

Churches in Africa urged to prioritize disability rig

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Nairobi, Kenya, December 8 (ENInews)--With a small number of disabled, deaf, and blind people now members of Africa's clergy, the continent's churches are being challenged to lead the struggle to increase rights for the disabled.

The churches have not fully embraced the issue, according to participants at a conference held from 6-8 December in Lukenya, near Nairobi. The conference sought to educate church leaders, officials, and representatives from organizations serving the disabled about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among other objectives.

"The church has been a pioneer in the care for people with disabilities. It started the first schools for those with disabilities and believed it was doing enough by sending the children to the schools. It failed to move from care to inclusion," said Samuel Kabue, executive director of the Presbyterian and Ecumenical Disability Network, who is blind.

The network, run by the World Council of Churches, has been advocating for the inclusion, participation, and active involvement of persons with disabilities in spiritual, social, and developmental activities.

"We are now bringing in the church to make it aware that it needs to be involved in this kind of advocacy. (We think) they know very little about the human rights of persons with disabilities," he said.

While explaining the churches' inadequate involvement in disability issues, Razaka Manantenasoa, a disabled lay shepherd of the Lutheran Church in Madagascar, said many viewed it as the work of foreign missionaries.

"The church thinks something has already been done. I think the church feels it has very little to. I would be encouraged to see movement," she said. Missionaries in

Madagascar built one main center, she explained, which is the only fully equipped center for disabled people there.

According to the Rev. Balayo Seezi, a disabled priest from the Anglican Church of Uganda, many people with disabilities do not attend church services because there are no proper structures and services that would benefit them.

"A disabled person may enter the church, but you may ask what arrangements have been made so that a person in a wheelchair may also be able to move to the holy table to celebrate the Holy Communion with others," he said.

Even with the challenges, there is a bright side, according to some participants at the Lukenya conference. Small loans from the Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB) are helping many people start income-generating activities, ending their dependency on handouts.

"At first, the members came to meetings on beds, but with education, support, and training, they now come on their own using white canes. Now our problem is that we cannot find enough white canes," said Donatilla Kanimba, RUB executive director.

In the last eight years, the network has been helping develop a disability discourses in theological institutions which has improving the awareness. Recently, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa ordained of deaf minister as result of this work.