

# **Disability and Mennonite Theologies: Resisting “Normal” as Justice Anytime and in a Global Pandemic**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The injustices brought to light by a pandemic like COVID-19 are pervasive and persistent for many people, including those with disabilities. These injustices are not merely the products of a pandemic; they are features of systemic marginalization based on cultural descriptions of “normal” that take socially constructed attributions of value and hold them up as standards for all people’s bodies. Disability theology and Anabaptist theology resist the culture of “normal.” These theologies call for a recognition of human value that works to move systems toward a “normal” that is just for all, in a time of a pandemic and in all times.

## **Introduction**

Words spoken in the critical moments that led to my aunt’s death haunt me to this day. I can still see the doctors in blue surgical coverings standing in the cove outside the ICU, facing us, her family. “Look, we have a woman with Down Syndrome here,” were the first words out of the lead doctor’s mouth. I heard everything else that was said, but those words punctuated every sentence for me. She was suffering; they needed to decide on a path and act quickly. Based on the doctors’ picture of what was happening, we agreed that we had to say goodbye, then held her and sang to her. One solitary tear lay on her cheek as she took her last breath. I recount those moments in my head like all of us standing there that day, convinced in the moment that it was the right choice. But the framing the doctor’s words gave to her death is the beginning of the haunt: “We have a woman with Down Syndrome here.”

Diagnosis can surely offer a medical professional information that bends the calculus of determinations when making end-of-life choices in the ICU. I have tremendous respect for the medical professionals who must make such calls every day, even when their training (or lack thereof) leads

them to begin a family conversation in such a sterile way. But that framing has led me to more than a decade of reconciling with not only my aunt's death but the way she died. The doctor's opening statement and tone did not acknowledge our grief. Nor did it regard the incredibly high quality of life she had, one steeped in deep relationship with a community that extended far beyond those hospital walls with others who knew every ounce of her worth, purpose, and agency in the world.

Mennonite and disability theology communities and lines of thought have been a part of that reconciling work for me.<sup>1</sup> This is mostly due to how these theologies align in approaches to human worth, resistance to cultural concepts of "normal," and how interdependence and community guide the work of justice, prioritized for the most vulnerable within unjust societal systems. These guiding theological dispositions not only stand as a witness in the midst of contemporary pandemic realities, including some framings of persons with disabilities as more expendable than others, but also serve as principles for action and decision-making that militate against a culture of what is "normal" at any time, including a global pandemic.

### **Primed for Theological Response: The Current Backdrop**

Today, medical resources are scarce everywhere and concerns over healthcare rationing are heightened for persons with disabilities. In certain American states, policies have been drafted in which such conditions as "mental retardation" and "dementia" could move someone to a lower rung of the access-to-care ladder.<sup>2</sup> These policies may derive from Western capitalist assumptions about "normal" lives that describe human worth and quality of life in terms of ability and productivity, efficiency, and capacity. Just as important, they derive from the uncomfortable but unavoidable recognition of human fragility that COVID-19 has forced upon society at large, and from an accompanying desire to get everything back to "normal" as quickly as possible. Many disability rights groups have responded to these policies,

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<sup>1</sup> Because my education and location in the Anabaptist tradition are rooted specifically within Mennonite Church USA and the Central District Conference, for the purposes of this essay I will refer to "Mennonite" theology exclusively.

<sup>2</sup> Minyvonne Burke, "Ventilators Limited for the Disabled? Rationing plans are slammed amid coronavirus crisis," NBCNews, March 27, 2020: [www.nbcnews.com](http://www.nbcnews.com).

citing laws that protect individuals with disabilities from discriminatory policies and procedures. Standing alongside those groups are theologies of many faith traditions, including Christian churches.

Ethicists warn that without specific guidelines designed for each state, the decisions of doctors may be influenced by unconscious bias against ethnic minorities, people with mental disabilities, and other groups. “This has been the most alarming concern for people with disabilities all around the world,” observes Catalina Devandas, the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities. “The highlight of this drama is that it seems to be the default reasoning of the mainstream society: The lives of persons with disabilities are not considered to be of as much value.”<sup>3</sup> Disability and religious scholar Rabbi Julia Watts Belser notes that disabled bodies have long borne the brunt of the politics of triage and medical rationing; “We live—so many of us—with the visceral knowledge that our lives are valued less.”<sup>4</sup> The National Disability Institute polled persons with disabilities across the US near the beginning of the pandemic; 60 percent said that they were very concerned about being adversely affected by healthcare rationing.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, self-advocates filed a complaint on rationing plans by hospitals early in the pandemic, with the Chair of Self Advocates in Leadership stating that “intellectually disabled people get denied care because of being seen as lacking value.”<sup>6</sup>

How society at large responds to persons with disabilities of many kinds has changed over time, largely due to the efforts of disability rights groups, advocacy, and the emergence of disability theology coming up against the tension of faith communities being exempt from the laws of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Many of these efforts have

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<sup>3</sup> David Kirkpatrick and Benjamin Mueller, “U.K. Backs Off Medical Rationing Plan as Coronavirus Rages,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/world/europe/britain-coronavirus-triage.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Watts Belser, “Disability and the Politics of Vulnerability,” Berkley Forum, Berkley Center, Georgetown University, April 15, 2020: [www.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu](http://www.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu).

<sup>5</sup> Coronavirus Listening Sessions Polls—Questions and Results, March 25, 2020, [www.nationaldisability.org](http://www.nationaldisability.org).

<sup>6</sup> Pam Katz, “Disability Discrimination Complaint Filed Over COVID-19 Treatment Rationing Plan in Washington State,” March 23, 2020: <https://thearc.org/disability-discrimination-complaint-filed-over-covid-19-treatment-rationing-plan-in-washington-state/>.

pushed against notions of “normal” in terms of both bodies and cultural attitudes. COVID-19 has laid bare the “normal” structures of injustice in US society that many people have been privileged to ignore, and against which both disability and Mennonite theologies speak.<sup>7</sup> These injustices are not merely the products of a pandemic; they are instead features of a system that depends on the systematic marginalization of some people in order to maximize efficiencies for others.

### **Deconstructing “Normal” in Disability Theology**

Theological anthropology asks the question, “What does it mean to be human, given the self-revelation of God?” Disability theologians in the Christian tradition underscore ways of being human in the image of God that are embodied beyond traditional norms. For instance, John Swinton states that “disability is a mode of human experience within which our accepted norms are challenged and reshaped as we encounter the fullness of what it means to be a human being in the rich diversity of God’s image.”<sup>8</sup> Hans Reinders contends that the truth about human beings is “grounded in God’s unconditional acceptance,” suggesting that theological anthropology should not begin in views about rationality, physical capacity, or even in an abstract account of relationship, but rather in commitments to each other, commitments that begin with bodies.<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this contention. The space our bodies occupy means that our presence with each other is bodily. Thomas Reynolds observes that the integrity of the human is “neither a function of exchange value and productive ability nor a spiritualized body, but rather is based on God’s

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<sup>7</sup> The injustices brought into view are pervasive and persistent against not just those with disabilities but many groups. This essay focuses on the experience of disability, but injustices toward especially black and brown bodies, the poor, those living in crowded conditions, queer persons, those with chronic illness and many more intersections, continue to be brought to light as the pandemic has moved on.

<sup>8</sup> John Swinton, “Many Bodies, Many Worlds,” Baylor University Christian Reflection Project, 2012, 18; <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=92612>.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 3. This idea is echoed by echoed by Nancy Eiesland in *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 91.

unconditional regard.”<sup>10</sup>

Early in the discourse of disability theology, Nancy Eiesland pointed to the embodiment of Christ as crucial to an understanding of humanity in light of disability. She referenced Luke 24:36-39, where Jesus appears to his disciples after his death and resurrection and builds a theological anthropology. The resurrected Christ proclaims that

God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.<sup>11</sup>

With disability compatible with full personhood through these theological lenses, the idea that disabled and other marginalized bodies are deemed not worthy, or not as worthy as others, is therefore the thing that is most “not-normal” and that calls for resistance within the systems driving definitions of “the norm.”

The term “normate” was first coined by disability studies leader Rosemarie Garland Thomson, who, according to author Kerry Wynn, used it to refer to the “socially constructed ideal image ‘through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings.’”<sup>12</sup> Amos Yong expands on Thomson’s definition; for him, “normate biases” denote the “unexamined prejudices that non-disabled people have toward disability and toward people

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Reynolds, “The Cult of Normalcy,” Baylor University Christian Reflection Project, 2012, 202; <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=92612>.

<sup>11</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives,” in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 92.

who have them,” and that these assumptions function so normatively that the inferior status of people with disabilities is inscribed into the consciousness of society. He argues that “non-disabled people take their experiences of the world as normal, thereby marginalizing and excluding the experiences of people with disabilities as not normal.”<sup>13</sup> Normate perspectives are then presumed adequate for measuring the experience of anyone and everyone. Yong’s description of normate bias in the context of disability studies has obvious analogies to similar discourses about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and postcoloniality, but as Carolyn Thompson points out, disability is often left out of discourses about justice in which race, class, and gender are givens.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the reason for that, persons with disabilities experience the injustice of ableism. It takes the form of what Iris Marion Young calls the “Five Faces of Oppression”: cultural imperialism, marginalization, powerlessness, exploitation, and violence.<sup>15</sup> Young states that those with disabilities are typically oppressed by marginalization and cultural imperialism, including the kind of imperialism that generates cultural obliviousness toward disability as a social construct.<sup>16</sup> This may be why some people may read healthcare policy rationing during a pandemic and agree without giving it a critical thought: “We are loathe to admit that oppression might be something in which we ourselves unknowingly participate, a structural system of constraints on certain groups of people.”<sup>17</sup> Just as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of sociopolitical and systemic domination name cultural attitudes perhaps more than the conscious beliefs of individuals, so also ableism is a set of negative stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes, and economic and sociopolitical structures and institutions that, when operating in tandem,

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<sup>13</sup> Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 10-11. This is often true of many Christian and Mennonite churches, even as they are sympathetic to the needs of all their members.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Thompson, “Ableism: The Face of Oppression as Experienced by People with Disabilities,” in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 212.

<sup>15</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” *Philosophical Forum* 19, no. 4 (1988): 270-90.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, “Ableism,” 213.

create exclusionary mechanisms that bar persons with disabilities from active participation in society—or from receiving equal access to medical care.<sup>18</sup> Ableism, like other forms of structural domination, need not be overt or even the result of negative intentions.

Regardless of the extent to which ableist prejudices are conscious, their effects can define a person in terms of appearance or limitation and can be used as a prejudicial measure of the person's worth, resulting in the person being judged by what they are not and reduced to a stereotype that carries the burden of stigma.<sup>19</sup> Medical decisions based on the idea of "impairment" are highly influenced not by medical professionals alone but other forces, especially insurance. Relying on the work of social theorist Michael Ralph to look at the origins of "impairment" from abolitionist times, and what forces have driven policies such as those named in this essay, Alex Sider explains that the concept of impairment is a construction depending on social arrangements and expectations, and not a neutral description. Rather it is "forged in the fires of policy debate and the drive to monetize the value of human life. The struggle to define impairment has positive consequences for some people and negative, dehumanizing ones for others."<sup>20</sup>

The debate over human life in many Western systems and beyond, under our systemic frameworks, is indeed monetized. This example of cultural ableism points to a certain kind of "cult of normalcy" that "takes the exchange values associated with bodily appearance and function . . . how useful, productive, or valuable certain bodies are in particular social exchanges—and it routinizes them through systems of power,"<sup>21</sup> says Tom Reynolds. A cult of normalcy takes socially constructed attributions of value from particulars and holds them up as standards for all people's bodies. Such perceptions are surely at play when rationing policies, however well-intentioned, are created in a crisis, but the point is that these perceptions are at play generally, at all times and in all places. They are not the product of a crisis.

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<sup>18</sup> Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Sider, "Among the Pains: Christianity, Disability and Healing," *Mennonite Health Journal* 19, no. 14 (2018); <https://mennohealth.org/2018/10/among-the-pains/>.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, "The Cult of Normalcy," 28.

Indeed, the cult of normalcy is even at play in the way that persons with disabilities are constrained to self-identify. Deborah Creamer observes that disability identity depends largely on the interpretation of others:

One is disabled insofar as he or she appears disabled . . . to be disabled is to be labeled so, typically by a medical practitioner or . . . agency. . . . To be a person with a disability has much to do with the extent and degree to which one is understood or treated as having a disability. Disability identity also depends on societal understandings of normal.<sup>22</sup>

As Bill Gaventa, the Founder and Director Emeritus of the Institute for Theology and Disability has written, some of the “not-so-good” highlights of the US responses to COVID-19 are convincing evidence of “the shadowy side of a capitalist economy that a little too cavalierly forms assumptions that people’s worth depends on their ‘usefulness’ or ‘productivity.’”<sup>23</sup> The witness of theologies using different lenses speaks into these times and serves as a call to solidarity and action.

### **Concepts of Normal and Human Worth**

Mennonite theology by nature pushes against cultural notions of “normal.” Historians classify early Anabaptists as “radical reformers,” alongside many others who emerged out of the reformation of the 16th century. They were a collection of pacifists, tightly knit communities, and biblical literalists, some encouraging withdrawal from society.<sup>24</sup> A history of being radical reformers and of worshiping in hidden churches, of ongoing resistance in a culture of violence, power, and wealth that pervades Western society, and of holding the value of living simply so that others may simply live, have long left Mennonites questioning the meaning of “normal” in mainstream culture. This understanding of human value lies in Scriptural accounts of creation and in how humankind being made in “the image of God” resonates in Jesus’ way

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Bill Gaventa, “Jotting down thoughts, glimpses, while sheltering in place,” *Waco [Texas] Herald-Tribune*, April 4, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> William Placher and Derek Nelson, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 162.



of living and loving, bringing the most vulnerable or socially marginalized into the center of community. In the contemporary *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the first article, “We believe that the universe has been called into being as an expression of God’s love and sovereign freedom alone,” is followed by a statement aligning with disability theology based on the belief that all humans are created in the image of God and therefore have a sacred dignity that speaks beyond limiting—or life-threatening—societal norms:<sup>25</sup>

We believe that God has created human beings in the divine image. God formed them from the dust of the earth and gave them a special dignity among all the works of creation. Human beings have been made for relationship with God to live in peace with each other, and to take care of the rest of creation. We believe that human beings were created good, in the image of God.<sup>26</sup>

These beliefs stress the ways human beings are called “into being as an expression of God’s love” and are created “good.”

Moreover, Menno Simons himself pointed especially to the Sermon on the Mount as setting forth what is normative for the Christian life. Leaders in the Anabaptist tradition treat commitments to justice, nonviolence, and peace, and to following the life and acts of Jesus as central to the faith, all instructive to followers who push against cultural norms. While Anabaptists see the Scriptures as the ultimate source of information, they regard Jesus as the final authority for faith and life and his ways as guiding their ways of being and ordering the world. These beliefs are lived out in calls and practices that affirm the value and interconnectedness of human life and non-human life as part of the sacredness of God’s creation. However, as Belser points out, for any religious tradition “[p]roclaiming the infinite value of each and every individual as an image of God is a powerful theological principle. But it’s cheap talk, unless it’s coupled with a deeper commitment to reckon with the concrete ways disabled people’s lives are harmed by ableism,

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<sup>25</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 1995, Article 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 6.

racism, poverty, and structural violence.<sup>27</sup> A deeper commitment rooted in theological principles is woven throughout many Mennonite practices and ideals of community, but it must be continually revisited at congregational and denominational levels.<sup>28</sup>

### **Interdependence and Community in Both Theologies**

Disability theology doesn't necessarily teach that because a person has a disability they are in greater need of other people; instead, it argues that "because I am a person, I need other persons, and so do you." Our interdependence and the need for community while living through a pandemic are very clear, flipping the sense of "normal" upside down and questioning stereotypes. We rely on others to meet our basic needs, and others rely on our relying.

Disability theologian Kathy Black offers a theology of interdependence that speaks to this. She states that we are "all interconnected and interdependent upon one another so that what we do affects the lives of others and the earth itself."<sup>29</sup> Commenting on the norms of Western, specifically US, culture she says, "The American motto of independence says that persons should be able to take care of themselves and not have to depend on society for basic survival and quality of life."<sup>30</sup> Not only is this not realistic, it is also not how the apostle Paul saw the body of Christ. The church as Christ's body is a place where members offer gifts to each other (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Not surprisingly, one of the favorite images of the Mennonite church is as "the body of Christ" with its works of love and service as extensions of Christ's ministry in the world, and everyone sharing their gifts.<sup>31</sup> Images of the church as one body are foundational to the faith, as distorted as it may be

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<sup>27</sup> Belser, "Disability and the Politics of Vulnerability."

<sup>28</sup> The space allotted to this essay does not permit identifying the kinds of challenges persons with disabilities face at congregational and denominational levels: accessibility, use of language, articles around baptism, opportunities for full participation and gift sharing, etc. The Anabaptist Disabilities Network works at these things: <https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org>.

<sup>29</sup> Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 41.

today. As Black asserts, Christian tradition is based on community and on our interdependence with God and one another:<sup>32</sup>

The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and God has so arranged the body, the community of believers, that the members may have the same care for one another. It is this interdependency in the midst of a culture that highly values independence that sets us apart.<sup>33</sup>

Within disability theology, Black and other writers acknowledge that theologies of interdependence honor the value of all individuals by reference to who they are and not by what they do. At an annual meeting of the European Society for the Study of Theology and Disability, Alex Sider highlighted the necessity of noncompetition for full human flourishing within interdependence, stating that human beings “depend on the cultivation of noncompetitive relationships that require interdependence in vulnerability, acceptance of others, and a vision of fully human life compatible with and modeled in the experience of disability.”<sup>34</sup> At the very basic bodily level, everyone is vulnerable. Vulnerability as a “normal” experience is not a cultural norm; in fact, as Belser points out, a slow response to the pandemic was the result of this near denial, with “young and healthy” people carrying on without concern in the early days, behavior that has ramifications especially for the most vulnerable within systems that wish to wipe out notions of vulnerability for a more acceptable norm.<sup>35</sup> Access to medical care for those deemed most vulnerable in any crisis, including the current pandemic, therefore should not be in question theologically.

Similarly, Mennonites aspire to value service to those in need over pursuit of wealth, fame, or power, as a current basic information website explains.<sup>36</sup> One resolution adopted at a national MCUSA convention in 2013,

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<sup>32</sup> Black, *A Healing Homiletic*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Sider, “On Becoming Human: Jean Vanier, Carl Rogers and James Alison on Disabilities, Acceptance and a Noncompetitive Theological Anthropology,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 16, no. 1 (2012): 16-32.

<sup>35</sup> For more on this point and vulnerability in this time, see Belser, “The Politics of Vulnerability.”

<sup>36</sup> See “Who are the Mennonites?” <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/mennonite-resolutions-and-confessions/>.

for example, makes the case: “According to our Anabaptist understanding of Biblical faith, and our denominational vision statement, we strive to follow Jesus in word and deed. . . . We also know that Jesus declared stern consequences for harming those who are vulnerable.”<sup>37</sup> That harm begins when systems root themselves in power, wealth, or fame. A quick panorama of the church living into its theologies as a whole spans local congregational practices and global projects. The witness in Mennonite thought and practice to “who is my neighbor” (anybody), or “who does God bless” (the whole world) resists “normal” definitions as laid out by society, government, or state, and questions the meaning of borders and neighbors in a pandemic. Note, for example, the number of US Mennonite congregations resisting federal definitions around immigration and providing sanctuary, or the other practices that are case studies for faith in action.<sup>38</sup> In living theology by being a neighbor, Mennonites affirm the worth of persons: we care for and with the whole world, no exceptions; all of creation is *good*.<sup>39</sup> These principles clearly align with disability theology’s ways of understanding the worth of persons, at a minimum, to seek to assure equal access to healthcare and other rights, and resist the temptation of making easy determinations when healthcare systems face a national and global crisis.

## Conclusion

The examples above illustrate the values of justice arising from a desire to follow the ways of Jesus in bringing God’s love into the world, and guide a Mennonite response during the COVID-19 crisis by providing monetary resources, donating blood, sewing masks, growing food, volunteering on the front lines, and ensuring care alongside many others with different religious

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<sup>37</sup> Protecting and Nurturing our Children and Youth. Mennonite Resolution, 2013. <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/mennonite-resolutions-and-confessions/>.

<sup>38</sup> See Kayla Berkey and Mennonite Church USA, “Offering Sanctuary, Churches Put Words into Practice,” Mennonite World Review, July 29, 2019: <http://mennoworld.org/2019/07/29/news/offering-sanctuary-churches-put-words-into-practice/>. Further, amid heightened racial and ethnic tensions in the US, “Welcome Your Neighbors” signs became a national visible witness to neighborliness, started by a Mennonite pastor. See <https://franconiaconference.org/tag/conference-news/page/15/>.

<sup>39</sup> Consider Mennonite Central Committee ([www.mcc.org](http://www.mcc.org)), Ten Thousand Villages ([www.tenthousandvillages.org](http://www.tenthousandvillages.org)), Mennonite Disaster Service ([www.mds.mennonite.net](http://www.mds.mennonite.net)), and Mennonite Mission Network ([www.mennonitemission.net](http://www.mennonitemission.net)) as examples.

motivations. Mennonite organizations dedicated to health have responded, such as the Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship, which promotes healthcare access for all, and insist that the most vulnerable have access not only to care but to the *best* care, not just in times of crisis but especially in such times.<sup>40</sup>

Disability theologies call church members to stay awake, to pay attention, and to resist the systems of oppression facing the most vulnerable. As Nancy Eiesland, one of the earliest voices in the field, put it: “We are called to be people who work for justice and access for all and who incorporate the body practices of justice and access as part of ordinary lives.”<sup>41</sup> Echoing her words is the Vision of Healing and Hope of Mennonite Church USA, which many congregations use as a guide for action and theological meaning: “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”<sup>42</sup>

These theologies provide the groundwork for justice that allows for God’s hope and healing to move through the world. As calls for a “return to normal” echo across society, they call for a recognition of human value that goes beyond cheap talk and works to move systems toward a “normal” that is more just for all, in a time of a pandemic and in all times.

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<sup>40</sup>“Tips for Pandemic Living,” Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship, March 30, 2020. <https://mennohealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Pandemic-Tips-for-Living-20200403.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> *Vision of Healing and Hope*, Mennonite Church USA, adopted 2016: <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/vision-for-healing-and-hope/>.