

## **Transcript of Mosaic Podcast Episode 'Theology, Disability, and Inclusion in Singapore'**

### **Jackie Hwang (JH):**

Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of podcast from Singapore Bible College (SBC), I'm Jackie Hwang and for this episode I'll be talking to our guest, Mr Leow Wen Pin. Wen Pin is an alumnus of SBC, graduated in the class of 2016. He is the founder and president of Koinonia Inclusion Network (KIN), a parachurch organization that helps churches include and disciple people with disabilities. He also teaches at a local seminary. His 2021 book *Enabling Hearts* offers a theological and practical treatment on how the church can and should include those who have disabilities. We're excited to have Wen Pin join us today for a discussion on the connection between theology, disability and inclusion. Wen Pin would you like to say a few words to our audience today?

### **Leow Wen Pin (LWP):**

Well thank you Jackie for having me on the podcast. I have really such fond memories of being in SBC and I'm delighted to be back among the SBC community today addressing the podcast listeners as well.

### **JH:**

Thank you. And I think before we start our conversation today, I just want to recount a recent encounter I had that maybe just to help our listeners think about this topic. On this issue of disability and the church, I was chatting with a group of ladies and one of the mentioned that her son was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, for the other ladies in the group they had never heard of this disability and I only have some faint ideas about it because of a friend of mine has specialized training in helping children with Asperger's. So this encounter really highlighted for me the ignorance about disability in the church. And so therefore I think our discussion today could really educate us on we can connect our Christian faith with our interactions with those who live with disabilities. So I'm really looking forward to learning from you Wen Pin, from your experiences and your reflection on this topic. Maybe before we get started on the heavy topic today, can you tell us a little bit about on what motivated you to become involved in this ministry.

### **LWP:**

Sure. In fact, the motivation for this is deeply tied to my journey at Singapore Bible College. One of the first episodes where I've had an opportunity to think rather deeply about this was in my final year at SBC, where for one of my courses I was allowed to write an essay about the gospel and disability. And then to reflect about that. And in my interaction with the theology of disability, I recognized and realized it was so interesting and so life-giving in different ways and so that's one of the experiences.

But also a related experience, when I joined SBC in 2013, I was also praying to God. At the same time, because I had been an active volunteer for a number of years with youth at risk and I was thinking to myself, should I focus on my theological studies? And so I was praying to God, asking him to show me the way. And rather interestingly, his answer to that prayer was to direct me to serve in a disability-related ministry. Now this was the very first time I had ever encountered people with disabilities in a formal way. And so I got involved, and I thought I was there to help them. But after serving in that capacity, I realized that persons with disabilities had so much to teach us and so much to share with society at large. And so in many ways, I realized that I needed them as they needed us to. And in that way, I learned by experience that persons with disabilities are good for the church. And so that's really one of the key motivators for driving me in this area of ministry.

**JH:**

That's a really profound insight. I like what you said about just that you thought you went in to help them, but then in the end you realized how important they are in making a part of the church. You know when you mentioned that this is something that birthed out of your studies here SBC, your last semester, I was kind of wondering what was the theological connection or the biblical idea that you turn to when you were thinking about disability from a Christian perspective?

**LWP:**

Wow, there's so many of these theological strands that we can lean on, but perhaps one of them I think that stood out for me was the whole dynamic between strength and weakness that is expressed in the gospel. We see that very clearly in 1 Corinthians and played out in different ways within the rest of the Bible as well. I think this is rather interesting because often when we interact with persons with disabilities, the difficulty that we experience, I think, is that we see them from our own perspective, even the term disability, assumes ourselves to be the norm, right? We consider ourselves to be typical and so a person with a disability is disabled. And, you know, thinking about this whole theme of strength and weakness and the way that God describes the wisdom of men, for example, foolishness and the strength of men as weakness has you know led me to think about how God views persons with disabilities. How can we see them from his eyes? And when I took that positioning and try to think about it in that way, I realized that to God's view all of us, all of us would look incredibly limited, wouldn't we? We are all creatures before him, and I think in many parts of the Bible, God actually communicates that to us. We are told that we are pots, mere pots of clay. We are told that we are servants. It's only when we position ourselves vis-a-vis each other, right when we compare ourselves to each other, that this idea of disability emerges more clearly. However, if we see ourselves from God's eyes, we are all equal in that sense as creatures and as servants and ultimate as children of God. And so that was one of the key ideas that really shaped me.

Largely because it was also important for me, on a very personal level, to relate to persons with disabilities. I think not from a patronizing perspective, as I mentioned, not from a perspective that says, I'm here to give you something, but rather to ask the question, how can we work together, you know, how can we work together for the Kingdom of God? And that was the, I think, the key theological message that really transformed the way I looked at this particular ministry.

**JH:**

That is really powerful. I really like how you challenged us that we do come with kind of our own perspective and we evaluate them, you know, kind of this is the norm that I experience, and that's the abnormal in their experience. And I think to change that, to challenge that perspective is so powerful and in a way so life-giving. I like how you say you try to see them through God's eyes and really recognizing that we're all children of God and how they contribute to a part of God's Kingdom.

For some reason when you said that, it also helps me to think about the verse in Psalm 139 about how we are fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image. And I think for me, the longest time I had, I really struggle, you know, with how someone with disability could be wonderfully and fearfully made. And I don't know if you have any thoughts on how you relate this kind of verses to people that you encountered in your ministry.

**LWP:**

I love the verse that you just quoted, in fact, a couple years ago, I had the opportunity to preach on this particular verse at one of our local disability sector organizations. And so I think a verse like this is meant to challenge us. Jackie, you mentioned that you find it uncomfortable. I think it's meant to be uncomfortable. You know, one of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggemann, talks about how important it is for reality to challenge the people of God, and how the word of God is supposed to present a reality that we find it so difficult to see. And I think a verse like this is meant to do that. It's meant for us to think about the person with disability. And then recognize in the power of the word that they are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made. And if God tells us that they are as such, what does that mean for us? How should that transform our perspective of what wonderful means, or what it means to be made by God?

So often when we talk about God, we talk about him in terms of perfection. It's, you know, we basically talked about him in superlative terms, right? We just take anything good and we just maximize it, and that's God. And verses like this actually challenge us to think about what perfection looks like in the eyes of God. You know, just alluding back to 1 Corinthians again, what does human perfection look like? Does it look like the ability to do anything? Or does it look like a wise and reliant dependence upon God, the willingness to rest in God? And this is one of the reasons why I think persons with disabilities are so important to us in the church because they challenge the kind of mindsets that we have, that we subtly bring into the church. And verses like this and people with disabilities as they live a verse like this out challenge us to revisit what God truly treasures within the church.

**JH:**

Yeah that's really wonderful. Yeah. I really appreciate you saying that because it just really helps me relate back to something in my own life. You know, when my husband and I were expecting our third child and we went for one of the pregnancy tests and there was some abnormality in the ultrasound. And I think at that time that was something that we really needed to wrestle with. We knew abortion was not an option because we're Christians and we value lives. But, you know, just this thought of possibly living with a child that could have some kind of disability was such a challenge of faith. And in what you said just now, you know about how seeing and understanding what perfection means in God's eyes, that's really something precious. And hopefully that could enlighten our listeners on just the value of life that God has placed in each individual. And maybe on that note, you know, we're talking about some misconceptions that Christians we could have and then you, I think in your book you had mentioned two common myths that Christians could have about disability. And for those who haven't read your book, maybe as a plug for your book, could you just give us a teaser about what you said about those two myths that Christians could have about disability?

**LWP:**

Of course. You know these two myths that we wrote about in the book, we experienced them on the regular basis when we do ministry with the churches and so they are very popular myths in that sense. The first one is simply that disability is caused by sin and that could be attributed to the sin of the person with disabilities. Or maybe the parents. You might think that maybe in a modern society like ours you don't get this very often. The sad truth is people with disabilities do hear this from fellow Christians on a regular basis. For example, I have a friend who has a congenital disability and you know, despite the fact that his parents have sacrificed so much to care for this friend of mine you know, some of his church mates actually suggested that because the disabilities are congenital, it might have something to do with the sin of the parents. And so it's a myth that can cause a lot of hurt and quite a lot of pain and we see this of course expressed in different ways in the Bible as well. The disciples also had this misunderstanding in John Chapter 9. When they saw the man who was born blind. And of course Jesus had to correct them and say it's not that this man or his parents sin, but it was such so that the works of God might be displayed in him. And so we see immediately Jesus correcting such a myth.

Now the second myth is that God desires to heal this disability, and so if there is no healing upon prayer and the person with disability must have some sort of unconfessed sin or some sort of insufficient faith. Now there's a rather interesting story told by the theologian, Nancy Eisland, who sometimes considered the mother of disability theology. She herself has a rather profound disability, and she tells her story of how she was pulled around from church to church, from healing service to healing

service, and people constantly told her that she had some sort of unconfessed sin and the way she talks about it, I love the way she phrases it, she said, 'My sins must have been hidden so well because I certainly couldn't find them'. And sometimes that's the experience of persons with disabilities that I've talked to who have gone through all these healing experiences.

Now, just to clarify, I'm not saying that God cannot heal disability. I'm certainly not suggesting that. However what I'm saying for both of these myths is they function as half-truths. There is some sense of truth in them. Now, what I mean by that when we talk about disability being caused by sin, that's entirely possible. Disability can be caused by sin. You know, a couple of years ago, I had a rather serious gout attack and for any of you who have gout before, it's extremely painful and you can't walk during that period of time if the gout is in your foot. And I was told by my doctor that one of the reasons why I had gout was because I had been eating too much rich food. I had committed the sin of gluttony so certainly it is possible for sin to be part of the equation, but the problem is that when we read the Bible we see that actually the Bible provides a whole range of reasons for why a person might have a disability. For example the man born blind to show the glory of God. It can be for example someone like Mephibosheth where his nurse is running away with him, she accidentally drops him, not to any fault of his own. Or it could be due to war. We see that all the time in the Old Testament. There are a whole range of reasons, just like there are a whole range of reasons for why perhaps God does not heal disability. It might be his sovereignty, it might be his choice, it might be his desire to use the disability in a specific way. So these are half-truths that we simply need to broaden our vision of what the Bible is saying about disability. And this is, you know, one thing I think pastors really could be teaching about at the pulpit to help prepare the congregation should they experience disability sometime in their life.

**JH:**

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that from your book and from your insight. To our listeners again, the book is called *Enabling Hearts*, published in 2021, edited as a collection of edited work by Wen Pin and his team. And I think on this topic of half-truth or misconceptions, I want to kind of turn to our Asian culture. You know Asian culture there is a kind of a deep-rooted concept of karmic retribution and you mentioned earlier that this thought that especially with a congenital disability then we think is it because the parents have done something wrong and I think that that probably has a close link to this, karmic idea. It's in us, subconscious or maybe it's around us more than we would admit. And even when Christians that could think that something bad is happening to us because God is punishing us for some past wrong. And I think that is really powerful when you address how those things could really be. It's not that they're wrong that sin could cause some kind of disability. We know like alcoholism could cause congenital defects and such things, but to not categorically say all disabilities are caused because the parents did something wrong, I think that is really important

in terms of correcting this deep-rooted concept of karmic retribution that quite prevalent among both Christians and non-Christians in our societies, in our cultures.

Maybe let's turn to the people themselves, the people with disability. I think in our ideas of salvation, a lot of times we think about knowing certain gospel truths, knowing certain doctrines and to be able to recite them and this almost presumes a kind of a normative cognitive ability. And I guess the question then comes to, you know, when we encounter people who have severe mental disabilities due to no fault of their own, what does salvation look like for them?

### **LWP:**

That is a great question and is a question that is, I think, posed also by the parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities, and it's one that we need to address, I think, in order to promote inclusion. Now I think, as you rightly pointed out, there is a tendency in Christian circles to make salvation very cognitive in nature and to phrase it as though it's some sort of intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. And I think the only way to really address this is in a sense, to double down, right? We need to carefully think about what the Bible actually says about salvation. Now one of the parables that always comes to mind when I think about this issue, is actually the parable of the sheep and the goats in the Gospel of Matthew. You know, I asked myself, how does Jesus differentiate a sheep from a goat? Right? It's a parable judgment, and the litmus test given by Jesus is he talks about whether or not the disciple cares for those who are poor, hungry, naked. Namely the last, the lost, and the least. And so when I'm reflecting upon a story like this, I'm seeing how Jesus himself decides on salvation in that sense. I see that in that sense, the Bible doesn't try to cut up the human being into, you know, the mind, the body, the soul. It treats us as a holistic individual. And because we're holistic individuals, it means that salvation is also, in that sense, holistic. Yes, there is some cognitive aspect to our salvation, but it's also expressed in our emotions, it's also expressed in our affections and of course in that parable it's also expressed in our actions towards others as well. So thinking about salvation, I think I would qualify that you know that earlier approach towards salvation by saying that we are not only looking for intellectual assent, right? We are looking for a really deep trust and loyalty to Jesus, our Lord and Savior that we see expressed in relationships as well as behavior.

I'm always reminded that Jesus tells us that the way we identify faith is by looking at its fruits, right? You know a tree by its fruits. And in that sense, I think it's a very reassuring thing to help parents understand this. That faith is not necessarily only expressed by words or by doctrine. Faith can very much be expressed in a whole range of ways. But let me illustrate this just by example. So last year I had the privilege of putting together a Bible study on inclusion and we were looking for someone to illustrate the cover of the Bible study and we learned of a brother with autism who was a rather good artist. And he agreed to let us use his beautiful painting of the cross on the cover. And so when we asked him, you know, could we please pay you for using the painting because we wanted to just reemphasize his value in that way. He refused,

he refused and no matter what I tried to do, he refused to take any sort of payment. And so when we asked him and we asked his parents why is he refusing, he says you know, to him, this is his way of serving God. Now I was very moved by this, not just by his love in action, but, you know, when I was speaking with him, he has trouble articulating his words in, let's say, in a complete sentence and that's because of his own disability, but certainly if you just focused on his ability to speak and try to gauge his faith from there, he will not be able to do so. But his actions spoke louder than words.

And so likewise, a couple years ago, I was just interviewing different people with disabilities, you know, just to understand their faith a little bit more. And so one of my friends, she said to me, Wen Pin do you know you if you interview people, you are introducing a bias into the process. You're only able to understand those who are able to say out their faith. Now I have a boy that I want us to talk to, but he loves to draw. Could you let him draw instead? But I was very stubborn. I said I still want to at least interview him a little bit. So I did. And his interview was rather simple. You know, he said, I love Jesus. I love God. But you know what? He drew his faith. When he drew his faith, the first thing he drew was the Trinity.

**JH:**

Wow.

**LWP:**

He drew the different members of the Godhead and the Godhead overseeing and providing and protecting his family. And so I think that sometimes the issue is with us that we are not willing to explore different ways for people to express their saving faith. And we need to see these different modes because that abiding loyalty and relationship with God can be seen in so many different ways. And that's probably the way I would go with this.

**JH:**

That is so beautiful. I almost wish we could show our listeners a picture of what that little boy drew with the picture of Trinity, of course, where we're using words but that just sounds so beautiful in terms of how many different ways we can express our faith in God and words and thoughts are just one of those ways and so to be open to appreciating other expressions and not think that cognitive ability or words are the only way we can gauge a person's faith, that is really wonderful. And you mentioned earlier that you have this Bible study that you and your team crafted. Do you care to share with us with the title of that Bible study is?

**LWP:**

So the Bible study is called Enabling Communities because the Bible study is meant to Enable Communities to include people with disabilities in the church. So it's a series of four studies drawn from the New Testament for small groups to use so that you

know, you can gather together and think through some of these Bible passages that talk about inclusion. And one of the things we made sure to put into the Bible study were action points. So after you finish your study, we give you some help to think about how you can actually practice what you're learning in a practical context.

**JH:**

That's great. Thank you for sharing that really practical and tangible resource for our listener. That makes me think about, you know, kind of our churches here in Singapore and maybe even beyond Singapore. You know, how we can be more inclusive of people who have disabilities. Maybe on that note or what would you describe are some of the key issues that here in Singapore we have in terms of just obstacles that we need to overcome to be more inclusive to people who have disabilities in the church?

**LWP:**

So what issues do perhaps Singaporean churches face when it comes to inclusion? Maybe let me preface this by saying that the issues I'm going to talk about I don't think are in the sense unique to Singapore, but they are, because of our cultural makeup, I think strongly expressed within our churches. I think one facet of it would be that Singapore is highly educated and because it's highly educated, there is a very strong respect and I think this is not a bad thing necessarily, but there's a very strong respect for professionalism. But because it's a very strong respect for professional know-how, I think people are very reluctant to care for people with disabilities on a day-to-day basis in church, right? Usually the reason given to us when we talk about this is I'm afraid that I don't know how to care for the person, I may cause more harm than good. And that's, you know, comes from a good place and also comes from a desire to want to help. But yet at the same time, you know what is rather interesting when you talk to families who have members with disabilities, that's not their perspective, right? What they would rather you do, rather than trying to wait until you get some professional training, it's actually just to simply befriend a person with a special needs and it's not very difficult you know, actually the key skill to have, it's just the ability to have a thick skin.

Sometime ago, I was interested to get to know a brother in my church who had mental health condition. And so I thought, OK, I'll go and sit next to him. And so when I said that next to him, I said hello, my name is Wen Pin, what's your name? And he just stared at me. You know, crickets. No, no, no response. Very, very awkward. So I said OK, never mind. So I came back the next week and I did the same thing, and this time he told me his name. But then the conversation did not continue after the either, so it's equally awkward and I just kept pressing at it. The next week, he said, Wen Pin, I remember your name and I was surprised he remembered my name. And then we had a little bit of a chat. It lasted for maybe a minute, you know, and it just went on like that and again, every week we made a little bit of advancement. And what was really interesting is that a few months down the road he was sharing with me some of his own spiritual struggles. And this is a person who was because of the disability, his



mind was in some sense degenerating, but yet he had a very rich spirituality that he wanted to express. And so that thick skin allowed us to just get through to him and really grow together with him as the church. So I think that's one thing Singaporean need to get over the need to, you know how to do everything before starting to do anything. So that's one thing.

Maybe another thing I think is almost baked into the fabric of being Singaporean is this whole idea of independence. Right from the very beginning you know, in primary school we are told the great story about how we trusted the British and they pointed their guns in all the wrong directions in World War II. You know, and we are told that that teaches us that we should never rely on anyone else. We must stand on our own two feet. And so we championed the virtue of independence. And these seeps into the disability sector as well, which is why you see a lot of promotion for persons with disabilities to be at the workplace, to earn their own living. Yet the reality of the situation is, from what I saw last saw regarding the statistics, only 10% of persons with disabilities are in the workplace. So what about the 90%? And so if we assume, if we take for granted the fact that independence is the target that you should aim for, we're going to have a very low view of that remaining 90% of persons with disability. Now, I struggled this myself when I went into full time ministry because I had always been independent. I was the one tithing at church and then suddenly I needed to receive love and affection from others. And I had to keep on saying 'no' until I realized that saying 'no' was the wrong spirituality and I needed to be dependent on other people as well. And it's in this growth of understanding that God did not create us to be independent but interdependent. That, as creatures our very nature, is to rely on him. That, I think, creates an environment where people with disabilities can come into our communities and not feel as though they're lesser beings. People with disabilities have gifts. They can contribute to the church, but they can also receive love. They don't have to feel bad for being recipients of love. In fact, learning to receive is one of the key things that any disciple in Christ has to learn because if you don't know how to receive, you cannot truly appreciate the grace of God.

And so yet again people with disabilities have that to teach to us and maybe quickly one, one last thing, something I hinted at just now, I think Singapore is using the words of John Swinton, we are a hyper cognitive society. I think it comes maybe from our Confucian roots. You know, all the exams that we do, we want to cognitivise everything. But the problem with championing that dimension of human life is that for those who are cognitively impaired in some way, we automatically assigned to them some sort of lesser quality. Now, I belong to an academic so-called profession, and so it may be strange for me to say this, but I think that there's so much more to life than scholarship, right? And talking about just now, my friend the artist or someone else who has a different skill set, I saw this so powerfully communicated.

A couple years back at a church, Church of Our Saviour, an Anglican church in Singapore, where they had the inclusive worship service and during the service they wanted to just showcase the unity of Christ of the church. And so what they did was

they invited persons and disabilities to be part of the worship team and so how they went about doing that was every person had a role. Some of them were singers, some of them were dancers. Some of them, you know, were waving pieces of cloth. But every one of them had a role to play in building up the church in that worship service. So rather than championing only one set of gifts, I think the Singapore Church could see the whole range of gifts that the Lord has poured down upon his people and enjoy the entire range of gifts. And when we do that, I think persons with disabilities will not be considered as persons with disabilities, but persons with different abilities.

**LWP:**

That's great. I love that last statement that you said almost helped me to think about kind of what we read in the Bible about how they're different members of the body and that we are working together, we shouldn't say one part is more honorable than the other. And really the weaker sometimes are not necessarily weak in the sense of that they're not useful, but they are just as useful to the body, greater whole. And just thinking even during the pandemic when we were not allowed to sing in the church service and just before that, my children and I were involved in a sign language worship ministry for the hearing impaired and it was during the pandemic they could worship normally like they always did, and the rest of us couldn't sing. And so I start seeing how a lot of sign language was incorporated into worship to bring the congregation into a participatory kind of worship gesture, you know, through our actions rather than through our voices. And that was just so beautiful to see that aspect of that part of the congregation or that part of the body of Christ helping the rest of us in terms of our worship during the pandemic. I really like all the points that you make about how we need to be interdependent rather than independent and we need to have thicker skins and that's those are really helpful points for us to keep in mind as we learn to engage and learn to include those in our midst who have some kind of disability or another, recognizing and valuing them for being a part of the body of Christ. I think we could keep having this conversation for a long time and just learn a lot from you. But want to thank you today Wen Pin for joining us and just sharing with us from the richness of your experience.

And to our listeners, thank you for tuning in. And that was Mr Leow Wen Pin with Koinonia inclusion Network who share with us on the topic of theology disability and inclusion. Thank you for listening goodbye.