



**THE SALVATION ARMY**  
INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT

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**DISABILITIES**



## STATEMENT OF POSITION

All people are made in the image of God and are of equal intrinsic value. Thus, The Salvation Army celebrates difference and seeks to treat all people with dignity and respect.

Many people around the world experience discrimination due to disabilities. The reality ranges from stigma or negative attitudes to deeply engrained and systemic exclusion. The Salvation Army's response is to go beyond minimum national legal requirements and to make it possible for persons with disabilities to be fully included and to flourish.

We know less of who God is and how God appears in the world when people with disabilities are excluded. Inclusion is beneficial for everyone. Diversity within our communities and congregations strengthens us and shapes our mission and ministry. The aim of all Salvationist practice is to ensure that we are a church that makes the embodied gospel accessible for all.



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Disability is an historical, contemporary, cultural and global reality. It is estimated that approximately one billion people live with a disability.<sup>1</sup> People with disabilities continue to face oppression in terms of injustice, economic deprivation, abuse, stigmatisation and discrimination. In some contexts, women with disabilities are multiply disadvantaged, many children with disabilities do not attend school, and children with disabilities may die at four times the rate of others. In many parts of the world, disability legislation does not exist.<sup>2</sup>

The word 'disability' can be understood as an umbrella term that includes both personal impairments,<sup>3</sup> and the societal restrictions experienced by people living with a disability. In general, 'impairment' is understood in medical terms and 'disability' as an expression of the exclusion between people living with disabilities and wider society. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's whole being

1 [www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability](http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability)

2 [www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html)

3 WHO, *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (Geneva WHO, 2001), 10. 'Impairments are problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss.'

(body and mind) and features of the society in which he or she lives.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous causes for the global reality of disability can be identified. These include, but are not limited to, accidents, poverty, injuries related to war and violence, pollution, cultural practices, birth defects, ageing and degenerative diseases. Addressing the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires a combination of medical, social, environmental and cultural interventions.

Language plays a significant role in shaping narratives around disability, and there are differences regarding how people with disabilities self-identify. In seeking to communicate the depth of our desire for inclusion, The Salvation Army strives to use the term 'persons with disabilities', an example of 'people-first' language, intended to highlight personhood first rather than the condition of the person.<sup>5</sup>

4 Article 1 of the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' states, 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.' <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>

5 People-first language, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People-first\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People-first_language)



Among others, three commonly understood models of disability help us understand and respond to the reality of disability. For example, the Medical Model organises disability around the themes of medical intervention, cure, rehabilitation services and personal limitation. The Social Model understands disability as limitation or disadvantage caused by societal structures and attitudes, while the Cultural Model highlights the interaction of various notions of disability within a given cultural setting. Meaning is then attributed to disability from within, or across cultural traditions. In some cultural settings people with disabilities are considered less than human, or are considered to be disabled because of evil spirits, curses or sins.<sup>6</sup>

Various international bodies are involved in the pursuit of improved outcomes for people living with disabilities. In 2008, the United Nations (UN) 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' was ratified by 157 countries. Amongst other things it promotes respect for the inherent dignity of people with disabilities. In looking towards 2030 and addressing global challenges while seeking to 'leave no-one behind', many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals speak directly to the

6 United Nations Division for Social Policy Development Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Toolkit on Disability for Africa: Culture, Beliefs, and Disability*, p.5. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/disability/Toolkit/Cultures-Beliefs-Disability.pdf>

difficulties encountered by people living with disabilities.<sup>7</sup> The World Council of Churches also signals the marginalisation that people with disabilities experience within the church itself and calls for 'A Church of All and for All'.<sup>8</sup>

7 [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/), in particular #8 and #10

8 World Council of Churches, Gift of Being: Called to be a Church of All and for All, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2016/the-gift-of-being>; World Council of Churches, 14 October 2014 Churches to be more inclusive of persons with disabilities [press release] [www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/churches-to-be-more-inclusive-of-persons-with-disabilities](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/churches-to-be-more-inclusive-of-persons-with-disabilities)



## FOUNDATIONS FOR THE POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY

All human beings are created in God's own image, uniquely reflecting God's nature and character (Genesis 1:27-31). God's creation is signified by diversity and that diversity is good (Genesis 1:31; Psalm 8). God loves and values every person, giving each one equal dignity and worth, and commanding us to love and value each other.

The Bible tells the story of a God who values those who are outcast, powerless and weak in the eyes of society. While reflecting the context of its day, Scripture recognises the real experience of exclusion that can result from disability (Luke 17:11-19). The Bible acknowledges pain and hardship as a part of the human condition (e.g. in the Book of Job). Paul states that when we are weak, God makes us strong (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus showed compassion for people with disabilities (Mark 1:41, Matthew 9:20-25) and urged his followers to do likewise (Luke 14:12-14). He corrected the assumption that disability was caused by the sin of a person or their parents (John 9:1-3), and he challenged social stigma by touching and eating with the socially marginalised (Matthew 9:27-30; Luke 19:1-10). God's creative intention is that we are fulfilled in community, living in relationship with God and each other. Paul described the community of the Church as a body, stating that 'those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable' (1 Corinthians 12:22 NIV). The perceived weaker members help to shape our knowledge of God, and without them we are less. In order to know God more fully, everyone needs to be fully included. The gift of being is profound. It is only together with all the saints that we can comprehend the love of God (Ephesians 3:18).

In its international mission statement, The Salvation Army declares it will meet human needs in the name of Jesus 'without discrimination'.<sup>9</sup> The Handbook of Doctrine describes the ideal of The Salvation Army's third doctrine as 'God-in-community who reaches out to create community. It is the very basis of the inclusive gospel. From its beginning, The Salvation Army has consistently proclaimed this gospel, calling people of all nations to respond to the love of God. We seek to include and welcome into the family of God those who feel themselves to be excluded from society.'<sup>10</sup> It is the aim of all Salvationist practice to create communities 'which reflect the inclusiveness, genuine acceptance and mutual love of the triune God.'<sup>11</sup> It follows that we are not a complete church if people with disabilities are not among us.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/Mission>

<sup>10</sup> *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* (2010), p. 75

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76



## PRACTICAL RESPONSES

The Salvation Army recognises the contribution of those actively engaged in addressing issues of ignorance, neglect or discrimination against people living with a disability. One of the primary desires of people living with observable or invisible disabilities is to be treated as ordinary human beings, created in God's image and called to dwell in mutually supportive communities. In most instances, to respond to this desire will require a collective shift in attitudes of both heart and mind. Such attitudes and responses can be promoted, modelled and taught, to a certain extent. The goal of any response should be to eliminate a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. Drawing on its theological understanding of God's view of people with disabilities, The Salvation Army notes the following:

1. The Salvation Army recognises the breadth of international advocacy regarding the human rights of people with disabilities, and seeks to better contribute to that advocacy, particularly in regard to the elimination of poverty and discrimination towards people with disabilities.
2. The Salvation Army embraces, promotes and models an understanding of persons with disabilities as people created in the image of God, with a unique and invaluable contribution to make in all aspects of life in community.
3. The Salvation Army fosters reciprocal ministry rather than the temporarily able-bodied ministering to people with disabilities. We are stronger together when we integrate every person into every fibre of our worship and mission.
4. The Salvation Army seeks the engagement, consultation and active involvement of people with disability when developing and framing general Salvation Army policies, human resource policies, as well as those specific to disability.
5. The Salvation Army acknowledges that the following aspects and considerations in relation to disabilities are a necessary part of its ongoing commitment to enabling all of God's children to flourish within the Body of Christ:
  - Raising awareness
  - Engaging in specific training
  - Employing universal building design
  - Embracing recognised 'best practice' communication preferences and initiatives.
6. The Salvation Army community is encouraged to have a greater understanding of the interdependence and mutuality inherent in supporting each other through the journey of life. We seek to respect the autonomy and self-determination of all people.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brock, Brian, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2019.

Shurley, Anna Katherine, *Pastoral Care and Intellectual Disability: A Person-Centered Approach*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2017.

Solevåg, Anna Rebecca, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts*, SBL Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 2018.

Yong, Amos, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011.

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### Approved by the General, October 2020

The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters.

