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The Church and Disability Justice: A Review of My Body is Not a Prayer Request

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The Church and Disability Justice: A Review of *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*

Abstract

"You can choose to live in a way that reflects the belief that every person bears the image of God, regardless of ability or achievement."

Posting about the book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-church-and-disability-justice-a-review-of-my-body-is-not-a-prayer-request/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

The Church and Disability Justice: A Review of *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*

Kathleen Van Tol

July 6, 2022

Title: *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*

Author: Amy Kenny

Publisher: Brazos Press

Publishing Date: May 17, 2022

Pages: 208 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1587435669

In her book *My Body is not a Prayer Request*, Amy Kenny provides a thorough and honest look at what it means for the church community to engage in disability justice. If you are looking for a book that will make you feel good about your church's ministry to people with disabilities, this is almost certainly not the book for you. Instead, this is a book that will likely make you feel uncomfortable and troubled, but that will also convict you that we need to do better.

As Kenny recounts stories of people approaching her, desiring to pray away her disability or suggesting that if she only had more faith she wouldn't be disabled, she reminds us that her body is already a temple for the Holy Spirit. She does not need to be free of disability to display the image of God, and being disabled does not limit God's ability to work through her life. She says, "I am many things, but a tragic defeat is not one of them"¹. While Kenny doesn't want us to view her and others with disabilities through a deficit lens that only considers what she cannot do, she also doesn't want to dismiss the fact that having a disability is hard. She doesn't want to be pitied, but she also doesn't want to "pretend that disability is all smiles with no space for suffering."²

Kenny calls out churches for claiming to be pro-life while limiting our representation of what an abundant life looks like. She states that when we create separate ministries to people with disabilities, we turn them into objects of pity or charity rather than seeing them as image-bearers with gifts to share with the entire church community. When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, ensuring equal access for persons with disabilities, religious institutions were exempt from compliance as a result of protests by Christian leaders. Kenny says, "The erasure of disability in church spaces was deliberately manufactured because disabled people were (and still are) considered too pricey and profane to include. Knowing that

houses of worship argued that including my body is offensive to their religious liberty will always sting.”³

Often people with disabilities are excluded by the church community, not as a result of vindictiveness, but through neglect. We simply don’t think about access for those with disabilities. Obviously, this is something that needs to change, but Kenny goes a step further. She advocates that we must go beyond simply providing access, and instead invite all people to fully belong. Just as ADA requirements such as curb cuts and elevators make public spaces more accessible for everyone, not just those with disabilities, church communities need to build in access that will “foster mutual flourishing for disabled and nondisabled people alike.”⁴ She points out that there is much we can learn from being together in community. Those with disabilities have already learned that they cannot rely entirely on themselves. In the same way, all members of the church community need to learn to trust and depend on God rather than relying on our own individual strength.

Kenny does not only identify discrimination that occurs in the church community, but she also shares stories of the discrimination she endured in many other community settings. She was often denied reasonable accommodations in school, despite there being clear laws to protect and support students with disabilities. She has regularly been subjected to extra scrutiny when using disability services such as handicapped parking or accessible entrances, to ensure she is not “taking advantage of the system.” She rightly asks, “Why would anyone fake disability?”⁵ She points out that there is little to gain from doing so: most people with disabilities are unemployed, and the majority of those who aren’t make less money than those who are not disabled. “The system” prevents people with disabilities from getting married or having assets with a total worth of more than \$2000. Between 60% and 80% of polling places are not handicap accessible, even though the law guaranteeing the right to accessible voting has been in place for more than 30 years.

Kenny suggests that instead of trying to pray away disability, churches should consider how to better provide support. There are many expenses related to having a disability. Could churches make sure that these people could afford the care they need? Could we recognize that we are all dependent on each other for survival? Kenny herself depends on a mobility device to move easily through her environment. We might not all require the same level of help, but we are still dependent on each other in many ways. She points out that most of us drink coffee, but don’t grow our own coffee beans. We wear clothes, but don’t sew them all ourselves. We use cell phones, computers, and other technology, but did not create it ourselves. “It’s simply that we’ve collectively decided which aspects of interdependence are more socially acceptable than others.”⁶

Ableism is so woven into our culture and practices that we often do not even notice it. Even if you do not support ableism, it is still there and perfectly capable of injuring those with disabilities. Kenny points out that prior to reading this book, you might not have been aware that this discrimination existed. However, now that you can recognize it, you can choose to stop

it from occurring. You can choose to live in a way that reflects the belief that every person bears the image of God, regardless of ability or achievement. If that sounds like the type of Christian person you want to be and the type of church community you want to belong to, I highly recommend you read this book.

1. p. 3
2. p. 116
3. p. 29
4. p. 137
5. p. 44
6. p. 84