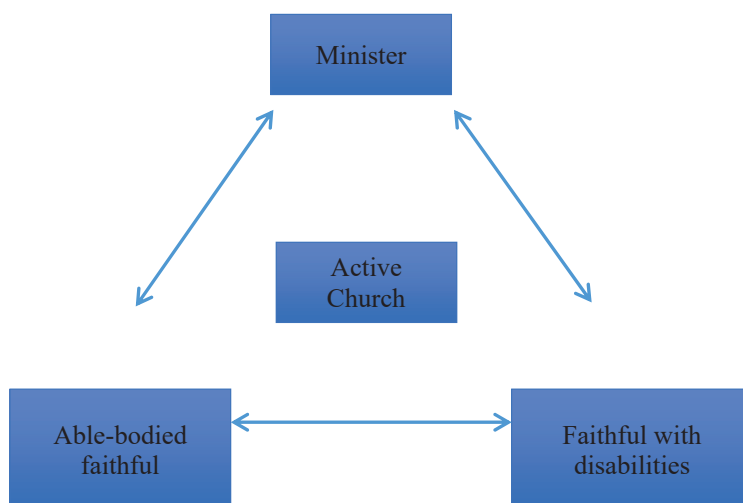
The survey was carried out on a representative sample of N=350 using random and stratified sampling, which allows inferences with a maximum error at 5%. Seven dioceses meeting the criteria of religiosity index (wr) and level of urbanisation (pu) at three levels: *high*, *medium* and *low* were identified for the study. It was assumed that none of the dioceses under analysis represented both extreme positions simultaneously (pu – high; wr – high or pu – low; wr – low). A synthetic reflection on research results lead to the formulation of the Active Church Concept.

2. THE ACTIVE CHURCH CONCEPT (KAK) – THE ACTORS

The contemporary teaching of the Church points to the necessity of inclusion of the disabled in the life of the Church community. Inclusion is always rooted in the will and capacity of the person concerned, and depends on the conditions created for their engagement. Moreover, and more importantly, inclusion is the result of cooperation of at least two parties. Yet, in many cases, the process has a vital third party – often underestimated or even overlooked. This third party are the carers and/or families of the disabled as well as the other able-bodied parishioners.

The Active Church Concept, which is rooted the Church's mission for all, is a model which relies on the principle of proclaiming the gospel to ALL, as well as on the concept of community, support and engagement of ALL. In its personal dimension, the Active Church Concept engages ministers, persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons.

Figure 1. The Active Church Concepts – the actors



2.1. THE MINISTERS

The available literature strongly emphasises the responsibility of ministers for the spiritual growth and active presence of the disabled in the Church¹³. Ministers need discernment and knowledge of the specifics of a particular disability, problems and limitations that are characteristic of a person with a particular disability, ways to cooperate and communicate, things to pay attention to when providing support and engaging in certain activities. It is essential that a minister acting as a pastoral care provider takes efforts not only to know persons with disabilities, but also be in touch with their families and explore their life circumstances. This knowledge is essential for building an active Church as an inclusive com-

¹³ Dariusz Lipiec, "Pastoral Care of Families of Persons with Disabilities," *Roczniki Pastoralno-Katechetyczne* 3, no. 58 (2011): 364–378; Paweł Robak, "Troska Kościoła Katolickiego o osoby z niepełnosprawnością," *Kościół i prawo* 11(24), no. 2 (2022): 253–265, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18290/kip22112.15>; Ryszard Kamiński, "Duszpasterstwo nadzwyczajne," In: *Teologia pastoralna* vol. 2, ed. Ryszard Kamiński, (Lublin: Atla 2, 2002), 309–312; Winfried Wermter, *Priest by Vocation*, (Częstochowa: Missionaries of the Precious Blood Publishing House POMOC 1998).

munity. A minister should also be competent in selecting tools, methods and ways of participation that facilitate access to the sacraments, spiritual growth, active participation in parish groups, prayer groups and engagement in basic activities in the parish. Acquiring knowledge on the above-mentioned issues takes time and can depend on diverse resources¹⁴. It is worth emphasising that a minister's attitude to the disabled depends on: (a) personality traits (especially sensitivity, empathy, openness, need to develop and work for the benefit of others, communication and dialogue); (b) own life experience; (c) formation and education at all levels (particularly in the theological seminary); (d) pastoral practice and formation. All these, and above all the ability and need for communication and dialogue, shapes a minister's responsibility for the complete inclusion of persons with disabilities and their carers, for their spiritual development and engagement in the life of the Church. The formation of a minister should be holistic and integral, encompassing the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions¹⁵.

2.2. FAITHFUL WITH DISABILITIES

Apart from the ministers, the KAK actor triad involves faithful with disabilities. On the one hand, in the system of pastoral care for people with disabilities, the disabled are treated as feeble and in need of special care and attention. To a reasonable degree, such an approach can have its objective justification and often *is* appropriate. However, it should be emphasised that an open and active Church treats all its members equally, which means that everyone can be a 'giver' of themselves in and to the Church. The contemporary teaching of the Church points to the need for inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the ecclesial community. The parish provides opportunities for diverse forms of their personal in-

¹⁴ See: Dariusz Lipiec, "Formation of Presbyters for the Pastoral Care of Persons with Disabilities," *Teologia i człowiek, Kwartalnik Wydziału Teologicznego UMK* 54, no. 2 (2021): 27–44.

¹⁵ See: Jan Wątroba, "Permanentna formacja duchowa kapłanów w świetle soborowych i posoborowych dokumentów Urzędu Nauczycielskiego Kościoła (1963–1994)," (Częstochowa, Publishing House: Częstochowa 1999): 17–18.

volvement in each basic function in parish life. The disabled can perform liturgical functions of altar servers, lectors, choir singers or extraordinary ministers of the Blessed Sacrament. They can be involved in parish religion classes (catechesis) and the preparation of children, young people and adults for the sacraments, work in family life counselling. There are opportunities for people with disabilities to get involved in various parish groups and teams.

In addition to dedicated (special) pastoral care, to which much credit is due, it is important to point to contemporary trends, aiming at a maximal integration of the disabled into the Church. It is worth pointing out that today many people with disabilities, especially youth, avoid dedicated support environments, and this also applies to ecclesial communities. They are reluctant to get involved in dedicated pastoral activities, directing their steps towards regular parish engagements. However, it is important for the disabled to have the ability to identify and communicate their needs and specify the type of support they require; point out difficulties or barriers; communicate their own qualities, capacities and skills; awaken their intrinsic need for spiritual development; ask questions; seek answers; develop an attitude of agency and subsidiarity; recognise and comprehend their role in the community.

Many people with disabilities have extraordinary gifts that can be used in and for the Church. Not infrequently disabilities can disguise these talents, hence the disabled are so frequently excluded from any significant roles in the service of the Church. E. Carter emphasises that as long as Church members do not use their spiritual gifts for service, the Church may not reach spiritual maturity¹⁶. Whatever kind of open pastoral ministry one can contemplate, the active presence of the disabled must always result from their will, commitment, communication and real engagement.

¹⁶ Erik W. Carter, Elizabeth E. Biggs, and Thomas L. Boehm, "Being Present versus Having a Presence: Dimensions of Belonging for Young People with Disabilities and Their Families," *Christian Education Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 128; Erik W. Carter, "A Place of Belonging: Research at the Intersection of Faith and Disability," *Review and Expositor* 113, no. 2 (2016): 167–80; Erik W. Carter, "From Barriers to Belonging for People with Disabilities: Promising Pathways toward Inclusive Ministry," in *Religion, Disability, and Interpersonal Violence*, ed. Andy J. Johnson, J. Ruth Nelson, and Emily M. Lund (New York: Springer, 2017), 25.

2.3. THE ABLE-BODIED FAITHFUL

As already argued, KAK has to be considered a triangular structure¹⁷, and the third actor in the KAK triad is the able-bodied faithful. The available research tend to favour dualistic approaches (e.g. ministers – the disabled), yet our research results clearly indicate equivalence of roles of the three stakeholders: ministers, the disabled and the able-bodied faithful. The latter is an equally important group, as it gathers carers and relatives who are the most familiar with the reality of the disabled and who belong to their environment. It also consists of other able-bodied faithful, who create a positive climate and a community atmosphere. Thus, it is a systemic necessity to maintain social relations between the able-bodied with their families and people with disabilities with their families. These relationships should be marked with a readiness to come to each other's aid, to share activities, to live in mutual positive relations. Motivation for community building should come from the sense of friendship and solidarity with others, which does not have to particularly address the disabled. It may well be that support and care can come from people with disabilities and be addressed to others in need. All Christians share a vocation to bear witness by practising fraternal love. They should show interest and concern for one another, regardless of their own limitations. Both the openness of ministers and of the able-bodied faithful directs the community towards formal and functional inclusion. Irrespective of deficits, everyone is obliged to build relationships based on mutual respect, empathy and support. However, it is important that this support takes place in a spirit of reciprocity and respect, avoiding excessive dependences. Praying together, participating in Masses and various pastoral activities can help build bridges between the disabled and the able-bodied in the Church. The formation of the Church community is the task for all its members, regardless of disabilities. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to an atmosphere of acceptance, solidarity and love in the Church. The formation of parishioners involves providing encouragement to all,

¹⁷ The literature on the subject most often focuses on a two-actor approach: See: Dariusz Lipiec, "Counteracting the Marginalisation of the Disabled in the Communal Life of the Church," *Polonia Sacra* 22 no. 4 (53) (2018): 135–149, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/ps.2634>

since it should be noted that everyone in the community is equal, everyone has needs, but everyone should also feel empowered and needed.

CONCLUSIONS

The satisfactory level of involvement and openness of the Church to all those invited to be in the Church depends on the cooperation of the actors within the Active Church triad. Everyone bears their share of responsibility for the cooperation with the other stakeholders and its quality. Without relationships, communication, efforts to comprehend each other's needs, possibilities and getting to know each other, cooperation is not possible. There is no other, better way than to get to know each other through cooperation and communication. Therefore, whether and to what extent people with disabilities and/or their carers articulate their needs will influence the level of openness not solely of ministers, but of the whole Church community they preside. An Active Church is a Church that is open to all, so all are invited to work out their mode of participation. They are also called to take responsibility for the form and intensity of that participation, and for the level of inclusiveness the Church is able to reach. The community-forming dimension of pastoral activities also manifests itself in the community integration by a minister, calling for the disabled, the able-bodied and their families with the loved ones to be together.

The Active Church Concept is an invitation, as Pope Francis has put it, to walk together and listen to each other, understanding that in the Church there is not *us* and *them*, but that we are all *us*, where everyone brings their gifts and their limitations. This awareness, rooted in the fact that we are all part of the same vulnerable humankind, eliminates arbitrary divides, and opens the door to the participation in the life of the Church of every baptised person.

The results obtained from the research allow the conclusion that the intensity of the involvement of people with disabilities in parish life depends not only on their level of religiosity, but to a large extent on the level of trust towards the institutions of the Church, the accessibility of parish infrastructure as well as Church events adapted to the needs of the disabled. This means that all people (able-bodied and disabled) can be ad-

dressees of the activities planned for them by others, but they can themselves - to the limits of their individual capacities – enjoy their right, if not a duty, to get involved in the life and growth of their parish community. The parish, on the other hand, creates opportunities and conditions for their multidimensional engagement. The proposed Active Church Concept can lay the foundations for building an appropriate model for the active participation people with disabilities in the Church community.

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