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Abstract

This is a review of Andrew T. Draper, Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae's book, *Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ*. This review includes a summary of the contents and engages in a critique of the overall book. This review discusses a practical theology of disability inclusive church leaders and how they can make their congregations into an accessible community.

Keywords

Disability, Leadership, Draper, Michele, Mae, Inclusivity

Cover Page Footnote

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Andrew T. Draper, Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae. *Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023. 208 pp. \$24.00.

Disability inclusion in the church has not been a highly discussed topic within Christian academia or in the church until more recently. Today, there are more people with disabilities than ever advocating for disability inclusion within the church. In their book, *Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ*, Dr. Andrew Draper, Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae discuss what it looks like for leaders within the church to educate themselves on the needs of their congregations, specifically those who have a disability. In their introduction, the authors state the purpose of this book by saying, “If this book motivates faith communities to dream together about how they can increase access and inclusion on the path toward reconciliation and justice, we will have met our mark” (xviii).

Draper, Michele, and Mae begin by discussing a practical theology of leadership. They take time to separately define the terms “leadership” and “leading”. They see leadership as the “formal study of the attributes and capacities of leadership” while they see leading as “what it means to lead in the way of Christ” (3). The authors also heavily rely on Northouse’s five guiding principles for ethical leadership: respect, service, justice, honesty, and community.¹ With these guiding principles, a theology of practical and ethical disability emerges.

The authors continue to discuss the stories of those who have experienced disability in their own lives. People like Amy Kenny, Brian Brock, and even all three of the book's authors have their stories told in this chapter of how they have dealt with disability either firsthand or by caring for a loved one with a disability. By telling the stories of those with disabilities, church leaders and laypeople can learn what it looks like to do life with and support those in their congregations living with disabilities. Michele discussed further how someone’s relationship with healing and suffering is changed and enhanced when they live with a disability (70).

Draper, Michele, and Mae then tie together the first two chapters by combining a theology of leadership with the experience of disability. They note that the power/authority of church leaders should be used to serve and guide rather than to dominate (91). Those who live with disabilities should be included in these places of church leadership so that the voices of those who are commonly marginalized in the church can be heard and learned from (99). The authors argue that while educating those in leadership about disability is a good and beneficial

¹ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2019), 346-352.

thing, it would be even better to empower and elevate people with disabilities to be a part of church leadership.

In their final chapter, the authors discuss what an accessible church community looks like. They focus on three main aspects of church: worship, preaching, and Christian education (112). For worship, the authors note that accessibility does not stop at the physical building, but includes things like Braille, sign language, and sensory stimulation (116). Pertaining to preaching, they make a point of saying that the people preaching should reflect the diversity within the congregation; specifically, those who are disabled should also be the ones teaching on Sunday mornings (124-125). In discussing Christian education, the authors note that those who are educating should be aware of how some theologies have been misused in the past to harm specific people groups, including the disability community (130-131).

Disabling Leadership is filled with practical knowledge and steps to take pertaining to how to be an effective leader to a congregation that is inclusive of those with disabilities. While this book is a great start on how to be an inclusive leader, there are some hermeneutical issues within the book. When engaging with Scripture, it appears that Draper, Michele, and Mae might be inferring or drawing out of the text things that might not be intended by the original author, specifically pertaining to disability. An example of this was in their exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12. They argue that because theologians do not include those with disabilities when discussing the diversity of the church, they are ignoring those in that community (32). The issue with this exegesis is that Paul, himself, did not mention those with disabilities. Theologians who do not draw disability inclusion directly out of the text are not being ableist; rather, they are being true to the words of Paul. Disability inclusion can definitely be derived from Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, but so can the inclusion of any/every marginalized people group.

On a more practical note, the long chapters are, at times, difficult to read. Because they are so long, the main point of the chapter can be forgotten or lost. Instead of taking many pages to discuss research from a particular scholar the authors relied on, it would be better to just summarize the work in a few short paragraphs. Because many pages were dedicated to the works of other scholars, the authors' message was sometimes lost. Overall, however, *Disabling Leadership* is a helpful tool for pastors and church leaders to inform themselves and their congregations about disability and take practical steps to be an accessible community of believers.

Bibliography

- Draper, Andrew T., Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae. *Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023.
- Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 8th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2019.