

# Engage Disability India 2017



The Engage disability movement began in 2014 with the first national conference being held in Delhi in September. The movement brings together Christian professionals in the field of disability, churches and para-church organizations, lay members of the congregations and persons with disabilities and their families. The vision of the movement is that all Christian communities in India will engage with and accompany people with disabilities to experience abundant life together. The second national conference was held at the LITE auditorium in Chennai from the 14th to the 16th of November, 2017. The focus of this conference was - Engage. Equip. Be enabled.

The objectives of this conference were:

- To bring together like-minded people and organizations who have a heart for disability
- To develop strategies for ministry alongside those with disabilities
- To equip church leadership and laity for disability inclusion in the Church
- To identify leaders with disabilities who can speak into disability issues in the Church

The conference was attended by about 370 delegates from all over the country and abroad. It was a powerful ecumenical event including over 100 organizations/churches. Leaders of some of the largest Christian associations and Churches in India were involved:

- General Secretary of National Council of Churches of India: Rev. Dr. Roger Gaikwad
- General secretary of Catholic Bishops Council of India: Most Rev. Theodore Mascarenhas
- General secretary of Evangelical Medical Fellowship of India: Rev Dr Sam Siddarth
- Moderator, head bishops, of Church of South India. Rt.Rev. Thomas K. Oomen,
- General Secretary, CSI Synod. Rev Dr. Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda
- Rt. Rev. Dr. George Stephen, Bishop of CSI Diocese of Madras
- Executive Director of EFFICOR: Kennedy Dhanabalan
- Executive director of Christian Medical Association of India: Dr Bimal Charles
- Head of programs for the Catholic Health Association of India: Dr Anto Maliekal
- Director of the International Christian Medical and Dental Association: Dr Vinod Shah
- Executive Director of the Emmanuel Health Association: Dr Sunil Gokavi
- Director of World Vision India: Dr Cherian Thomas

Addressing the participants, Bishop Dr George Stephen urged the participants to learn, understand and affirm the image of God in people with disability, as well as affirm equal rights, respect and dignity of all persons. Presiding over the inaugural ceremony, Rev. Dr. Daniel Rathnakara emphasized that disability Inclusion focuses on accessibility (functional, attitudinal and information – communication technology barriers), theological discourse (engaging, promoting

and building body of knowledge on Indian disability theological discourse through grassroots engagement) and networking. Bishop Theodore reiterated that the Christian Church is the leader in engaging disability in India and highlighted the need for all Churches to come together in favour of the poor, the underprivileged and deprived including persons with disabilities.

The four main themes for the plenaries were:

- The Bible and disability
- The irresistible Church
- Families with disabilities and the Church
- Connecting the Church and the disability sector

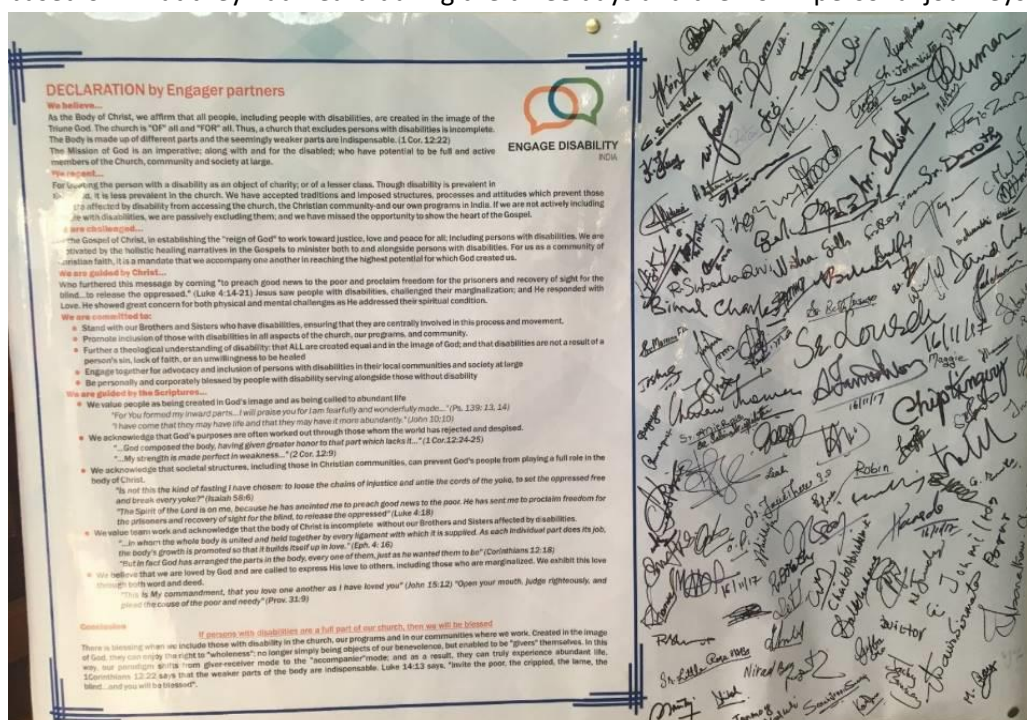
Each of these themes had breakout sessions that explored in greater depth the topics. Practical tools and case studies were shared to make these ideas tangible. There were 45 speakers for the 14 breakout sessions. The different breakout sessions also had people sharing their personal stories which added value to the sessions. For example, a couple shared their story of getting married despite much opposition because of the disability of the lady. The husband believed that the lady is created in God's image and that decision came with many challenges as they come from one of the slums and yet, they shared how much they have been blessed as a family.

Another Pastor shared about his journey with persons with disability following the 2014 conference wherein he identified people with disabilities in his community and connected with a NGO in providing support and access to entitlements to these people. He also organized training programs for other pastors in his area with the help of contacts he had developed during the conference.

An organization shared about their experience with the Engage disability toolkit that was developed following the last conference to aid in disability inclusion for lay people. They adapted the toolkit to develop modules on disability inclusion and have been using it for their regular trainings on development across the country. CSI adapted the toolkit to develop an Octave disability resource.

There was a planned networking session as part of the conference where organizations/churches from a particular region had an opportunity to connect and plan future collaborations. Each region also selected two leaders to help facilitate the group communication and meetings.

At the close of the conference, the leaders and delegates also signed a declaration about their response based on what they had heard during the three days and their own personal journeys.



**During the conference, a core group met to plan the way forward for the network. The discussion is summarized below:**

**Conference statement of intent (Engage 2017):**

1. Engage with leaders in the Christian community to help them promote inclusion across their structures and networks e.g., leaders in NCCI, CBCI, EFI, EMFI etc. etc.
2. Designated day of prayer: 5<sup>th</sup> day of every month facilitated through an Engage Disability prayer coordinator
3. Develop/ disseminate tools for churches to engage with disability:
  - a. Church disability audit (social, physical accessibility for the elderly, attitudes)
  - b. Needs assessment (to understand what support is required by the Christian community in order to respond to disability)
4. Continue documenting best practices and stories of change and make them available to the entire network
5. Catalyse regional/state level conferences or workshops to facilitate practical engagement with disability
6. Meet as a local hub regularly with an initial plan for a specific event within six weeks (e.g., Christmas celebrations with people with disabilities etc)
7. Equip churches/organisations to implement government legislation e.g., RPD Act, 2016 so that we are all complying to the laws of the nation
8. Equipping religious training institutions to teach candidates about importance of disability inclusion in their religious community and ministry
9. To create a resource directory of member organisations



**Feedback from delegates:**

Professor Annavarum: “The conference itself was a great blessing... From corridor conversations to keynote speeches, every event was immensely enriching. It is the first ever public conference where we could witness individual transformation, be of believers with disabilities like ourselves, of preachers....., of leaders of major NGOs, of parents of children with profound disabilities”

CMC Vellore: The CMC team are planning to utilize the pastors and churches they met at Engage Disability to help follow up their PMR patients after discharge. It is a very practical way for them to work with churches to walk alongside those with disability.



“The engage disability conference in Chennai was totally new for me and I come to know how we think, how we react and what we do, when it comes to engage disabilities (PWDs) in our community, church,

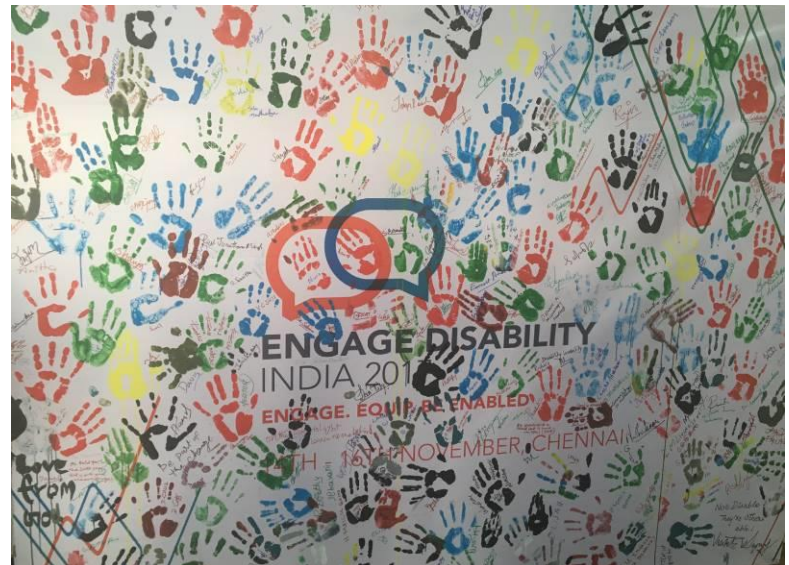


work place and daily life. (I realized that)...while promoting inclusion of those with disabilities in all aspects of our church, our community, our program is important, the most important place they want to be is in our hearts... we can make ramps, accessible toilets, inclusive playground, and community base rehabilitation center (CBRC) etc. but the inclusion of PWD depends how we deal with each person with disability individually. And this is because the bible teaches us that it matters. Luke 14:13 says, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lamb, the blind ... and you will be blessed”. – Bright Luke

Gratitude!

A big thank you must go to the organizing committee and in particular CSI for hosting such a large and diverse conference so professionally.

Of course, all thanks and all glory be to God who brought has together Christians from all over this great country for this cause. We thank God that we have seen His divine hand over the whole Engage Disability 2017 conference.



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