

**REIMAGINING DISABILITY WITHIN NAGA COMMUNITY: DEVELOPING A
FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSION WITH HANS S. REINDERS' CONCEPT OF
FRIENDSHIP**

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Reimagining Disability within Naga Community: Developing a Framework for Inclusion with
Hans S. Reinders' Concept of Friendship

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Disability is a real experience and the Naga community in my observation has denoted it to be a transcendental cause far from human responsibility. It has led to seeing disabled persons as less than human. This has resulted in a collective social outlook against disability, which I believe Christian traditions and misrepresentation of scriptural teachings on disability have played a role in shaping the negative thoughts of the Naga community. An example is the tradition of evil and sin. Miguel J. Romero writes on Aquinas's concept of suffering and impairments which I quote- "It follows for Aquinas that insofar as a suffering Human being exists, that person is good and any evil suffered in the body by that person is a privation of that person's relative good as a human creature."¹ Romero defends Aquinas' suggestive theology of suffering as a corporeal sin, an outcome of a fallen world. He notes that many wrong interpretations of Aquinas's take on suffering and impairments have been made where he is wrongly assumed to be indicating a person who suffers or is afflicted has sinned and corrupted.² This example showcases how a tradition is transferred and misrepresented, in this case suffering as an effect of sin, corporeal turned to individual. Either way, we begin to see here the tradition of associating suffering with original sin has not been dissociated. Wati Longchar, a professor of systematic theology from Nagaland who specializes in Asian contextual theologies, stresses the existing Christian view of associating sin and disability where sin has tarnished holiness and perfection in the created order. This view assumes disability as the direct consequence of human sin and far from God's grace.³

Disability, as I used to think about a decade ago, is understood in terms of sin, punishment, and shame. This is due to how society in Nagaland, where I am from, viewed people with disability and how preachers preached on the issue. There is a dreadful uneasiness when it comes to imagining a life with the disabled. People, in my society, would do their best to avoid any situation that would place them in the presence of the disabled. This reality is not an isolated one and furthers the veracity of the marginalization and stigmatization people with disability face in

¹Miguel J. Romero, "Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds., Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 108.

² Miguel J. Romero, "Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace," 109.

³ Wati Longchar, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society," In *Doing Theology from Disability perspective*, eds., Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans (Manila: ATESEA, 2011), 216.

the Naga community. I have personally heard preachers in Naga Baptist Churches taking the story of David's infant child who died as a punishment from God for David's adultery in 2 Samuel 12 and relating it to a generational curse for disobedience and sinfulness, where disability is seen to fall under. Due to the departure of disability from normality, as an essence of divine cause, the negative social outlook has not been addressed in the Naga community and the Naga churches. It is a sad reality that the community still associates disability with curse and sin. This further validates the need to rethink the existing social perspective on disability in Naga Community and investigate the Christian traditions on disability. Often, the first discussion that comes up among my relatives and friends who are Christian Nagas, upon seeing a person with disability is - whose sin was it? What did he/she do to deserve this effect? For what reason did God curse him/her to live with this? Note that the underlying assumption in the Naga social context is that disability is a curse, and a curse is an outcome of sin, thus sometimes used interchangeably. These words associated with disability help to explain why pity and distance are common responses to disabled persons within the community.

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on disability studies in the context of Nagaland. Theologians have started to write about the issue of disability and critique theology itself as one of the perpetrators in vilifying disability. This means that my research is not the first of its kind but will be developed with the help of those who have done the research before. Cultural and social bias is an issue when it comes to dealing with disability. Along a similar line to my research concern, Wati Longchar and Bendanglemla Longkumer are Naga theologians in theological and religious studies who have contributed much to researching existing cultural disability views and lived realities of disabled persons. The above research has attributed Christian traditions and moral theology to have taken part in shaping the moral culture. This showcases the continuity of the problem to challenge the dominant existing views on disability and social exclusion for the Naga community is relevant to the broader academic concern which I will discuss in the next section further. It also includes the necessity to locate the study beyond academics to the social reality.

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is made up of five chapters in total of which three chapters will be the main body. While Chapters 1 and 5 are Introduction and Conclusion respectively, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are Positioning Disability in Nagaland, Reimagining Friendship, and Embodying Friendship respectively. In Chapter 2, I will explore the challenges people with disability face in Nagaland with the help of ego documents. I will also explore theological narratives that affect the perspectives on disability. I will further explore how social and political factors have shaped the position of the disabled in Nagaland. In Chapter 3, I will lay out friendship as a possible answer to the question of exclusion and marginalization of the disabled in Nagaland. For this, I will explore the thoughts of Hans S. Reinders and Aristotle. In Chapter 4, I will explore the implications of friendship in Nagaland with the help of L'Arche, an organization that has embodied the philosophy and principle of this concept of friendship.

1.3 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The primary aim of this research is to explore the reality of people with disability in Nagaland and to use friendship as conceptualized by Hans Reinders to foster a more inclusive society. This research aims to inform the readers about the present condition and state of people with disability in Nagaland. It also aims to make the readers aware of the Aristotelian concept of friendship that does not align with a Christian understanding of friendship. I am engaging with the concept of friendship from Hans S. Reinders who calls his own approach 'unapologetically theological' as the main focus to arrive at a reimagination of disability for the Naga community. Friendship according to Reinder's approach reveals the dependency, vulnerability, and relationality of all human beings to God and one another, regardless of physical and mental abilities, which can form a counterargument against Naga's conception of pity, distance, marginalization, and viewing disability as a divine punishment. This approach will also lead the research to new perspectives in understanding disability within the Naga community. I am also intrigued to uncover how the notion of friendship from Reinders in disability will showcase the humanity of every person regardless of physical or mental standing within society. As a result, the following questions emerge in the exploration of the subject.

1. What is the position of the disabled in Nagaland?

2. How can we imagine the concept of friendship around the discussions on disability?
3. In what ways is a theological conception of friendship able to change views on disability in the Naga Community?

For this research, I shall engage with scholars like Longchar and Reinders. Longchar is concerned with the silence of discourses on disabilities in the theological field. He has published much on the theological perspectives on disability from the concept of a disabled God, disability as cultural bias and the misrepresentation of disability as an effect of sin and curse. His work on *Disability Theology from Asia* and *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective* will be my primary focus. *Disability Theology from Asia* explores various dimensions interconnected with disability in Asian societies. The various aspects of social, religious, cultural, historical, biblical, theological, pastoral and legal issues are dealt with. *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective* identifies the limitations and possible discrimination due to the formulation of theology by the able-bodied people for the able-bodied people. This leads to marginalization of disabled community even in the theological explorations and furthers the social exclusion in the Church.

Longchar's emphasis on cultural beliefs, sin, and the cause of exclusion (disabilities) in perceiving disabilities as a consequence of sin relates closely to my research concern on Naga's misinterpretation of sin, curse, and punishment. Thus, I will develop most of the research analysis of associating sin and disability from Longchar's works. He touches on the social attitudes of Christians toward disability and calls for acceptance and inclusion. As far as my observance goes, his alternative to cultural bias toward disabilities as open-hearted acceptance as a duty of being a Christian highlight an obligation. This, I have to figure out along the research. Reinders is a professor of ethics and mental disability in religious studies. Reinders' notion of friendship is relational and develops from God's unconditional love and friendship as a gift. It is a free gift received and given with appreciation rather than obligation. The book *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* will be my primary resource. This book primarily deals with intellectual disability and tries to show how anthropology, ethics, and disability are related. It also dives into Christian theology and its relation to disability to showcase how these two have shaped each other and how it can be

developed further. It also explores the practical implications Reinders developed on theology and friendship. His main research concern is to develop a better understanding of the lived experiences of people with profound disabilities through the model of friendship to counter existing theological, anthropological, and ethical limitations. His rich and diverse engagement with the theological, anthropological, and ethical frameworks of disability will assist my problem specifically in relating to disabled persons in the Naga community. Reinders also notes that the negative experiences of disability exist due to social biases and not due to the disability per se, and friendship holds the key to solving the problem of exclusion and providing wholeness that theological, anthropological, and ethics have failed to solve.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

The research project gives the background of the existing conceptions of disability as a social bias based on Christian traditions and teachings existing in the Naga community. I will adopt a literature review as my methodology. I will also explore and engage with ego-document, blogs, and videos. In the first part (chapter 2), the background for the need to address preconceptions of disability is laid out to understand how the Naga community views disability using Longchar's work on disability. The second part (chapter 3) is dedicated to understanding the concept of friendship with the help of Hans S. Reinders as opposed to the Aristotelian concept of friendship. The third section (chapter 4) will seek to understand how this concept of friendship can be actualized with the help of L'Arche. In this organization, able-bodied people and intellectually disabled people live together and foster genuine relationships – one of which is friendship. I will then, seek to connect the friendship model of L'Arche with Nagaland, arguing for a social perspectival shift on disability. In the first section of the research, I will explore how Christian traditions play a role in the misrepresentation of disability that affects the experience of disabled persons. This first part seeks to answer the question - How do elements from the Christian tradition promote exclusion for people with disability? How do the people in the Naga community view disability according to Longchar? How the political and social arena has excluded people with disability? Within this section, I will elaborate on the tendency to socially exclude disabled persons in the Naga community and the issue of why the existence of cultural ideologies and Christian traditions on sin and disability is so significant for the exclusion of disability within the Naga community. After laying the background on how disability is

perceived and viewed in the community and discovering where it has stemmed from, I will proceed to introduce the notion of friendship in disability and discuss the friendship approach of Reinders in the third chapter. It will build on the approach of Reinders's concept of friendship based on sameness, interdependence, and vulnerability as opposed to theological concepts of God as an able and apathetic God. I will also contrast this with the Aristotelian concept of friendship. From this discussion, I will draw out the insufficiency of Aristotle's concept and the need to arrive at a Biblical concept that seeks to foster inclusive actions and principles. Then, in the last section, the research will seek to go beyond the theory of friendship to see how this theory can be actualized through the representation of L'Arche. This investigation of L'Arche will provide a practical basis for the validity of the concept of friendship in Nagaland and will further explore how this concept can be seen in ecclesial, theological, social, and political areas.

2. POSITIONING DISABILITY IN NAGALAND

2.1 THE STORY OF A DISABLED PERSON

Due to her disability, a young Naga girl named Naomi is barred from going to school and doing other things like studying, playing, and making friends, that a kid of her age would enjoy. Her mother thinks that this condition of her daughter is an embarrassment and is caused by the sin of their forefathers. This scene is taken from a short film called “I am not Helpless” by Dreamz Unlimited, a YouTube channel on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disability.⁴ This short film also portrays the societal perspective towards the disabled as helpless and towards disability as a vessel for pity. Overall, it showcases the stigma and the challenges that a person with a disability in Nagaland has to go through because of what and how society believes and functions around this matter.

While this short film brings awareness to such matters, a lot of media is concentrated on showcasing disability as a curse, embarrassment, and failure to be fully human. Aise H. Kiba, the actress playing the lead role in the video, is disabled and describes her growing-up environment as not easy. She had to hide her deformities under a Pancho so that her bad experience in the school and society would dilute a little. She recalls how she would long for a friend but would only be subject to harassment and humiliation. This also led her to contemplate suicide as a lasting remedy. As she battled societal norms, she headed toward becoming the president of the Village Student Union, but that experience turned out to be extremely discriminatory. During one of the General Meetings, one elderly man opposed her becoming the president and demanded resignation because she was handicapped and a woman, and this would disgrace the village.⁵ This indication of her as a disgrace due to her physical condition hints to how generally Naga society view a disabled person and more so if this person is a woman. Against the odds, she holds the position of General Secretary of Nagaland State Disability Forum (NSDF), and Programme Coordinator of the Office of the Commissioner for Person with Disabilities (PWDs), Government of Nagaland.

⁴ Dreamz Unlimited, “I am not Helpless,” YouTube Video, 9:36, December 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5-qmIkhEmw>.

⁵ See R&N Studios, “A True Naga Warrior 2018: Aise Kiba (Testimony),” YouTube Video, 5:18, January 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qph6S9h1JXE>.

The above-shared video story and testimony provide us with a wider perspective of people with disability battling against wider marginalization that intrudes on their personal space and also extends toward the far-reaching ends of social influence in Nagaland. It also portrays the issue of exclusion that people with disabilities face.

2.2 THE DIVERSE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

But before diving into the context in which the disabled in Nagaland are positioned, I shall briefly discuss the definition and the diverse nature of disability. Disability is not simple and addressing issues regarding disability can fall prey to hefty generalizations. Thus, an understanding that incorporates such diversity within the disabled community must be explored.

Defining disability is difficult because of its diverse nature, the range of types that might fall under it, and the ways people experience things they cannot do. CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) defines disability as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).”⁶ Helander writes: “A person who in his/her society is regarded as disabled, because of a difference in appearances and/or behaviour.”⁷ In most cases, a disabled individual experiences functional limitations and/or activity restrictions. A “functional limitation” disability can be defined as “specific reductions in bodily functions at the individual level,” while an “activity restriction” disability refers to “specific limitations in activities.”⁸ The disabled community encompasses a wide range of individuals with varying abilities, challenges, and needs. Acknowledging this diversity is crucial in addressing issues related to disability effectively. Margrit Shildrick argues that disability is a complex concept that is influenced by various factors including socio-historical context, geopolitical circumstances, and local perceptions. It is difficult to define universally due to its multi-faceted nature and the diversity of interpretations within a single location. The boundaries and meanings of disability remain elusive and resistant to clear-cut

⁶ “Disability and Health Overview,” *CDC*, accessed June 4, 2024, [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html#:~:text=What%20is%20disability%3F,around%20them%20\(participation%20restrictions\).](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html#:~:text=What%20is%20disability%3F,around%20them%20(participation%20restrictions).)

⁷ Samuel George, “Persons with Disabilities in India,” in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, eds. Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans (Manila: ATESEA, 2011), 32.

⁸ George, “Persons with Disabilities in India,” 32.

definitions.⁹ It requires an understanding that disability is not a monolithic category but rather a spectrum that encompasses physical, cognitive, sensory, and developmental differences. Within the disabled community, there are individuals with visible disabilities as well as those with invisible disabilities. There are also variations in the severity and impact of disabilities, with some individuals experiencing mild limitations while others face significant barriers to participation in daily life.

Moreover, the intersectionality of disability with other identity factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background further complicates its definition and understanding. For instance, women with disabilities often face compounded discrimination, encountering both gender bias and ableism. Similarly, individuals from marginalized racial or ethnic communities may experience disability differently due to cultural stigmas or lack of access to resources. Understanding these intersections is vital for creating comprehensive and equitable policies and practices.

However, in this thesis, I shall look at disability generally while acknowledging its diversity without divulging the specifics. This is because of two reasons – first, the limitations of this research as there is not much space to divulge into the complexities of it individually, and second, because the thesis presupposes that the various discrimination and stigmatization that people with disability faces in Nagaland are not limited to few but the whole of the spectrum of disability; and thus the approach we will be exploring through this research can and will apply to all people with disabilities.

2.3 EXCLUSION OF THE DISABLED AND NAGALAND

The thesis locates itself in a specific geographical location namely Nagaland. Nagaland is a small state in the north-eastern part of India and home to various Naga indigenous tribes. Nagaland is rich in culture and is stunningly beautiful - teeming with natural wonders, including lush forests, diverse plant life, and abundant wildlife. The traditional Naga religion is animistic, but with the

⁹ Margrit Shildrick, "Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, eds., Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2012), 33.

advent of the British, Christianity was accepted by many people. Now, it is a majority religion with over two-thirds of the population associating themselves with Christianity.¹⁰

2.3.1 Exclusion and Theology

Nagaland is a Christian state¹¹; thus, Christian perspectives, thoughts, and opinions have a major influence on how society thinks and functions. Theology, then plays an important role in informing people about the values and roles of a society. I shall look into the works of Dr. A. Wati Longchar, a theologian from Nagaland who has widely contributed to disability studies from the Naga Perspective. Longchar has been critical of theology and its contributions to the marginalization and exclusion that the disabled community faces. He calls a theology constructed by “abled people”¹² contrasting it to people with disabilities and laying out three major theological concepts that contribute towards exclusion – God, sin, and suffering.

Longchar sees that the way theology imagines God and has portrayed the images inadvertently provides a launchpad that leads to the exclusion of the disabled. God is shown in the triumphalistic images that showcase the perfection of the body as the attributes of God. Thus, healing, prosperity, cleanliness, tidiness, and able-bodiedness can be seen as the way of life willed and celebrated by God.¹³ This creates a hierarchy of status in how our bodies function and how our bodies differ. Healthy bodies will be glorified but sickly will be criticized, shamed, and pitied. This will lead the people to feel like they do not belong as this is not their place to begin with. It is made for the convenience of able-bodied, healthy, and successful ones. Longchar also observes that these theological narratives “negate the body,”¹⁴ emphasizing the soul and the afterlife while downplaying issues related to the body. The primary focus is on saving the soul, which leads to a neglectful attitude towards people with disabilities. Their concerns, problems,

¹⁰ M. Barthakur and Deryck O. Lodrick, “Nagaland,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nagaland>.

¹¹ Wanhang Rengma, “Is Nagaland a Christian State?” *Nagaland Post*, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2024/03/08/is-nagaland-a-christian-state/>.

¹² Wati Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” in *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, eds. Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar (EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/SATHRI/YTCS: West Bengal, 2019), 260.

¹³ Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” 260-61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

and reality of daily lives are overlooked, with the sole concern being spiritual wellness, whether they are saved or not.

Likewise, the doctrine of sin and the creation of humans can play an important role in contributing to the exclusion of people with disabilities. Longchar argues that the deviation from the original sin that corrupted the creation leads to seeing disability as the corruption of the body – the imperfect order of creation, thus associating it with curse and punishment.¹⁵ The Christian doctrine of Holiness, which is related to sin, reinforces the exclusion of people with disabilities from religious affairs, deeming them impure and imperfect. Constructed by the powerful and privileged, this doctrine asserts that God accepts only the perfect, requiring offerings to be without blemish. Consequently, this belief has led to the exclusion of people with disabilities from temple ministry, a practice that persists in churches today.¹⁶ People with disability are condemned and judged naturally. During my younger years, when I saw a person with a disability, I automatically thought that there must be something wrong with that person or his family. S/he must have sinned or is carrying the punishment of sin from his forefathers. Such perspectives are not isolated but are shared by a majority in Naga society. Similarly, the language used in expressing the doctrine of the image of God often imagines a perfect and powerful body that looks good, works well, and can have dominion over God's creation.¹⁷ Being a disabled person would then lead to not being good, not working well, and being weak. They cannot relate well to what they are born into, or the creation that God has created. People with disabilities would then be rendered as an inferior image, a corrupt one that is the result of sin and punishment.

Suffering and the way we view it also play a significant role in the exclusion and marginalization faced by people with disabilities. It is called “virtuous suffering.”¹⁸ Suffering is viewed as a virtue, a means to attain a higher goal, like a reward of some sort.¹⁹ Thus, suffering becomes a

¹⁵ Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” 263.

¹⁶ Wati Longchar, “Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society,” in *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, eds. Wati Longchar and Gordon Cowans (Manila: ATESEA, 2011), 216.

¹⁷ Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” 264.

¹⁸ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 72.

¹⁹ Daniel J. Louw, “Virtuous Suffering and the Predicament of being Handicapped: Towards a Theology of the ‘disabled God puffing in a wheelchair,’” in *die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1692>.

channel by which God tests and blesses his people. Disability then becomes a sign of divine election, that must be endured to gain rewards. This idea as Longchar sees it is a distorted view and its ramifications are harmful to people with disabilities. It blinds the eyes to see injustice.²⁰ This leads to an inaccessible path for a person with disability to try and navigate the ways to redeem themselves – either they are cursed or tested – both lead to segregation in society in the ways we view their struggles and issues. Nancy Eiesland writes succinctly, “The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned” and points out that, as is true for any such characterization, “neither represents the ordinary lives and lived realities of most people with disabilities.”²¹

Sammy Githuku portrays that disabilities are cast in a negative light in the Biblical narratives, which often use derogatory language for people with disabilities. People with disabilities were seen as misfits and were marginalized in the ancient societies. They faced discrimination in work and community worship and rituals they could perform.²² 2 Samuel 9:8 uses the expression of dead dog to describe a physically disabled person. The blind people in Leviticus 21:18 were seen as unfit for the temple service and poetic expressions in Psalms (58:4; 38:13; 26:7) about disability were often used to denote unwillingness, unworthy, and ineffective.²³ Githuku also argues that human disability has been used figuratively to express ugliness, hard-heartedness, inability, and weakness.²⁴ This caricature of the Old Testament texts further presses the people to view disability as bad and seems to provide a biblical ground for despising and labeling people with disabilities as a cursed people group. Although there are complexities when it comes to looking at these texts and verifying their meaning based on the contexts in which they were formed, the majority of Christians who are fed these narratives will not look past the nuances in the texts and will gladly take the meaning at face value. This affects the way people view disability and their treatment and mindset towards people with disability.

²⁰ Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” 266.

²¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70-71.

²² Sammy Githuku, “Biblical Perspectives on Disability,” in *Disability, Society and Theology: Voices from Africa*, eds. Samuel Kabue, Esther Mombo, Joseph Galgalo and C.B. Peter (Limuru: Zapf Chancery Publishers, 2011), 86-87.

²³ Githuku, “Biblical Perspectives on Disability,” 87-89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

We see how theological discourses and narratives can lead to the exclusion of people with disability. Longchar is not trying to portray theology as an evil perpetrator, but that the way we do our theology without considering the perspectives of people with disability leads to theological ‘truths’ that lead to the marginalization and exclusion of people with disability. God is perfect and the effect of sin is corruption but when these ‘truths’ are portrayed, the reality of people with disability is not considered. The experiences of people with disability should be a part of the larger context from which we derive our theological truths.

2.3.2 *Exclusion and Society/Culture*

Society often looks at people with disabilities as being on a sub-human level. They are usually seen as a burden and treated as outsiders. Samuel George suggests that society is unwilling to accept people with disabilities as part of the community because that would oblige the community to make special arrangements and keep up with the demands. Thus, social distancing is preferred, rendering them as outsiders.²⁵ The Morung Express titles a news article “Naga society ‘insensitive to needs and rights of PwDs’” while writing about an awareness program by Nagaland State Disability Forum (NSDF).²⁶ The society has discriminated against people with disabilities in various forms and such realities cannot be swayed away. The various realities include denial of inheritance, stigmatization, infanticide, abandonment, confinement, illiteracy, neglect, and denial of rights. Such abuse and mistreatment are common and are fairly justified by people of the communities.²⁷ Nagaland State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities Diethono Nakhro said that disability accentuates poverty “because the systemic institutional, environmental and attitudinal barriers that people with disabilities encounter in their daily lives result in their entrenched social exclusion and their lack of participation in society.”²⁸ Diethono Nakhro herself is disabled and shares her story on her blog ‘That Angami Girl.’²⁹ In her blog, ‘My life is disabled by my environment,’ she explains how she finds that society’s public spaces are designed in a way that becomes a nightmare for someone like her.³⁰ One incident ironically

²⁵ George, “Persons with Disabilities in India,” 35.

²⁶ “Naga Society ‘insensitive to needs and rights of PwDs’” *The Morung Express*, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://morungexpress.com/naga-society-insensitive-needs-and-rights-pwds>.

²⁷ Longchar, “Culture, Church, Disabilities and Marginalization,” 258-59.

²⁸ “Disability accentuates poverty and isolation,” *The Naga Republic*, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://www.thenagarepublic.com/news/nagaland-news/disability-accentuates-poverty-and-isolation/>.

²⁹ Visit <http://www.thatangamigirl.com>.

³⁰ She is paralyzed from the neck down due to a car crash and now moves around with the help of a wheelchair.

portrays the condition of the disabled in Nagaland. She had to visit the Directorate of Health and Family Welfare to discuss urgent disability health service matters with the Principal Director. However, she is unable even to enter as big 25-step stairs welcome her. She somehow manages to get up with the help of her driver and assistant but to her shock, the Disability office is on the fourth floor with no lifts.³¹ The entire incident showcases an ironic stand that Nagaland has placed itself in. Society in theory has all recognized the problems and issues at hand but in practice is still very far from making people with disability included in the community. We shall look further into how this dynamic of ‘doing for but not enough’ is played out at constitutional and political levels in Nagaland.

2.3.3 Exclusion and Politics

In Nagaland, the exclusion of people with disabilities extends to legal frameworks that often fail to address their rights and needs adequately. Despite existing disability laws and policies, enforcement and implementation remain inadequate, leading to continued marginalization and lack of accessibility. This failure in legal provisions reflects broader issues of political neglect and insufficient prioritization of disability rights. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 was implemented in 2019 and its policies came into force only in 2020.³² The Act suggests that people with disabilities will be empowered through the principles of non-discrimination, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, and accessibility. But does that sound like what is happening in Nagaland? The testimonies of people like Diethono Nakhro and Aise H. Kiba say otherwise. But does this mean that nothing is being done and people with disabilities are excluded beyond hope? No, the state is playing its part in the work. Nagaland is also the forerunner in complying with the provisions of the RPwD Acts among other states and UTs in India.³³ However, Nagaland is yet to comply with the provisions that are now being spearheaded by the Supreme Court.³⁴ The urgency and motivation seem lacking. While the acts, rights, policies, offices, and provisions shed light on the effort the state government is making to work

³¹ Diethono Nakhro, “My life is disabled by my environment,” *That Angami Girl*, accessed May 27, 2024, <http://www.thatangamigirl.com/2018/12/my-life-is-disabled-by-my-environment.html>.

³² NTN, “Er. Ghuvani G Kinimi: Breaking barriers and overcoming his disability,” *Nagaland Tribune*, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://nagalandtribune.in/er-ghunavi-g-kinimi-breaking-barriers-and-overcoming-his-disability/>.

³³ “Nagaland yet to comply with Five Provisions of RPwD Act,” *The Morung Express*, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-yet-to-comply-with-five-provisions-of-rpwd-act>.

³⁴ “Nagaland now complies with most Provisions under RPwD Act,” *The Morung Express*, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://www.morungexpress.com/nagaland-now-complies-with-most-provisions-under-rpwd-act>.

for people with disabilities, the implementation showcases a big gap in the way state and politicians work for people with disabilities. It shows that there are concerns and awareness but not effective community participation. The exclusion of the disabled can be seen in this legislative and political negligence. This also hints toward the limitations of rights, acts, and policies in breeding an inclusive society for the disabled, and thus invites society to explore beyond the legislative measures.

Recently, India's elections were held and one crucial discourse in the political maneuvers is that of the vote banks. These are the people who are loyal supporters from a single community who consistently support a specific candidate or a party in elections.³⁵ These are considered very important for elections as they guarantee a certain political party or an organization the secured votes needed to win a parliamentary or assembly seat. However, it is also concerning because the minorities among the minority communities can be sidelined in pursuit of looking after the needs and wants of the people who are in this vote bank. The disabled people in Nagaland amount to a meager 1.5% of the entire population of the state and within that pool of 29361, only 22% (6707) are registered in the electoral role.³⁶ This prompts the exclusion of people with disabilities by political parties when it comes to election agendas and future developmental projects. The NSDF (Nagaland State Disability Forum) president said, "All political parties should consider us as part of the development agenda – The PwDs are being neglected in all sectors of life for so long and we no longer can wait and watch our rights denied."³⁷ The demands laid by the NSDF and other Disability organizations showcase a plethora of issues and concerns that if not addressed will be detrimental to the disabled community. This neglect stems from complex societal attitudes toward the community. On one hand, there is an evident concern, with efforts being made and widespread sympathy. On the other hand, the community remains marginalized, requiring constant reminders to those in power. This situation suggests that the challenges faced by the disabled community extend beyond awareness and meetings. While political advancements,

³⁵ "Votebank," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 29, 2024, <https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Votebank>.

³⁶ See Annual Report 2021-22, Government of Nagaland: Office of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, <https://scpd.nagaland.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/annual-report-2021-22.pdf>.

³⁷ PTI, "Nagaland forum demands Inclusion of Disabled People's Rights in Election Manifestos," *The Print*, accessed on May 24, 2024, <https://theprint.in/india/nagaland-forum-demands-inclusion-of-disabled-peoples-rights-in-election-manifestos/2032989/>.

meetings, and policies are undoubtedly essential, a different approach is needed. And this is what I will be developing in the next chapter.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in Nagaland, illustrating how societal, cultural, theological, and political factors contribute to their marginalization and exclusion. The personal testimonies of Aise H. Kiba and Diethono Nakhro provide poignant insights into the lived realities of people with disabilities, highlighting the pervasive stigma and systemic barriers they encounter daily. These narratives underscore the deep-rooted societal attitudes that view disability through a lens of pity, embarrassment, and sin, significantly impacting the social and personal lives of disabled individuals.

The analysis of theological perspectives, particularly those influenced by Christianity, reveals how certain religious narratives perpetuate exclusionary attitudes. The works of Wati Longchar emphasize the need for a more inclusive theology that considers the experiences and realities of people with disabilities. The harmful implications of triumphalistic images of God, the doctrine of sin, and the concept of virtuous suffering are critically examined, showing how they contribute to the marginalization of disabled individuals. Furthermore, the discussion extends to the societal and cultural dynamics in Nagaland, where people with disabilities are often seen as burdens and outsiders. The societal preference for distancing and the various forms of discrimination, such as denial of inheritance and stigmatization, reveal a profound insensitivity towards the rights and needs of the disabled community. Diethono Nakhro's experiences poignantly illustrate the physical and attitudinal barriers that hinder the participation of people with disabilities in public life.

Politically, the chapter highlights the shortcomings of legal frameworks and the neglect by political entities. Despite the existence of disability laws and policies, their implementation remains inadequate, reflecting broader issues of political neglect. The lack of political will and prioritization of disability rights exacerbates the marginalization of the disabled community. The minimal representation of disabled individuals in the electoral process further underscores their exclusion from political discourse and decision-making.

The following chapters will delve into a comprehensive exploration of an approach that holds significant potential for reimagining and better serving the needs of the disabled community. By examining various facets and dimensions of this approach, I aim to uncover new perspectives and innovative strategies that can enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and overall quality of life for individuals with disabilities, beyond political and awareness rights for people with disabilities.

3. REIMAGINING FRIENDSHIP

3.1 RISING VOICES FOR THE DISABLED

The conversation around disability and theology is evolving, becoming more nuanced, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse experiences of people with disabilities. Many theologians and religious leaders are actively engaged in advocacy and activism to promote the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities within the religious communities and society at large. Bendanglemla Longkumer, who is a senior lecturer in theology and ethics at the Pacific Theological College, Fiji, calls for an inclusive ecclesiology so that the church treats discriminatory views on disability that neglects the need and the whole well-being of the person as a health crisis and calls for caring and inclusive theology.³⁸ Whether it is spiritual or physical, the church should be accessible to people with disability. A pastor or the board of the church that promotes/commends inclusivity for people with disability but has not done work architecturally to tend to such people groups, then the goal has not been achieved.

S. Ekonthung Ezung also advocates for a borderless ecclesia that will let people with disabilities experience the fullness of life without borders/walls.³⁹ Ezung who is an associate professor at the Eastern Theological College, India, refers to people with disabilities as people who are suffering due to human-made norms and restrictions and the church should be a place where such suffering is shared through the ministry of empathy, acceptance, hospitality, solidarity, and justice.⁴⁰ This involves not only providing physical accommodations but also fostering a culture of understanding, compassion, and advocacy within the church community. In essence, the voices of Longkumer and Ezung remind us that creating a truly inclusive church requires a multifaceted approach that addresses theological, cultural, architectural, and relational barriers to participation. By embracing a theology of inclusion and actively working towards accessibility and support, the church can strive towards realizing its calling to be a place of welcome, belonging, and empowerment for all individuals, including those with disabilities.

³⁸ Bendanglemla Longkumer, "Disabling Christian Discourse on Sin and Grace: An Ecclesiology Inclusive of People with Disability," in *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, eds. Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar (EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/SATHRI/YTCS: West Bengal, 2019), 310.

³⁹ S. Ekonthung Ezung, "Towards a Borderless Ecclesia for Persons with Disabilities: Envisioning an Inclusive Pastoral Ministry," in *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, eds. Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar (EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/SATHRI/YTCS: West Bengal, 2019), 358.

⁴⁰ S. Ekonthung Ezung, "Towards a Borderless Ecclesia for Persons with Disabilities," 362.

3.2 THE QUEST FOR AN APPROACH

The call for an inclusive society where the disabled are included and cared for is an ideal situation. In the previous chapter, we saw that the disabled in Nagaland are in difficult position. They face exclusion and marginalization at all personal, social, and institutional levels. The call, therefore, by the people I have mentioned in the above paragraph and all the organizations discussed in the previous chapters is for a society where the disabled would be treated as an equitable member of the community, participating and being included in the affairs of the society. Any natural response includes a significant change at institutional levels and a call to society to love and care for the disabled. Is this enough, though? Or, will this bring the change we are so passionate about in this research? I have argued in the previous chapter that people with disability are facing exclusion and that there is a limitation to what the rights, policies, and acts can do to change the position of the disabled in Nagaland. These are not enough and therefore, with the help of Hans S. Reinders, I want to propose the idea of friendship as a transformative and essential component for achieving true inclusion and equality for individuals with disabilities.

Friendship, isn't that a strange suggestion? Friendship is a very natural essence to humanity and society that it almost feels strange and unnatural to suggest it. But there is a group of people within our social community that friendship is hardly the natural essence of their lives. Although everyone has the natural desire to have friends, it is seldom towards people with disability. There seems to be a perception that is aligned more towards charity and justice than friendship because it is difficult to imagine a friend (of an able-bodied person) being a person with disability. Reinders has extensively worked with people with intellectual disability. He shares his experience about how other people connect with them and have relationships with them. However, he finds that it is very rare to find anyone who can be seen as a friend to a person with a disability.⁴¹ The video story "I am not helpless" discussed in the previous chapter has a particular scene where a person with disability is being pitied by a shopkeeper prompting him to extend a charitable hand and give her (person with disability) something for free.⁴² Although the

⁴¹ Hans S. Reinders, "You did not Choose me, but I Chose you: Reflections on Friendship and Choice," *Studienhaus*, Flochman Lectures PDF, 1.

⁴² Dreamz Unlimited, "I am not Helpless," YouTube Video, 9:36, December 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5-qmIkhEmw>.

action may come from a genuine concern from the heart of the person, we see charity at play and not a relationship being fostered. If you find yourself uneasy with the idea that friendship is the best or most appropriate response, it might be the case that you are influenced by an Aristotelian view of friendship. So, what is the Aristotelian view of friendship? I shall first explore this.

3.2.1 Aristotle's Concept of Friendship

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* elaborates on the complexities of friendship, distinguishing between different types of friendships based on their motives and outcomes. Aristotle proposes that we are attracted to things, including people because we find them pleasant, useful, or unqualifiedly good.⁴³ When we like someone for one of these reasons, we wish good things for them. However, liking an inanimate object, such as a bottle of wine for its pleasantness, does not involve wishing for its good.⁴⁴ In friendships, the sorts of good we want for a friend depend on what attracts us to them. For instance, if a shared interest in music drew us together, we would wish for them to have opportunities to enjoy that music.

Aristotle notes that for a friendship to form, the liking must be mutual and acknowledged by both parties. This mutual affection leads to three types of friendship: those based on pleasure, utility, or the perceived good character of the other person.⁴⁵ These friendships accommodate individuals of various moral characters. Even morally deficient individuals can form pleasure or utility friendships with each other or with others of different characters. For example, two musicians or a music lover and a musician can enjoy each other's company through their shared interest in music, regardless of their moral virtue. Aristotle concludes by stating that two people become friends when they like each other, become aware of each other's feelings, and reciprocate that liking.⁴⁶ In essence, for Aristotle, friends are equal – they have mutual interest and the good they bring to the relationship is reciprocated. According to Aristotle, if someone benefits another not because of who that person is, but solely for their own gain, then they are not truly a friend to the person, but only to the profit they receive.⁴⁷ The equilibrium is lost, and

⁴³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Adam Beresford (Penguin Classics, 2020), VIII 2 1155b 17-28.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII 2 1155b, 29-31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII 3 1156a, 6-10.

⁴⁶ Corinne Gartner, "Aristotle on the Nature and Value of Friendship," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship*, ed. Diane Jeske (New York: Routledge, 2023), 37.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII 3 1157a 15-16.

true friendship cannot be achieved. Reinders, commenting on Aristotle's concept writes, "In true friendship, there will be an equality of return."⁴⁸

3.2.2 Friendship Reimagined

For Aristotle, then, to be friends with a person with a disability becomes highly unlikely, often unimaginable, and practically impossible. If these "intuitions"⁴⁹ on friendship are followed that aligns with Aristotle's imagination of friendship, then a major problem arises in imagining friendship with anyone. Reinders, in this regard, summarizes Aristotelian view through this question, "How can one be friends with someone so unlike oneself?"⁵⁰ Reinders, whose work in the book *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* primarily focuses on intellectual disabilities, asserts that true friendship as described by the Aristotelian terms makes it highly unlikely to imagine a friendship between people with disabilities and able-bodied people.⁵¹ Now, in the context of Nagaland, imagining friendship with person with any disability carries a negative connotation, as I have tried to portray in the second chapter. Thus, the focus on the unlikeliness in imagining friendship between able-bodied and intellectual disability as discussed by Reinders can be substantiated towards whole of disability spectrum in the Naga context. The segregation exists in Nagaland and it is not merely between intellectually disabled and other kinds of disability, but between all individuals with disability and able-bodied person. Thus, a reimagination of friendship is required as "our common sense notion of friendship is guided by an ancient Aristotelian intuition, the intuition namely that friendship with a person so unlike oneself cannot be real, because true friends are in important respects like one another."⁵²

3.2.2.1 God's Friendship with Us

⁵³God's friendship with us integrates theological perspectives into understanding friendship, emphasizing how divine friendship shapes human relationships. God's friendship with humanity is characterized by unconditional love and grace, grounded not in human merit but in God's

⁴⁸ Reinders, "Transforming Friendship," 345.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 342.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 360-61.

⁵² Reinders, "Transforming Friendship," 340-41.

⁵³ See Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 279-307.

inherent nature to love and extend grace universally. This divine friendship is marked by unconditional acceptance, reflecting that true friendship involves accepting others without conditions or expectations of change. God's friendship is inherently inclusive, welcoming all individuals regardless of their social status, abilities, or backgrounds. This aspect calls for a corresponding human practice of radical inclusivity and hospitality, particularly towards those who are marginalized or excluded.

⁵⁴This is rooted in the Trinitarian nature. God's essence is love, specifically friendship love, within the communion of the Trinity. This divine friendship extends beyond the Godhead to embrace creation, including humanity. The Holy Spirit, as the love between the Father and Son, facilitates this friendship, bridging the gap between divinity and humanity. The Incarnation exemplifies God's commitment to friendship, as Jesus embodies this relationship with humanity, making it tangible and accessible. Through the sacramental dimension of the Incarnation, God extends friendship not only to our spirits but also to our bodies, fostering a deep communion marked by sharing and fellowship. Ultimately, the Trinity's friendship with humanity is manifested through Christ's presence in the church and the relationships among believers.

Reinders suggests that God's friendship serves as the foundation for our friendships and also our identity as a being. That is why our friendship with God and people go hand in hand, there is no place for real friendship apart from God, and once we are friends with God, being friends with people is natural.⁵⁵ And this is very important as this relationality helps us understand who a human being is. Thus, the value or worth of a human being is not measured through the potential for capacities and abilities but the unique relationship God maintains with humanity.⁵⁶ Thus, he argues that no characteristics or limitations of a human being can disqualify this relationship “friendship” nor can the love and grace for humans be broken.⁵⁷ The nature of this relationship provides an eternal ground for irreversibility. What I mean is that the locus of the worth and value and thus, the foundation for friendship lies not with humans but with God. Does this mean that humans are friends with God irrespective of the choices humans make? No, this is not the

⁵⁴ See Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 227-273.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

point that I am trying to make, nor I believe is Reinders's. Let's take an image of an eternal spring of water. Imagine an eternal spring that flows perpetually, providing fresh, life-giving water regardless of whether anyone drinks from it or uses it. This spring represents God's continuous offer of friendship and love. It flows unceasingly because of who God is and what God does—an unending source of grace and love available to all. This helps us to reimagine the understanding that in the economy of God's creation, everyone is deserving of friendship, because God, first is the friend of every human being.

3.2.2.2 Sameness and Difference

In contemporary postmodern society, the celebration of difference is seen as a fundamental aspect of our humanity. This perspective values diversity and the unique qualities that each individual brings to the collective human experience. However, Reinders offers a critical perspective that suggests an emphasis on sameness should take precedence over difference, especially in the context of disability. Reinders argues that prioritizing difference can lead to a problematic perception of individuals with disabilities. By focusing too much on how people with disabilities differ from others, society risks defining them primarily by their disabilities, thus inadvertently treating them as "non-person entities" or sub-humans.⁵⁸ This classification creates a divide that can result in exclusion and discrimination, rather than inclusion and equality. The argument for asserting sameness over difference is deeply rooted in theological principles, particularly the notion of God's friendship with humanity. Reinders posits that our fundamental sameness stems from "who God is and what God does."⁵⁹ This theological framework suggests that our worth and value are determined not by our subjective experiences or individual differences but by our relationship with God. In this view, subjectivity—our personal experiences and individual characteristics—takes a secondary role in the objective truth of our equal standing before God.⁶⁰

Reinders is careful to acknowledge the reality and significance of human differences. He does not advocate for a homogenization of human experience but rather for a recognition that our core

⁵⁸ Lorraine Cuddeback, "Becoming Friends: Ethics in Friendship and in Doing Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 167.

⁵⁹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 283.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

identity is shaped by our relationship with God, which unites us all. This approach interestingly aligns with the Aristotelian intuition of friendship, which posits that true friendship is based on equality and shared values. In Aristotle's terms, true friendship requires a foundation of equality. When we recognize that we are all equal because of God's friendship with us, our differences become less divisive. This theological equality allows for genuine friendships to form, even among individuals who are subjectively different. In other words, our objective sameness—rooted in our equal relationship with God—provides the basis for true friendship, while our subjective differences become secondary considerations. Thus, Reinders' perspective offers a nuanced approach to the concept of human difference. While celebrating diversity is important, it should not overshadow the fundamental sameness that defines our shared humanity.

3.2.2.3 Receiving the Gift

Now from the vantage point where the foundation for friendship is God and that we are all the same because of God's equal relationship with humans, the act of friendship first begins with receiving. Thus, friends in essence are not chosen but received. This sets a dangerous precedence as if to overshadow one's freedom over the relationship by the other. Reinders also acknowledges that this is counterintuitive. However, Reinders claims that "some of the most important things in our lives are not in our command, and that friendship is one of these things."⁶¹ The fundamental claim that friends are not chosen but received challenges common perceptions of human relationships by suggesting that some of the most significant and meaningful aspects of our lives, such as friendship, love, and kindness, cannot be commanded or controlled, but rather are gifts that are offered to us. This perspective emphasizes the passive role we play in receiving these relationships, highlighting that there is no obligation for anyone to befriend another specific person and that what makes these relationships valuable is the genuine preference for the person for their own sake. Recognizing friendship, love, acceptance, and respect as essential human goods that rely on the actions and decisions of others underscores the importance of being chosen for who we are, which represents a deep recognition of our intrinsic worth and a genuine connection. While modernity often emphasizes personal freedom and the ability to choose our paths and relationships, this view shifts the focus from active agency to the grace involved in these connections, advocating for a balance between choice and the reception

⁶¹ Reinders, "Transforming Friendship," 347.

of significant relationships. Societal and cultural biases that prioritize independence and autonomy can lead to an underappreciation of the dependent nature of these human goods, and acknowledging this dependency can expand social inclusion, encouraging us to value all individuals, including those with disabilities, as potential friends based on their intrinsic worth rather than societal biases or expectations, thus challenging notions of equality and symmetry in relationships and promoting a more inclusive understanding of human connections. Martina Vuk writes, “Choice is important but is only relevant to friendship when it communicates that love as choice is not other-dependent. This further entails that we can choose someone to be a friend because we like this person as a person, but it is not our choice to make the other person our friend.”⁶²

This opens up another important aspect of our lives and that is vulnerability. Friendship makes us vulnerable. Our lives and well-being are deeply intertwined with the actions and intentions of those around us. This reality can also be frightening, particularly for those who have faced the brunt of being vulnerable and dependent on someone who does not love them.⁶³ So, what does this mean? It means that friendship as a relationship cultivates dependency. It also means that friendship is a gift. The concept of receiving friendship as a gift is rooted in the idea of God’s friendship with us, highlighting that, although we have the choice to accept it, the necessity of receiving it underscores the other-dependent nature of friendship. God does not coerce us into friendship, yet His ongoing invitation illustrates that true friendship, while a choice, is also a gift that requires acceptance, reflecting our mutual dependence on others for these profound human connections. This also critiques the contributory view that dominates friendship. If friendship is a gift, then the other (person) doesn’t become a means to something else. The contributions one makes to the relationship doesn’t affect the nature of the relationship. This negates the asymmetry that one might try to point out in being friends with the disabled, as Aristotle would argue. This makes the receiving of friendship beautiful because friendship is in itself the reward of friendship.⁶⁴

⁶² Martina Vuk, “Friendship: Anthropology of Relational Interdependence? A Comparison between Reinders and Swinton,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 27, no. 1 (2023): 90, DOI: 10.1080/23312521.2020.1859041.

⁶³ Hans S. Reinders, “The Power of Inclusion and Friendship,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 4 (2011): 432.

⁶⁴ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 349.

Reinders' exploration of friendship, grounded in theological perspectives, challenges contemporary notions of choice and autonomy by emphasizing the inherent vulnerability and gift-like nature of true friendship. By drawing on the model of God's friendship with humanity—marked by unconditional love, grace, and radical inclusivity—Reinders illustrates that friendship is not a relationship we command or control but one we receive and nurture. This theological framework posits that our fundamental sameness, derived from our equal relationship with God, transcends individual differences and provides a solid foundation for genuine, inclusive friendships. Recognizing friendship as a gift that underscores our mutual dependency, rather than a relationship based on utility or merit, calls for a re-evaluation of societal and cultural biases that prioritize independence and contribution. This perspective not only enhances our understanding of inclusion, particularly for people with disability but also fosters a more profound appreciation of human connections. By embracing the vulnerability inherent in receiving and offering friendship, we can cultivate a more compassionate and equitable society where every individual, regardless of their abilities or differences, is valued and included as a friend.

3.2.3 Biblical Model of Friendship

How can we see such a display of relational bridging in the gospels and the life of Jesus Christ? Although the term friendship is not explicitly recorded, we can see how Jesus used the opportunities to display the essence of extending an invitation to friendship and community in his mission to people in general. Jesus's interactions with people with disabilities in the Gospels reveal a profound shift in perspective from viewing disability as a condition of exclusion to an opportunity for inclusion and belonging within the community of faith. Rather than merely bestowing acts of mercy upon individuals with disabilities, Jesus's healing miracles demonstrate a radical compassion that seeks to restore wholeness and dignity to those who were marginalized by their impairments. In each encounter, Jesus not only addresses the physical or emotional needs of the person with a disability but also affirms their intrinsic worth and belonging within the community. By restoring sight to the blind, mobility to the lame, and speech to the mute, Jesus demonstrates that every individual, regardless of their abilities, has a vital role to play in the kingdom of God. Moreover, Jesus's approach to disability challenges prevailing cultural attitudes and religious norms that relegate individuals with disabilities to the margins of society.

Instead of viewing disability as a sign of divine punishment or moral failing, Jesus redefines it as an opportunity for God's power and compassion to be made manifest. By including people with disabilities in his ministry and affirming their rightful place within the community of faith, Jesus sets a powerful example for his followers. He calls upon us to embrace a theology of inclusion that recognizes the inherent dignity and value of every individual, regardless of their abilities or limitations.

In John chapter 9, there is a story of a man born blind. The disciples with the cultural understanding of sin and punishment try to put forth an argument that links the disability with sin. However, Jesus rejects it declaring that this happened so that the works of God might be made manifest in him. Edward W. Klink III gives an interesting insight into the usage of the plurality of the word “works.” He argues that the blind man becomes a primary witness to the works of God, thus, making him one part of the works being done to reveal to the world the Son of God.⁶⁵ The blind man becomes an active participator in the work that Jesus is doing. In the following, we see that Jesus comes back to the healed man with an invitation to believe in the Son of Man. The works of Jesus in the person with disability not only reach his need to be whole physically but also the greater need to be a part of the never-ending community initiated by the triune God. To try and come up with an image, we can look at the image of a person doing charity from a bus throwing biscuits and bread to the poor and needy. But when replaced with Jesus, we can see that he is not doing so. He is inviting the people onto the bus to be a part of the revolution. The act of mercy is not only an act out of pity but an act to initiate an ever-lasting relationship.

Thus, in Jesus, we find people in general and people with disabilities in particular significant role players in the works of God and are being invited into a relationship and friendship as Jesus says in John 15:15 (NIV), “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

⁶⁵ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 437.

3.3 CONCLUSION

The exploration of disability, theology, and friendship presented in this chapter challenges traditional notions and calls for a reimagined approach to inclusion within both the church and society. Through the voices of theologians like Bengdanglemla Longkumer and S. Ekonthung Ezung, we see a clear advocacy for an inclusive ecclesiology that transcends mere architectural accessibility to embrace a culture of empathy, acceptance, and justice. Their perspectives highlight the need for a multifaceted approach that addresses theological, cultural, and relational barriers to full participation for people with disabilities.

The quest for an inclusive society where individuals with disabilities are treated equitably demands more than just policies and acts; it requires a transformation in how relationships are perceived and fostered. Hans Reinders' proposition of friendship as a transformative and essential component for true inclusion and equality introduces a radical shift from the typical charity-based approach to one rooted in genuine relationality. This perspective, however, confronts us with the Aristotelian view of friendship, which traditionally finds it difficult to imagine a friendship between able-bodied individuals and those with disabilities due to perceived inequalities. Reinders' theological reframing of friendship, particularly through the lens of God's friendship with humanity, offers a powerful counter-narrative. By emphasizing the unconditional love and grace of divine friendship, Reinders argues that the foundation for true friendship lies not in mutual benefit or equality of return, but in the inherent value bestowed by God. This theological basis calls for a recognition of fundamental sameness in our relationship with God, which transcends individual differences and provides a solid ground for genuine, inclusive friendships.

The biblical model of friendship, as demonstrated by Jesus' interactions with individuals with disabilities, further supports this reimagined approach. Jesus' actions and teachings consistently emphasized the intrinsic worth of every person and their rightful place within the community of faith. His miracles of healing were not merely acts of mercy but profound demonstrations of inclusion, dignity, and active participation in the kingdom of God. This model calls on the church to move beyond charity and pity, inviting all individuals, especially those with disabilities, into deeper, lasting relationships of friendship and community. As we move forward, the next chapter

will delve into practical applications and strategies for fostering such friendships within the context of Nagaland's churches and society.

4. EMBODYING FRIENDSHIP: FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, I provided an in-depth overview of the exclusion and marginalization faced by disabled individuals in Nagaland, highlighting the various social, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to their disenfranchisement. This examination included an analysis of how certain theological concepts, particularly those deeply rooted in local traditions and beliefs, perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce barriers that prevent disabled individuals from fully participating in society. Additionally, I contrasted this situation with Hans Reinders' concept of friendship, which presents a transformative approach to fostering inclusion and combating exclusion. In this chapter, we shall delve deeper into the heart of my thesis: how can this redefined concept of friendship reshape and realign the position of the disabled in Nagaland? More importantly, how can this redefined concept of friendship reshape and realign able-bodied people to not only accommodate and advocate but have a genuine meaningful relationship with the disabled?

4.2 THE STORY OF L'ARCHE

For this reason, we shall first dive into the story of L'Arche to see a community of people embodying the concept of bringing people who were facing exclusion from society and including them as people in our daily lives. In the third chapter, I have developed the idea of friendship with the help of Hans Reinders revolves around God as the foundation of this relationship, sameness over difference, and vulnerability, interdependence and relationality over power and strength. Now I will lay out how these features can be seen in L'Arche.

L'Arche began in northern France in 1964 when Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, invited two intellectually disabled men to come and live with him as friends.⁶⁶ He came to realize during the entire process that disabled people (intellectually disabled in this case) faced rejection not only from their own families but also from the society that looked at them as non-human, non-participatory, non-valuable beings.⁶⁷ Another realization is quite interesting – “[they] did not

⁶⁶ Hans S. Reinders, “Transforming Friendship: An Essay in Honor of Jean Vanier,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 19, no. 4, (2015): 341, DOI: 10.1080/23312521.2015.1093903.

⁶⁷ Jason Reimer Greig, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 205.

want a naval officer commanding them but a *friend* who valued and recognized them as persons.”⁶⁸ This is just one part of his discovery because he discovered that as much as they needed him, he also needed them. They had this gift to offer that Vanier realized later.⁶⁹ Vanier writes:

As I touched the fragility and pain of people with intellectual disabilities, and as their trust in me grew, new springs of tenderness welled up in me. I loved them, and was happy with them. They awakened a part of my being that had been underdeveloped and dormant. Through them, a new world began to open up for me, not the world of efficiency, competition, success and power, but the world of the heart, of vulnerability, communion and celebration. They were leading me on a path towards healing and wholeness.⁷⁰

Vanier could see that this initiative was not a charity but a building of a community where humans were supposed to live. He understood that the nature of a relationship demands a response that, for Vanier, awakened in him a part of humanity that lay dormant for long. It is this discovery he attributes to the contribution of the disabled, as a gift that they can offer to him and all the world. This opens up the idea of interdependence and relationality – ideas that many in the Naga society think are irrelevant for people with disability but L’Arche has shown that this is not correct. We need one another. Although dissimilarities exist, similarities are more because of the foundation that we all share in the providence of God’s grace and redemptive love. Tim Kearney, a worker at L’Arche, writes about his discovery:

Before living at L’Arche I was conscious mainly of how different the handicapped person was from me, and those differences were obvious. What is more obvious to me now, however, are the similarities, to what extent he is 'like me', to what extent we are alike. On one level, the resemblance is mundane. Mark and I both have difficulty getting ourselves out of bed in the mornings and we both enjoy a good meal accompanied by a nice bottle of French wine. On another level this similarity is less mundane but equally real. We both suffer – the pain of past wounds of rejection, the pain of loneliness and depression, the pain of feeling at times that we are unlovable.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Greig, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability*, 205.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷⁰ Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Everyday* (London: SPCK, 2013), 34.

⁷¹ Tim Kearney, “Discovering the Beatitudes at L’Arche,” *The Furrow* 35, no. 7 (July 1984): 462, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27677888>.

Kearney is not alone in this discovery, as many have realized that we all possess differences and sameness and that the need for a genuine relationship is open to all, not just to able-bodied people. Today we see that L'Arche has grown much bigger but this was never the goal nor the intent. It has spread through countries and continents "to create communities where people suffering from intellectual disabilities can live together with those called to be friends."⁷² For Vanier, it was a way of life – a life that is rooted in this redefined anthropology where the disabled and abled can come and live as friends not because they must, or because it is morally good, but because they get to. They get to experience the providence of God's friendship between them and the fullness of the promise of community that God promised in the Scriptures. L'Arche does not focus on redeeming people from human suffering but focuses on the attitude and behavior surrounding this suffering, namely, 'How can I love whose hearts are broken?' in contrast with 'How can I heal them?'. This provides an understanding that L'Arche is about knowing that the God we worship is found in communion and friendship with one another.⁷³ This means worshipping God is intrinsically linked to humans' relationship with others. If anyone, thus, marginalizes the disabled or anyone in this sense, actually ends up with a limited conception of who God is, and the true relationship with God cannot be realized/actualized.

Another thing that is important to note is that L'Arche relied on God's providence. This providence is not in terms of material wealth or protection. It is in the way of God leading them in a way where His presence is most effectively seen – in weakness and vulnerability. Thus, trusting in God and one another with their weakness and living life through this.⁷⁴ This community is not there to protect itself against adversity or showcase itself as powerful. This community exists to remove this barrier/veil hiding the adversities of the body and mind, showing the wounds of the soul, and reliving life that is vulnerable and prone to weakness. This fosters not only friendships and relationships with one another but also with God.⁷⁵ This is the calling of God to each one of us to a deeper and richer human fulfillment.⁷⁶

⁷² Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 52.

⁷³ Reinders, "Transforming Friendship," 354.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁷⁶ Jean Vanier, *Our Life Together: A Memoir in Letters* (London: Longman and Todd, 2008), 344.

4.3 FROM L'ARCHE TO NAGALAND

Many have called L'Arche countercultural but looking at how the churches are dealing with this issue (or not dealing with it at all), I see this movement as an alternative to traditional church practices in Nagaland. I do not want to paint a dystopian view to say that there are no strides made regarding people with disability. However, what L'Arche has done, or is doing in embodying the concept of friendship - i.e., to 'live with' people with disabilities and not 'to do for' them⁷⁷ - is not seen in Nagaland. This concept I developed with the help of Hans Reinders in the previous chapter looks at human conditions from the lens of transcendent gift. L'Arche in its philosophy and its practice reinforces Reinders' call to friendship – acknowledging the inherent dignity of the individuals and the importance of genuine relationships that transcends societal stigmas and prejudices. The idea of the call to friendship intends to eliminate the power imbalance we see in society. Can we nurture and cultivate this concept of friendship within the context of Nagaland?

Although the idea of friendship with equality, love, and sacrifice is present in the Naga society due to the influence of Christianity, the concept fails to adequately incorporate and extend justice to the community of the disabled. The Naga community is a tribal community. Important features of the tribal communities in India are interdependence as argued by T.B Naik and unity as defined by Ralph Linton.⁷⁸ Thus, there already exists the idea of inclusion and shared reality, and with the advent of Christianity, that idea reimaged itself within the narrative of God's redemptive history and purpose. However, the idea of shame and honor persists and plays a crucial role in shaping the Naga's understanding of friendship. Along with it is the idea of material contribution as an idea of a shared reality that further distances Naga's understanding of friendship from the idea that I have tried to lay out. Historically, the Nagas were headhunters, and social relationships were often determined by one's strength, the honor one could command, and the contribution to the society one could deliver.⁷⁹ This cultural backdrop, combined with

⁷⁷ Greig, *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability*, 205.

⁷⁸ Gurnam Singh, "Administration and Development of Tribal Community," Class Notes, Lucknow University, accessed 20 June, 2024, https://www.lkouniv.ac.in/site/writereaddata/siteContent/202004131501351340Neeti_SW_Tribal_Community.pdf.

⁷⁹ Monalisa Gogoi, "The Headhunters of Nagaland: Dying Traditions and Civilization" *the critical script*, accessed June 07, 2024, <https://thecriticalscript.com/article-details/the-headhunters-of-nagaland-dying-traditions-and-civilization>.

Aristotelian notions of friendship, posits that friends should bring honor and prestige to one another. Consequently, relationships perceived as weak or unequal are generally not esteemed within Naga society. This cultural paradigm poses a significant challenge when addressing issues of social exclusion, particularly concerning individuals with disabilities. Traditional notions of sin, divine punishment, and the associated values of weakness, shame, and curse heavily influence the societal perspective on disability. Thus, the issue is not merely a disassociation from the disability itself but from the negative connotations that society attaches to it.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this analysis should not be taken as the only issue people with disability face as discussed in Chapter 2, but the major factors that have influenced the perspectives on friendship. Thus, what this redefined understanding of friendship does is help people understand what true friendship looks like and offers a way to make a pathway of inclusion for people with disability. This concept can realign people's attitudes by shifting the focus from questioning the justifications for the disability, usually moral or spiritual, to a place where people will come forward to extend a hand of friendship in order for the community to experience the opportunity for mutual giving and receiving. Similar to the philosophy of L'Arche, the emphasis shifts from trying to make sense of the problem or to resolve the issue to taking care of the needy and fostering genuine relationships. Friendship, in this sense, encourages the perception of individuals with disabilities as creations of God, equally deserving of His friendship and grace.

4.4 BEING A FRIEND

This concept should then not only be theorized in the papers but should be made alive in the streets of Nagaland. For this reason, there are three main sectors where the work needs to be done to make progress in dealing with people with disability. First, ecclesial and theological. What do I mean here? The church, for the disabled, doesn't become a charitable organization or a place of judgment but a community and a family, that lives in the providence of God. Thus, the church becomes the epicenter of grace for the disabled and not a place of torment – a place where friendship as a gift to us from God is embodied. What does that look like? It looks like a place where people with disabilities are not excluded but are welcomed, not as guests, but as a friend, as a being made in the image of God, and as a brother/sister who belongs to Christ. The

paradigm shifts from people with disabilities being distant onlookers to active participants in the kingdom of God. People with disability are not jobs or tasks that for any able-bodied churchgoer become an opportunity to climb a moral ladder, but they become co-workers and family to work together and live together for the purpose God has called the community to. Vanier summed this up well. He writes “I get upset when people tell me, ‘You’re doing a good job.’ I’m not interested in doing a good job. I am interested in an ecclesial vision for the community and in living in a gospel-based community with people with disabilities. We are brothers and sisters together, and Jesus is calling us from a pyramidal society to become a body.”⁸⁰

Indeed, the church is a body and everyone, the able-bodied and the disabled is part of this one body. Thus, if this is so, then the church cannot sideline the issues of the disabled as insignificant or set aside for a special occasion. It will be a daily practice. The church cannot conduct itself for able-bodied people and then think about the disability as a special case but bring about normalcy in the way programs, buildings, parking, initiatives, workshops, and fellowships are designed, organized, and orchestrated. This should not mean that we start to treat people with disability as able-bodied people. It is established that everyone has needs. The stairs that are designed in the building are designed so that people can walk there appropriately. It would be weird if the stairs were too high for any person even with no disabilities. What I am trying to say here is that we design everything according to the needs of able-bodied people and treat people with disabilities as an outsider, an exemption. When the church learns to be friends with people with disabilities, their needs matter and are subject of great interest, it will not be an exemption list in the agenda but a core part of it. I believe that the church needs to understand the weight of the burden the idea of friendship brings. I believe that the gospel has already done that but the church has decided to look the other way.

Theologically, the church must deal with the idea of divine punishment. For this, proper teachings and theological training must be sought after. Even theological institutions should incorporate awareness studies to bring to light the teachings that could be used against people with disability. Many Naga theologians write about theology without incorporating the needs and

⁸⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 34-35.

the reality of the disabled. The nature of this inquiry must change in light of what the gospel demands – to be a friend of the disabled.

There is a pitfall when it comes to thinking about friendship with the disabled. The able-bodied person reading this or being introduced to this idea might think of reaching out as opposed to being reached out by the disabled. One of the concepts I discussed in the previous chapter is receiving. The act of receiving is important as it entails the fundamental truth about friendship that it is other-dependent. When one chooses someone as a friend, the other person needs to receive that friendship, and when the other extends the friendship, the first person should also be willing to receive it. The church, most of the time, tries to put itself on the end of giving out friendship but not receiving it. This positions the church as a primary giver which can create a lack of reciprocity where the church does not value what others have to offer. This leads to an imbalance in power dynamics that places people with disabilities less than those who give. Thus, true friendship is not achieved.

If a person's dignity and humanity are to be honored, able-bodied people must be able to position themselves in the place of receiving it as a gift. I shall borrow the illustration used by John Swinton in making his case of belonging, a shift for the Church to be the guest (receiver) and not the host (giver).⁸¹ There is a painting of Pope Francis when he was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires. It is a realistic painting of a young weak boy suffering from AIDS in a wheelchair and the cardinal on his knees holding the boy's foot.⁸² Swinton points out an interesting observation. One of the "world's most powerful religious representatives kneeling at the feet of one of the world's weakest and most vulnerable people."⁸³ The painting would have looked different if the cardinal was standing over or patting his head but instead, he is in the position where he has to look upwards to the weak and not below.⁸⁴ The cardinal is now not a giver but a receiver, receiving what the weak and the vulnerable have to offer. This helps us see that the way people position themselves affects the dynamics of power.

⁸¹ John Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging: Why 'Disabled' Bodies are Necessary for the Faithfulness of the Church," in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, eds. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets (London: Routledge, 2016), 179.

⁸² Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging," 179.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

The use of a separate language for the disabled from the Church is intentional. This is to show the great divide and the exclusion the disabled face in the churches in Nagaland. The disabled are still outside the church. This research aims to envision a Church that imagines itself with the disabled and not without and the need to identify the disabled separately from the Church is eliminated. Such should be the path the Church needs to take that it overflows towards the greater society it caters to. Friendship begins with God, and it flows from there. If the Church finds itself unable to be friends with the needy and the marginalized, the Church must return to a place where it will receive God's gift of friendship.

The second area is society and the third is political. Society plays an essential role in the inclusion of people with disabilities. Social norms and attitudes often mirror the inclusivity practiced within communities, including religious ones. Therefore, society as a whole must recognize and value the contributions of individuals with disabilities. Similar to the ecclesial call, society must position itself in the position of receiving the friendship the disabled can provide. Learning to be friends instead of a caregiver of the disabled will demand a repositioning of society's way of achieving inclusion and participation. It will disallow a categorization of the disabled as powerless and of lower status. Equality, then doesn't become something that is desired but something that is fostered in such an environment. Advocacy and realignment to the cause of the disabled take primary charge of daily social engagements. Such attempts, although necessary, are the bare minimum this research aims to achieve. What is necessary is a genuine relationship, fostering a friendship that seemed implausible and undesired in the context of marginalization and exclusion. From taking a step to open a door for the disabled, to allowing the disabled to open the door of their houses to the society so that the society receives the friendship the disabled gives is the true inclusion people with disability can experience.

Similarly in the political area, the rights and policies must work for and not against people with disabilities. Public policy and legislation are essential for creating an equitable environment for all citizens. Governments should enact and enforce laws that promote accessibility and equal opportunities. This includes legislation that mandates accessible public spaces, inclusive education, and equal employment opportunities. By implementing such laws, governments can help ensure that people with disabilities have the same opportunities and rights as everyone else.

Although the State Government passed the law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, the implementation of it only came about in 2019 and the policies came into force in 2020. This has led a lot of people with disabilities to delay their progress in making careers and stability.⁸⁵ Thus, strict measures must be taken to ensure the implementation of such rights and policies and there should be a robust system for accountability.

Actions that welcome people with disability, to advocating for social inclusion and policy making in political arenas are the bare minimum a human deserves. The idea of friendship that I am trying to bring in the context of Nagaland demands a deeper commitment – to be a friend. Justice and rights come naturally in the context of friendship. Let's say that I have a disabled friend, Anna, who is in a wheelchair. I invite her to my house and make my house accommodating of her disability. This is not what I am advocating for. This accommodation, although necessary, is only the beginning of the path of inclusion. Friendship suggests much more, that I have a genuine relationship with her, having transformed myself to view her not as half a person or someone I must respond to with charity, but that I get to live with her as a person created in the image of God. This I believe opens up a way towards inclusion and making the disabled know that they are not the object of our charity but integral members of our community.

4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored the transformative potential of redefining friendship to reshape the social dynamics between able-bodied and disabled individuals in Nagaland. I have explored that the idea of friendship is not only a theoretical exploration in the pages of academia but a reality that can be actualized as I have tried to show through L'Arche. This presents itself both as an opportunity and a challenge to Nagaland to contextualize this idea that can significantly change the position of the disabled from exclusion to inclusion. By examining the story of L'Arche and its foundational principles, we see how genuine friendship rooted in vulnerability, interdependence, and shared humanity can dismantle barriers of exclusion and marginalization. This model of community living, as exemplified by Jean Vanier and others at L'Arche,

⁸⁵ NTN, "Er. Ghuvani G Kinimi: Breaking barriers and overcoming his disability" *Nagaland Tribune*, accessed May 30, 2024, <https://nagalandtribune.in/er-ghunavi-g-kinimi-breaking-barriers-and-overcoming-his-disability/>.

demonstrates a profound shift from mere charity to mutual relationships where both parties recognize and celebrate each other's inherent worth.

Translating these principles to Nagaland, we recognize the existing cultural and theological challenges that perpetuate the disenfranchisement of disabled individuals. Despite the Naga society's intrinsic values of interdependence and unity, there exists a significant gap in extending these values to the disabled, often due to deeply ingrained notions of honor, shame, and strength. By aligning the Naga context with the concept of friendship as articulated by Hans Reinders and embodied by L'Arche, we can begin to bridge this gap.

The ecclesial, societal, and political sectors all have roles to play in fostering this inclusive environment. The church must become a place where people with disabilities are welcomed and valued as equal participants in the community. Society must shift its perspective to see the disabled not as objects of charity but as integral members who have much to offer in terms of friendship and shared humanity. Politically, the enforcement and expansion of policies that protect and promote the rights of disabled individuals are crucial for creating an equitable environment.

Ultimately, the call to embody friendship in Nagaland is a call to a deeper, more authentic way of living together. It demands a shift from viewing the disabled as beneficiaries of our goodwill to recognizing them as friends who enrich our lives with their presence and gifts. This I believe is a task of every human – not only as an obligation but inherent to us being humans.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the position of the disabled in Nagaland and provide a way forward towards the transformation of the experiences people with disability face. For this reason, I have explored the multifaceted dynamics of disability, society, and theology in Nagaland and how this interplay perpetuates an exclusionary environment in Nagaland. Furthermore, I explored the concept of friendship redefined with the help of Hans Reinders to propose a framework that can work to make a more inclusive and relational society for the disabled. With this, I have made recommendations that have ecclesial, theological, social, and political implications.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

In Chapter 2, I argued that Nagaland, although aware of disability rights and the progress it is making towards it, as a society has marginalized people with disability, especially labeling them as cursed, punished by God, and an embarrassment. The reality of exclusion faced by people with disability is paramount. The major factors driving the exclusion can be attributed to social superstitious and religious beliefs. Wati Longchar identifies that the portrayal of God, the definition of sin, and the perspectives on suffering contribute towards showcasing people with disability as not perfectly made, punished and cursed, and a special test case for future rewards. I have also tried to point out how the texts of the Bible can further solidify negative perspectives around people with disability as many of the texts portray disability as good enough reason to be unqualified to serve God and society. As these religious and social perspectives and sentiments drive an exclusionary environment for the disabled, the social and political shortcomings especially in policy-making, rights implementation, accommodation, and participation in the community further solidify exclusion. In this exploration, I discovered that the attempt to make a society that is inclusive of the disabled needs much more than advocating for their rights and bringing awareness to the public. Thus, I have argued that the idea of friendship can bridge that gap.

In Chapter 3, I explored the surprising suggestion of the idea of friendship as a transformative and essential component for achieving true inclusion and equality for people with disabilities. It is surprising, and quite counter-intuitive as well because of our understanding of friendship that

derives its meaning from an Aristotelian concept. The Aristotelian concept of friendship that has influenced much of modern Nagaland's way of viewing friendship makes it unlikely to picture a person with disability as a friend. Thus, I have argued that friendship, as it stands with the Aristotelian heritage, cannot withstand the burden of transitioning the position of the disabled from exclusion to inclusion. This concept needs to be reimagined. With the help of Hans Reinders, I have argued for a concept of friendship that stems from an understanding of God's friendship with humans and that sameness takes precedence over difference. This not only reconceptualizes the idea of friendship but also reimagines anthropology from a Christian perspective. This friendship is now seen as a gift and human beings are to receive it as a gift from the other.

This re-imagination of friendship now demands that the Church reposition itself as a friend to the disabled and also to the reality of the disabled being friends with the Church. I have explored this in Chapter 4. What does friendship with a person with a disability look like? L'Arche stands as a perfect example of this quest. L'Arche is an organization founded by Jean Vanier to create a community where the people don't work for but live with the people with (intellectual) disabilities. L'Arche embodies friendship in a way that goes beyond mere theorization and reaches the hearts and souls of people. Concepts like interdependence, vulnerability, and relationality are not far-fetched ideas but a reality if one chooses to. L'Arche stands as a testament to show the practicality of the idea of friendship. Thus, this friendship can now be contextualized on the grounds of Nagaland with the primary actor being the Church. I also argued that rights and policies for the disabled and steps taken to accommodate people with disability are not what the friendship demands. Friendship sees these ideas as a must, a natural step, steps taken without the need to discuss. Friendship takes a step forward in fostering a relationship that moves beyond charity – it is the life of living together, participating, receiving, and giving the gift that God has given to humans.

5.2 LIMITATIONS OF THIS THESIS

As I have explored the position of the disabled in Nagaland and a possible solution to the issue of exclusion through the conceptualization of friendship, this thesis has its limitations. The research is primarily qualitative. I adopted a literature review methodology, analyzing case studies in

anthropology, history and theology, theological writings, and ego documents. As there is no quantitative research done, there will be gaps in the studies to properly identify the nature of the issue and also the extent of the issue affecting society at large. There may be experiences and realities of exclusion and inclusion that will remain underrepresented and unexplored. For example, my own thesis has a broader focus on disability in general while L'Arche focuses on individuals who are mentally or intellectually disabled. This lack of focus also presents itself as one possible limitation of this study. This opens up the opportunity for future exploration. There is a need for more extensive quantitative research to complement the qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of the prevalence and impact of disability in Nagaland. Quantitative studies could offer statistical insights into the demographic characteristics, economic status, educational attainment, and health outcomes of individuals with disabilities. This data would help to identify patterns, trends, and disparities, thereby informing more targeted and effective interventions. Additionally, the theological perspectives discussed in the thesis are predominantly Christian. Though Nagaland is predominantly Christian, other religions also form a minority in the land, and their religious beliefs are not taken into account in research as my research primarily focuses on Christians. This may significantly influence the outcome of the research and possible ways friendship can be used in differing theologies and cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the practical recommendations presented in the thesis, while informed by successful models like L'Arche, may face challenges in their implementation as the case study focuses on L'Arche a European organization with different cultural and moral backgrounds. The adaptability of these models to the specific socio-economic and cultural conditions in Nagaland is crucial for their success, and this aspect requires further exploration. Moreover, the research was limited to the conception of friendship through the lens of Hans Reinders. While Reinders' perspectives provide valuable insights, the thesis did not extensively engage with other significant theologians who have contributed to this area, such as John Swinton and Thomas Reynolds. Their work has not been brought into dialogue here in this thesis as I believe that in itself can be a research interest due to its sheer volume and the effect it will have in the future of disability studies.

5.3 KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

The research has uncovered significant insights into the intersection of disability, society, and theology in Nagaland. It has highlighted the profound impact of societal and cultural norms on the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities and underscored the critical role that theological narratives can play in either perpetuating exclusion or fostering inclusivity. By examining these intersections, the study has shed light on the multifaceted ways in which disability is perceived and experienced in the region. One of the most compelling findings of the research is the concept of friendship, particularly as reimagined through theological discourse. This concept emerged as a powerful framework for addressing the relational and cultural barriers to inclusion. Traditionally, in the Naga context, engagement with people with disabilities has been dominated by a charity model as seen in the video I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2, where assistance is provided in a manner that often emphasizes the giver's benevolence over genuine relational equality. Friendship, in contrast, promotes a model of mutuality and shared humanity, challenging the prevailing dynamics of power and dependency. This reimagining of relationships with individuals with disabilities is particularly interesting and novel. It challenges the conventional approach where charity overshadows other forms of engagement, and friendship rarely makes the list. This shift from a paradigm of "doing for" to "living with" individuals with disabilities represents a fundamental change in perspective. It emphasizes the importance of relationships based on equality, mutual respect, and shared experiences, rather than one-sided acts of kindness that can inadvertently reinforce marginalization and exclusion.

This insight has illuminated how able-bodied individuals' core principles and perceptions of disability contribute to an environment of exclusion. The traditional view often sees people with disabilities as passive recipients of care rather than active participants in society. This research has made me realize that it is the opposite. People with disabilities are not passive recipients but active participants that affect the lives of those with whom they foster genuine relationships. I thought that people with disabilities did not have much to offer, but seeing the studies of Hans Reinders and others, I was gravely mistaken. This discovery has not only changed my perspectives but also challenged the way I viewed God's creation. Another discovery in the research is that the problem people with disability face is the biased perspective of divine punishment and the major reason for their marginalization. However, divine punishment is just

one issue people with disability face, and exclusion is the major issue they face in Naga society. Divine punishment then becomes one of the ways this exclusion is achieved in the lives of the disabled.

While this research is focused on disability, the idea of friendship holds implications beyond the context of disability. This presents an opportunity to explore areas of exclusion and marginalization in the larger context of society. In examining friendship within the context of disability, we uncover dynamics that are often hidden in plain sight: the subtle ways in which individuals can be excluded or marginalized. This exploration serves as a microcosm for broader societal issues. When we understand how friendship can bridge gaps and foster inclusion for those with disabilities, we gain insights into how similar approaches can be applied to other marginalized groups. It also allows us to look at our personal relationships. The idea of friendship invites us to a richer and deeper relationship in our own lives and can help us realize the potentiality of human relationships. This is the gift that God has given to us.

This thesis in many ways has informed and reformed me – from the way I thought about people with disability to the ways I can imagine a deeper genuine relationship with them. It has also made me realize that many are coming forward to make the lives of people with disability meaningful. This thesis also helps me see that people with disability are helping the church to understand its identity and its mission, to care for and to live with the needy and the vulnerable – not from the position of power but of dependency and mutuality. It also helps us see that people with disability are capable of meaningful relationships and that the exclusion they face has affected them immensely from physical and social to mental and psychological. I pray that the readers of this thesis can also go into the journey of discovering the riches of God’s friendship in the lives of the disabled.

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Data management plan

1. General information

Name of student: Yareichonmi Kashung

Names of thesis supervisor(s): Rob Compaijen

Date: 21-06-2024

Version: 1.0 (Final Version)

2. General information about research and subject of the thesis

(Provisional) title of the research / thesis:

Reimagining Disability within Naga Community: Developing a Framework for Inclusion with Hans S. Reinders' Concept of Friendship

Short description of the research project and method(s): My research is concerned with the cultural and social bias that exists within Naga community towards people with disability. The primary aim of my research is to explore the reality of people with disability in Nagaland and to use friendship as conceptualized by Hans Reinders to foster an inclusive society. My research adopts literature review as its methodology and primarily focus on analyzing Hans S. Reinders book *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*.

Type of research data to be collected: Literature review and analysis of short film and blog.

Period in which the data will be collected: March till June, 2024

3. Technical aspects of the data storage

Hardware and software: software

File formats: Docx and Pdf

Size of the data (estimate in MB/GB/TB): 300 MB- 500 MB

Storage of data while conducting research: Laptop and Gmail

Storage of data after completion of research: Laptop, Gmail and Google drive

4. Responsibilities

Management of data while conducting research: Myself

Management of data after completion of research: PThU Library

5. Legal and ethical aspects

Owner of data: Myself

Are data privacy sensitive? YES / NO - **No**

If YES: How will you arrange safe storage and consent of the persons and organisations involved in your research?

6. Other aspects

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(The following has to be filled in by the thesis supervisor:)

Approved

Not approved, because:

Name

Rob Compajen

Signature:



Date:

21/06/2024

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