

## **Songs of the Silent Hearts: Spiritual Expressions of the Deaf and Mute Community of South Kalimantan's GERKATIN Community**

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores the spiritual expressions of Deaf communities within GERKATIN South Kalimantan and examines how non-verbal forms of worship function as authentic manifestations of Christian and religious spirituality. The research aims to understand how Deaf individuals articulate their faith in the absence of auditory and verbal communication, and how their embodied, visual, and relational expressions form a meaningful spiritual experience. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs interviews, observations, and document analysis to investigate the lived experiences of Deaf individuals, focusing on their religious participation, social challenges, and alternative modes of expressing faith. The findings reveal that Deaf spirituality is shaped significantly by visual engagement, bodily expression, sign language, and communal relationships, all of which serve as powerful vehicles of meaning-making in their religious life. The study identifies a notable gap in public facilities, inclusive worship spaces, educational access, and pastoral support that continues to marginalise the Deaf community. The novelty of this research lies in its articulation of Deaf spirituality as a legitimate locus of theological reflection—demonstrating that silence, embodiment, and visibility are not deficiencies but rich spiritual resources. The implications of this study call for broader ecclesial and societal transformation, encouraging churches, religious leaders, and policymakers to adopt inclusive practices, integrate sign language and visual liturgy, and affirm Deaf individuals as full participants in spiritual and communal life.

### **Keywords:**

*GERKATIN; the deaf people; disability; friendly*

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies on disability in Indonesia do exist, but most research focuses on pastoral aspects or social services. Very few studies examine how the spiritual expressions of deaf-mutes are understood from the perspective of theology and their own faith experiences. This research gap indicates the need for a more in-depth study of spirituality as a lived experience, not just as a liturgical function or church social service. Therefore, considering the reality of deaf-mutes in Indonesia, they are formally united in an organisation called "GERKATIN" (Indonesian Movement for the Welfare of the Deaf). This organisation was founded on February 23, 1981, in Jakarta. The Central Executive Board (DPP) is based in Jakarta, while the Regional Executive Board (DPD) is based in the provincial capitals, including those in South Kalimantan. This movement was born as a result of the merger of several deaf communities in Indonesia. Although there is no specific information regarding the date of the formation of GERKATIN in South Kalimantan, in 2023, GERKATIN South Kalimantan has been actively holding Indonesian sign language training for the general public. (GERKATIN, 2023) .

Deaf-mute people are included in the group of multiple disabilities who are often considered to have limitations in expressing emotions, feelings, and spirituality, especially because worship practices in many churches still rely heavily on verbal expression. This view raises several issues that need further research, including: (1) how deaf-mute people express their spirituality without verbal media; (2) to what extent they can actively participate in worship when hearing is an obstacle; (3) how they experience the atmosphere of worship; (4) what forms of spiritual expression are used, such as body movements, sign language, or art; and (5) to what extent the church provides liturgical care and support for their spiritual needs. Based on these issues, this study aims to reveal how deaf-mute people express their spirituality in "silence," which they manifest as "heart songs."

In general, it is known that deaf-mutes face several obstacles in expressing their faith, including: 1) Limited access to worship, many places of worship do not provide interpreters who master sign language, making it difficult for them to understand sermons, songs and prayers delivered verbally. In addition, religious materials in formats that are friendly to the deaf-mute, such as videos with sign language or written text that is easy to understand, are also still very lacking. (Ainun, 2023) 2) Lack of awareness and sensitivity from religious communities, including the Church, to provide inclusive programs that pay attention to the needs of deaf-mutes; (GPIB, 2022) 3) There is no training for religious leaders, including Church administrators, in communicating with them through sign language; (Indonesia, 2023) 4) Difficulty in expressing faith in traditional ways, because worship often involves verbal expressions in songs, prayers, readings of scriptures and preaching of the word, so that deaf-mutes become isolated and must find other ways to participate and express themselves; (GPIB, 2022) 5) Lack of social and spiritual support for deaf-mutes, so they are isolated in religious communities due to difficulties in communicating. So far, there are no special groups or communities within religions that support their spiritual expression in a way that suits their needs. (Liputan6.com, 2020)

There are several writings that talk about disability: first, Maretha Perunika in her writing entitled "*Two Sentences of the Shahada and Prayer: A Case Study of the Deaf Community in Palangkaraya from an Islamological Perspective* ." This writing explains how the deaf struggle

to express their spirituality through the Shahada and Prayer with sign language so that it can be categorised as valid in Islamic teachings. Second, Ikhsan Juniadi, in his writing entitled "*Theology of Disability: An Effort to theologise about disability for the GKE Tanjung Untung Congregation according to the Translation model* ." This writing reveals how the Church theologises about people with disabilities. These two writings talk about people with disabilities from two different perspectives, namely Islamology and Dogmatics.

Related to GERKATIN, there are several related studies. Yossi Fitriana, Nentien Desri and Yellyta Ulsafitri Handayani with the title "*Improving Knowledge and Skills of Teachers with Disabilities in the Context of Developing Reproductive System Learning Methods in the Deaf Group of the GERKATIN Organisation in Bukittinggi City* ". The research focuses on understanding how teachers provide learning to deaf groups regarding the reproductive system. Initially, learning was centred on the teacher, but then it was developed into interactive learning, which developed into network learning. (Yossi Fitriana, Nentien Desri, 2020, p. 6) . Retno Herningrum Pratiwi and Martien Herna Susanti, in their article entitled "*Political Participation of First-Time Voters with Deaf Disabilities, Members of the Gerkatina DPC South Jakarta in the 2017 DKI Jakarta Gubernatorial Election* ". The research focuses on examining the forms of political participation carried out by members of GERKATIN, South Jakarta's first-time voters in the 2017 DKI Jakarta Gubernatorial Election. The research found several obstacles experienced by first-time voters with disabilities in GERKATIN South Jakarta DPC, namely a Lack of socialisation, No Assistance, and Facilities that are Less Disability-Friendly. (Pratiwi & Susanti, 2020, pp. 36, 39–40) . Maulana Safitri and Puput Ratnasari in an article entitled "*Empowerment of Deaf People with Disabilities Through Handicrafts at GERKATIN Palangka Raya Branch* ". The research focuses on efforts to understand the empowerment process for deaf groups and the analysis of the empowerment stages. The handicraft program carried out has an impact on people with disabilities and is even able to change their economy for the better. (Maulana Safitri, 2022, p. 102) . Reskyana Syam, et al. In his article entitled "*Improving the Skills and Self-Confidence of the Deaf (Deaf) in the South Sulawesi Regional Leadership Council (DPD) GERKATIN Through Choirs*, " he highlights efforts to train a choir for deaf groups. The goal is to increase their self-confidence to be on par with others. (Reskyana Syam, 2018, p. 110) .

In her study of disability theology, Nancy Eiesland, in her work, *The Disabled God*, asserts that the bodily experience of people with disabilities is a legitimate and crucial theological locus. For Eiesland, disability is not merely a physical condition, but a mode of existence that reveals the presence of a "disabled" God, and this challenges the church to reimagine its divine and prophetic identity (Nancy L. Eiesland, 1994). Meanwhile, theologian Amos Yong presents a perspective that views disability as an essential part of the diversity of creation; according to him, the Holy Spirit works through differences and limitations as a medium of love and healing, not as an obstacle (Amos Yong, 2011). The thoughts of these two figures are highly relevant to this research because they open up a theological space that values the existence of deaf-mutes as a valuable faith, not as a deficiency. Thus, the thoughts of Eiesland and Yong provide a theoretical foundation for this research to read the spirituality of deaf-mutes through the lens of disability theology that elevates dignity, inclusion, and healing as essential theological aspects.

This research itself attempts to highlight the social reality of people with disabilities, specifically deaf-mutes, who are often excluded from worship services, making it difficult for them to express their spirituality. Furthermore, the different research locus also characterises this paper. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding, awareness, and sensitivity to how deaf-mutes express their spirituality in a way that is comfortable for them. This research also aims to explore how the deaf-mute community expresses their spirituality, while also examining how the meaning of faith is formed through sign language, community relations, and everyday religious experiences. Through this focus, the research makes an academic contribution to the development of disability theology in Indonesia, particularly in broadening the church's understanding of embodied, relational, and inclusive spirituality.

## **METHODS**

The research conducted in this paper is qualitative. Qualitative research is a method that examines informants as subjects that take place in a scientific situation. The research conducted will attempt to describe existing conditions, such as opinions given from the ongoing process. (Muhammad Idrus, 2007) . Data collection was carried out using interview techniques, observation, and the use of documents in the research. The analysis process consists of data reduction, narrative data presentation, and verification or conclusion. The time was carried out in February-March 2025 in Banjarmasin and Martapura, with the study target of deaf-mute people gathered in the GERKATIN Organisation of South Kalimantan.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **People with Disabilities Need Support in the Form of Facilities and Infrastructure**

Before 2023, the deaf community in Banjar Regency, South Kalimantan, was largely invisible in the public sphere. Community activities were barely heard of, and access to information, education, and social spaces was extremely limited. However, this situation slowly began to change when Muhammad Fajri, a deaf-mute person with a strong passion for community building, learned about the existence of GERKATIN (the Movement for the Welfare of the Deaf in Indonesia) from the central government in Jakarta. Driven by a sense of concern and a calling to fight for the rights of his deaf-mute friends in his region, Fajri began communicating with the central government and took the initiative to establish a similar organisation in his area. He became a pioneering figure, encouraging the birth of the Banjar Regency GERKATIN DPC on September 23, 2023. Within a short time, GERKATIN Banjar successfully formed a management for the 2023–2028 period, with Fajri as chairman. This community continues to grow and build relationships with various parties, including religious leaders, universities, and the local government. Although they did not yet have a permanent secretariat and still relied on private homes for their activities, the spirit and solidarity they had built were very strong. With his persistence, he invited other deaf-mute friends who had previously been inactive or unorganised to begin gathering, discussing, and forming a legitimate organisational structure. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview , 2025* ) .

To date, the GERKATIN organisation has shown significant growth in South Kalimantan. Several branches or representatives have been established in areas such as Banjar Regency, Banjarbaru City, and Barabai. The existence of these branches is clear evidence that the deaf-mute community is beginning to emerge and demonstrates a spirit of unity and advocacy for their rights and well-being. However, this development still faces a number of fundamental challenges, particularly regarding the organisation's facilities and infrastructure. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview* , 2025)

At the provincial level, the organisation's leadership falls under the control of Mahmud, the Chairman of the South Kalimantan Regional Leadership Council (DPD) of GERKATIN. Under his leadership, efforts to strengthen inter-regional coordination continue, both through online meetings and in-person visits to the regions. Mahmud serves not only as a coordinator but also as a key driver, keeping the organisation's spirit alive amidst various limitations. He actively communicates with regional branches to ensure that the entire deaf-mute community in South Kalimantan remains connected, engaged, and well-served. ( *Mahmud, Interview* , 2025)

One of the main obstacles they face is the limited availability of suitable and permanent gathering spaces. To date, South Kalimantan lacks a dedicated building that could serve as a permanent centre for deaf-mute community activities. Consequently, various activities, such as routine meetings, training sessions, discussions, and other social events, must still be held in private homes. Despite numerous requests from the government for assistance, they have received no response. This situation is unfair to them, as other communities enjoy access to adequate public facilities.

The above conditions certainly make it quite difficult to maintain the consistency, comfort, and effectiveness of joint activities. This is further exacerbated by the limited understanding of the rights of people with disabilities among the public and government officials. However, despite these limitations, the spirit of cooperation and solidarity among members remains strong. Despite this, GERKATIN activities continue to be conducted online and through management visits to the regions.

Furthermore, at weddings, for example, this community has yet to find training for preachers or worship facilities that are accessible to people with disabilities. This is despite Indonesia specifically ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, specifically in the appendix to Regulation of the Minister of State for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection No. 12 of 2011 concerning policies for handling children with special needs. They have the same rights, including social services. (Jan S. Aritonang and Asteria T. Aritonang, 2017, p. 187-189)

From a Christian perspective, understanding that they are *the Imago Dei* is very important. As the image and likeness of God, humans represent God's presence and action in the world. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017, pp. 31-32) In line with this, according to Law No. 4 of 1997, people with disabilities are part of the Indonesian people who have the same position, rights, duties, and roles in various areas of life. Therefore, equal support and social services are certainly important to strive for. (Et.al., 2016, pp. 5-6)

The local government has assisted in the form of basic food packages, but only twice. There are no skills training, scholarships, or empowerment programs that address long-term needs. The assistance provided is more symbolic than strategic. Yet, what the deaf community needs is not just "given" assistance, but also "empowerment." They have the potential, passion, and desire to develop, but they haven't been given the space and opportunities they deserve. They want to work without always having to rely on charity. They want to be recognised as equal citizens, with the right to be heard, understood, and respected.

In the appendix to the Regulation of the Minister of State for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2011 concerning the policy of handling children with special needs, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been ratified. They have the right to gain independence. (Jan S. Aritonang and Asteria T. Aritonang, 2017) In addition, based on Law No. 4 of 1997, people with disabilities are part of the Indonesian people who have the same position, rights, duties, and roles in various areas of life. Article 6 explains that all people with disabilities have the right to various needs, both in education, employment, equal treatment, accessibility, rehabilitation, social assistance, and maintenance of social welfare levels, and the same right to develop their talents, abilities, and social life. Although the implementation of these values is often just a dream. (Et.al., 2016)

The government needs to conduct comparative studies in learning the appropriate form of service for people with disabilities, for example, from *the v. Bodelschwingh Foundation Bethel* (vBS Bethel) in Bielefeld, Germany, and even becoming a negotiator in the public and political space in empowering people with disabilities. (Jan S. Aritonang and Asteria T. Aritonang, 2017) Experience that needs to be emulated by the government. In addition, the government as a policy maker has the selling point to be a negotiator in negotiating with certain parties to open a wider and friendlier space for people with disabilities in obtaining employment. For example, Jekonia Tarigan's experience interviewing Mr. H who was retained by the agency where he worked and even supported in his work, even though he was a person with disabilities. (Et.al., 2016)

Other experiences in Indonesia include *Difa City Tour and Travel* (DCTT) in Yogyakarta, or in Yapetra, Tanjung Morowa, North Sumatra, with *Multi-Disability Impairment* (MDVI) and inclusive education. In addition to increasing literature for people with disabilities and involving them in the procurement of such literature, such as *the Fellowship of Netra Community (Fency)* in Jakarta, in collaboration with the Christian Blind Association and the A Wyata Guna Special School. (Et.al., 2016)

In Kalimantan, one example is GERKATIN Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, which has a program to empower mute groups through handicrafts. The comfortable environment and availability of sales outlets in the community have a positive impact on them. Their potential is explored through this program, fostering camaraderie fostering mutual support, which in turn impacts their economy. (Maulana Safitri, 2022, pp. 102, 117) . Therefore, the government should empower the GERKATIN community in South Kalimantan to develop specialised skills that will contribute to a better quality of life.

## People with Disabilities Need Friendly Public Services

The commemoration of International Sign Language Day, which falls on September 23, 2023, marks a significant milestone for the deaf-mute community in South Kalimantan. More than just an annual ceremony, this moment is deeply meaningful for members of GERKATIN (the Movement for the Welfare of the Deaf in Indonesia) as a space to demonstrate their existence, abilities, and solidarity among people with disabilities, especially deaf-mutes. That year's commemoration attracted 120 deaf participants from various regencies and cities in South Kalimantan, including Central Kalimantan. They came not only to celebrate but also to voice their rights and equality as citizens. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview* , 2025)

The series of events held was quite diverse, ranging from pantomime competitions and parades to open discussions on issues frequently faced by the deaf-mute community, such as access to public services, education, and equal employment opportunities. The pantomime competition became a favourite event because it provided a powerful means of expression without having to rely on verbal language. Likewise, the parade served as a form of open declaration to the public that the deaf-mute community exists and is present in society. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview* , 2025)

The discussions also served as important reflection points. They shared ideas and experiences, and developed hopes for a better future for the community. Topics such as the need for sign language interpreters in public spaces, disability-friendly administrative services, and the importance of government support in the form of inclusive policies were hotly debated and relevant. Many participants also felt that events like this should be held more frequently, as they could strengthen interregional networks and provide a space to speak that they rarely get in public forums. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview* , 2025)

More than just a celebration, this activity provides a space for the Deaf-Mute community to actively participate in raising awareness among the wider community. Their participation in social forums like this demonstrates that people with disabilities are not a passive group or simply waiting for a helping hand, but rather an active, productive, and enthusiastic community eager to participate in social development equally. Through this commemoration of International Sign Language Day, GERKATIN South Kalimantan proves that inclusion is not just discourse, but can be realised through real and meaningful participation. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview* , 2025)

Topics such as the need for sign language interpreters in public spaces, disability-friendly administrative services, and the importance of government support in the form of inclusive policies have become hot and relevant discussions. Furthermore, public services for people with disabilities are currently still suboptimal. They deserve equal rights in education, accessibility, health care, social services, and employment. Their potential needs to be optimised as best as possible. These include educational patterns or forms, the right to social life and basic welfare, therapy and rehabilitation, training and development of life skills ( *soft skills* ), legal protection, and daily living management so they can become independent, responsible citizens and participate in development. These need to be addressed as early as possible, even from the time they are born. (Jan S. Aritonang and Asteria T. Aritonang, 2017)

## The Need for Widespread Awareness That Persons with Disabilities Are an Integral Part of Society

Living with a disability is not easy, especially for those living in areas where inclusion has not been seriously addressed. This is what our deaf-mute friends experience. Despite building communities and engaging in various activities, the reality on the ground shows that they still face numerous challenges and significant gaps in facilities, policies, and social support.

One of the main ongoing issues is the limited space for activities. To this day, GERKATIN in South Kalimantan does not have a permanent meeting place or secretariat. All activities, such as meetings, training sessions, and even small religious events, must be held remotely, often in members' homes. Several requests have been made to the government for shared space or facilities, but to no avail. While other groups are free to conduct activities in village halls or community buildings, GERKATIN must rely on the goodwill of members to share their private spaces. ( *Mahmmud, Interview , 2025* )

This situation is exacerbated by the lack of understanding among the public and government officials regarding the rights of people with disabilities, particularly those who are deaf and mute. Sign language, the sole means of communication for most deaf and mute, has not been widely accepted. Many people are unfamiliar with it or are reluctant to learn it, even in religious settings. For example, when they attend religious studies or lectures, deaf and mute people often just sit quietly. They don't dare use sign language for fear of being seen as disruptive. Yet, it is the only way they can understand the content of the lecture. As a result, spiritual spaces, which should be places where everyone feels accepted, become lonely and alienating for them. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview , 2025* )

The local government has assisted in the form of basic food packages, but only twice. There are no skills training programs, scholarships, or empowerment programs that address long-term needs. The assistance provided is more symbolic than strategic. Yet, what the deaf community needs is not just "given" assistance, but also "empowerment." They have the potential, passion, and desire to develop, but they haven't been given the space and opportunities they deserve. ( *Mahmmud, Interview , 2025* )

This challenge is not just about facilities or policies, but also about awareness and respect for humanity. Deaf and Mute friends also want to be part of social life, worship in peace, study comfortably, and work without always having to rely on pity. They want to be recognised as equal citizens who have the right to be heard, understood, and respected. ( *Mahmmud, Interview , 2025* ) Despite these limitations, the GERKATIN community in South Kalimantan continues to move with all the strength they have. They do not remain silent. They continue to commemorate International Sign Language Day, form organisational structures, train their members, and build solidarity. All of this is done not because they have great resources, but because they have a dream and a strong determination to fight for a better life.

The Deaf-Mute Community strives to raise public awareness through active participation. Their participation in social forums like this demonstrates that people with disabilities are not a passive group awaiting outreach, but rather an active, productive, and enthusiastic community committed to equal participation in social development. Through this commemoration of

International Sign Language Day, GERKATIN South Kalimantan demonstrates that inclusion is not just talk, but can be realised through real and meaningful participation.

For example, an institution like vBS Bethel engages people with disabilities as an integral part of society. This institution places people with disabilities within the community, including in public schools, and encourages community involvement in serving them. vBS Bethel even acts as a negotiator and discussion partner in public and political spaces. People with disabilities are also involved in making decisions about what is best for them to do and what they should do. (Jan S. Aritonang and Asteria T. Aritonang, 2017)

Although the impression of inferiority found in the use of the term "disabled" to refer to people with disabilities in Law Number 4 of 1997 is still found. The term is seen as showing an unfriendly attitude. They are considered individuals with shortcomings, so their values are less good or even less than perfect. Furthermore, the public views that people with disabilities tend to be associated with someone's physical limitations in certain professions. For example, people who experience blindness are identified with the profession of massage therapists. Furthermore, those with physical disabilities tend to have difficulty finding work and live in poverty, often becoming beggars on the streets. (Et.al., 2016) This erroneous perspective needs to be reformed because they have equal rights and status as fellow human beings in all circumstances.

## **The Need for Wider Support and Access to Education for People with Disabilities**

Higher education opportunities for deaf-mute students have been available at Lambung Mangkurat University (ULM) since 2019. This is a breath of fresh air for the younger generation of deaf-mute students who have faced various limitations in access to higher education. Two GERKATIN members, Nisa and Zahra, are real examples of deaf-mute individuals who have been able to access education. They were able to pass the university entrance selection and are currently active as students at ULM. Their story is both inspiring and proof that people with disabilities, especially deaf-mute individuals, have great potential that needs to be facilitated with adequate access and support. (*Nisa, Interview*, 2025)

However, despite this progress, many other deaf-mute children still face serious challenges. In general, access to inclusive education remains very limited, both in terms of the number of truly disability-friendly educational institutions and the availability of supporting facilities such as sign language interpreters, accompanying teachers, and learning systems tailored to their needs. Most deaf-mute children still only receive education in Special Schools (SLB), which, while beneficial, often lack a curriculum that is equivalent or flexible enough to prepare them for the outside world, let alone to compete at higher levels of education. (*Zahra, Interview*, 2025)

After completing their education at a special needs school (SLB), many students face difficulties continuing their education at a regular high school, let alone entering college. This is due not only to economic constraints but also to a lack of understanding on the part of public schools about how to support deaf-mute students. Furthermore, not all universities have active and functional Disability Services Units (DSUs). Yet, the existence of DSUs is vital to ensuring

the comfort and success of students with disabilities, including providing sign language interpreters, learning aids, and a holistic support system. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview, 2025*)

This problem of access to education also continues into the workplace. Deaf-mute people often do not have equal opportunities in obtaining employment, even for nonverbal individuals. Many companies still view people with disabilities, including deaf-mute people, as a burden rather than an asset. As a result, many special needs school graduates, or even university graduates from the deaf community, end up working in the informal sector, with minimal wages and inadequate working conditions. ( *Muhammad Fajri, Interview, 2025*)

In general, access to inclusive education remains very limited, both in terms of the number of truly disability-friendly educational institutions and the availability of supporting facilities such as sign language interpreters, teacher assistants, and learning systems tailored to their needs. Although Lambung Mangkurat University has provided educational access for the deaf-mute community since 2019, most deaf-mute children still only receive education in Special Schools (SLB), which, while beneficial, often lack a curriculum equivalent to or flexible enough to prepare them for the outside world, let alone compete at higher levels of education.

After completing their education at a special needs school (SLB), many students face difficulties in continuing their education at a general high school, let alone entering college. This is due not only to economic constraints but also to a lack of understanding on the part of public schools about how to support deaf-mute students. Furthermore, not all universities have an active and functional Disability Services Unit (ULD). The existence of a ULD is vital to ensuring the comfort and success of students with disabilities, including providing sign language interpreters, learning aids, and a holistic support system. This is in line with the principle that all citizens have the right to an equal education. Article 6 of Law Number 4 of 1997 states that all persons with disabilities have the right to education, employment, equal treatment, accessibility, rehabilitation, social assistance, and the maintenance of social welfare, as well as the right to develop their talents, abilities, and social life. (Et.al., 2016)

## **Support and a Disability-Friendly Workplace are Needed**

Deaf-mute people often lack equal opportunities in employment, even for nonverbal individuals. Many companies still view people with disabilities, including deaf-mute people, as a burden rather than an asset. As a result, many special education school (SLB) graduates, or even university graduates from the deaf community, end up working in the informal sector, facing low wages and inadequate working conditions.

Whereas Law Number 4 of 1997 in Article 6 explains that all persons with disabilities have the right to work, equal treatment, and accessibility. (Et.al., 2016) The perspective above is certainly contrary to the Law. Learning from the experience of Mr H, who was interviewed by Jekonia Tarigan, who was retained by the agency where he worked and even supported in his work, even though he was a person with a disability. (Et.al., 2016) The attitude of the agency, like this, certainly deserves appreciation. The government is also obliged to open wider space as a policymaker for the opening of agencies that are friendly to people with disabilities. So they can get jobs, equal treatment and accessibility to decent work.

## **Inclusive Spiritual Support is Needed for Persons with Disabilities**

Spiritual life is a vital aspect of every individual's existence, including for the deaf-mute community of GERKATIN in South Kalimantan. However, in practice, living a religious and spiritual life is not easy for them. Major challenges arise from limited communication and minimal support from social environments and religious institutions.

For most GERKATIN members, spiritual experiences like prayer or listening to religious sermons require unique adaptations. For example, many deaf friends rely on technology like *cell phone alarms* or a watch for signs from others to signal prayer times. When at the mosque, they pay attention to the movements of others or the presence of congregants as signals that prayer time has arrived. This means that their spirituality is heavily influenced by sight and social observation, not sound. (*Nisa, Interview*, 2025)

One of the crucial processes in Islam, such as reciting the shahada, is also carried out with a special approach. Deaf preachers serve as crucial intermediaries in guiding them to understand Islamic teachings comprehensively. In some special schools (SLB), deaf students also receive religious instruction and the procedures for the five daily prayers. However, once outside the school environment, many of them find it difficult because there are no inclusive prayer spaces. (*Zahra, Interview*, 2025)

Indirect discrimination also frequently occurs. During lectures, deaf students often choose to remain silent for fear of being seen as disruptive if they use sign language. This deprives them of the opportunity to understand the lecture or receive religious instruction that should be accessible to all. In South Kalimantan itself, there are currently no dedicated worship services for the deaf community, as has begun to exist in Bandung. As a result, their spirituality grows individually and independently, rather than through community or formal worship structures. (*Muhammad Fajri, Interview*, 2025)

Furthermore, in sacred contexts like weddings, deaf people also undergo the marriage ceremony using sign language. This process serves as an important symbol that faith and spiritual life can be manifested in different forms, yet remain valid and meaningful. Unfortunately, not all religious officials or leaders understand this communication need. This limitation is further exacerbated by the limited number of religious teachers or preachers who master sign language. Their presence is crucial in helping the deaf-mute community understand religious teachings and live a spiritual life. Government assistance is also still very minimal, aside from the two-time provision of basic food supplies, there has been no concrete support such as training for deaf-mute preachers or the construction of disability-friendly worship facilities. (*Yunan, Interview*, 2025)

However, despite these limitations, the Deaf-Mute community continues to demonstrate a steadfast faith and a passion for growth. Their great hope is that in the future, more people will learn sign language, so that inclusion becomes more than just a slogan but a true reality in religious life. They desire to be present in worship spaces not as "spectators," but as an integral part of the congregation, deserving of equal instruction, enlightenment, and spiritual care. (*Yunan, Interview*, 2025)

In addition to researching the GERKATIN community, as another example, the research team also looked at the reality of a deaf-mute Christian friend in Banjarmasin, namely Atika

Irwan, a deaf-mute teenager currently studying at SLB Negeri 2 Banjarmasin. She is not just an ordinary student; Atika is also known as an active and enthusiastic figure in helping her friends. At school, she is trusted to be a peer tutor in the field of sign language. Through this role, Atika helps her juniors understand basic communication, while also acting as a liaison between students and teachers in daily learning activities. Her role not only builds self-confidence but also fosters a sense of social responsibility as part of the deaf community. ( *Atika Irwan, Interview* , 2025)

Beyond her sign language skills, Atika also possesses other outstanding talents: painting and dancing. Her dancing talent is unique; despite her hearing impairment, Atika can dance to the tempo of music quite well. This is possible because Atika can still detect slight vibrations or rhythms in the music being played. Her perseverance and ability in dancing have become a very meaningful form of self-expression for Atika. ( *Atika Irwan, Interview* , 2025)

Atika's spiritual experiences were also quite profound. She lived for six months in the Budi Luhur dormitory, a residence run by nuns. There, she began to understand the concept of divinity, particularly through the figures of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. The nuns used sign language to teach Atika the values of faith. Routines such as attending six a.m. mass became part of her spiritual habits at that time. Her understanding of God began with simple things, such as recognising them through images and visual symbols, such as the image of Jesus, whom she recognised as "the God who looks like a Caucasian." ( *Atika Irwan, Interview* , 2025)

Now, Atika regularly attends services at the GKE Eppata every Sunday at nine in the morning. Previously, Atika had attended Sunday School, but did not continue due to communication limitations. To fill the gap, her mother often taught her about the Lord Jesus through picture stories. Atika's participation in worship is largely determined by visual accessibility. She understands the flow of worship through LCD slideshows, which display verses, liturgy, and the order of the service. However, there are some parts that she cannot follow completely, such as when the congregation sings together or when the pastor preaches without a sign language interpreter. Nevertheless, Atika's presence in church is a symbol of her openness to spirituality, as well as proof that deaf friends also have a desire to be involved in the fellowship of faith. ( *Mastina Dewi, Interview* , 2025)

In her daily life, Atika is included in group B at her school, this group consists of students who have mild disabilities such as deafness and speech impairments, but are still able to interact socially and learn well. At school, there is a division of classes into three large groups: A (for students with *Down Syndrome* who have relatively severe intellectual disabilities), B (for students with mild disabilities like Atika), and C (for students with severe autism spectrum disorders who require special attention). ( *Mastina Dewi, Interview* , 2025)

Atika has also experienced challenges in managing her emotions. When she finds herself in an environment that doesn't understand her needs, she can become frustrated. Once, while living in a dormitory, she had a violent tantrum that broke a wall fan. The nurse's reprimands at the time weren't enough to change Atika's response. However, over time, she learned to calm herself. Now, Atika is starting to manage her emotions better, although she still occasionally screams if she isn't understood. This shows progress in the process of mentoring and accepting herself. ( *Mastina Dewi, Interview* , 2025)

In practice, people with disabilities face challenging religious and spiritual lives. Significant challenges arise from limited communication and minimal support from social environments and religious institutions. For example, for most GERKATIN members, spiritual experiences like prayer or listening to religious sermons must be adapted in unique ways. For example, many deaf friends rely on technology like *cell phone alarms* or look for signs from others to indicate prayer times. When at the mosque, they pay attention to the movements of others or the presence of congregants as signals that prayer time has arrived. This means that their spirituality is heavily influenced by sight and social observation, not sound.

Other challenges faced in Islam, such as reciting the shahada, are also approached with a special approach. Deaf preachers serve as crucial intermediaries in guiding them to understand Islamic teachings holistically. In some special schools (SLB), deaf students also receive religious instruction and the procedures for the five daily prayers. However, once outside the school environment, many of them struggle due to the lack of inclusive prayer spaces.

During lectures, deaf students often choose to remain silent for fear of being seen as disruptive if they use sign language. This deprives them of the opportunity to understand the lecture or receive religious instruction that should be accessible to all. In South Kalimantan, there are currently no dedicated worship services for the deaf community, as has begun to exist in Bandung. As a result, their spirituality grows individually and independently, rather than through formal communities or worship structures. Furthermore, the spiritual realm, where everyone should feel welcome, has become a lonely and unfamiliar place for them.

In their weddings, deaf friends also undergo the marriage ceremony using sign language. This process serves as an important symbol that faith and spiritual life can be expressed in different forms, yet remain valid and meaningful. Unfortunately, not all religious officials or leaders understand this communication need. This limitation is further exacerbated by the limited number of religious teachers or preachers who master sign language. Their presence is crucial in helping the deaf-mute community understand religious teachings and live a spiritual life. Government assistance is also still very minimal, aside from the two basic food aid packages provided, and there is no concrete support, such as training for deaf-mute preachers or the construction of disability-friendly worship facilities. Their great hope is that in the future, more people will learn sign language, a more inclusive lifestyle, so that their presence in worship spaces is not merely as spectators, and they receive equal teaching, enlightenment, and spiritual growth.

In addition to Muslims with disabilities, Christians with disabilities also face similar challenges. Atika, for example, experiences similar challenges when attending church. Her participation in worship is largely determined by visual accessibility. She understands the flow of the service through LCD slideshows *displaying* verses, liturgy, and the program. However, there are some parts she cannot fully follow, such as when the congregation sings together or when the pastor preaches without a sign language interpreter. Nevertheless, Atika's presence in church symbolises her openness to spirituality and demonstrates that deaf friends also desire to be involved in the fellowship of faith. Atika's own experience demonstrates that sign language plays a significant role in communication. For example, during her six-month stay at the Budi Luhur dormitory, she learned about the concept of divinity and the figure of Jesus Christ through the sign language used by the nuns.

Spiritual values play a powerful role in providing strength and hope for people with disabilities, such as Mr H, interviewed by Jekonia Tarigan. For him, a deep appreciation of religious values allows him to live each day with hope. (Et.al., 2016) Therefore, inclusive spiritual support is needed, both by religious leaders and by friendly and supportive worship services for them in places of worship, such as those in Bandung.

In the Christian community, the church needs to be welcoming to them. Because they are *the Imago Dei*. Being created in God's image actually embodies God's presence and action in the created world. Thus, it is clear that humans represent God's presence and action in the world. Thus, humans act as God's representatives in action and serve as God's physical medium for conveying the divine presence. This provides relational support for people with disabilities. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017)

The power of God over all His creations, including humans, needs to be a theological concern for people with disabilities, for example, the experience of Moses, Sarah, and Mrs. Samson in the context where infertility is also seen as a disability. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017, pp. 34–38, 53–54, 65–66, 99–101) They need to be loved as a form of love and fear of God. Besides, because they are a vulnerable group, their dignity needs to be maintained. Besides, different physical conditions are part of God's order. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017, pp. 74–75, 86, 141–142)

In the healing experience performed by Jesus on Bartimaeus, it shows that even though he was blind, he understood his calling to discipleship well. Thus, even though he was disabled, he remained strong in internalising spiritual values. In fact, he is seen as a wise man in the Bible, even though, in his blindness, he still had superior knowledge and understanding of the divine plan. This condition is in contrast to other followers of Jesus who were physically healthy but continued to misunderstand Jesus' identity and message. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017) A person can be blind, but his spiritual sight functions well. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017) Therefore, people with disabilities must be seen as valuable people, even heirs of the kingdom of God. (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017)

As stated by Mr H and Atika, the figure of Jesus certainly influences their spirituality. Because Jesus himself has fully entered the experience of disability in suffering, persecution, and oppression. So he can identify with people with disabilities, and is present as a Person who has shared in their exclusion in all things. For them, it does not matter whether Jesus is disabled or not; He has been able to penetrate the human experience of weakness, exclusion, and marginalisation. As Jesus in the Letter to the Hebrews, who also felt marginalisation and exclusion at the time of His death through crucifixion, by telling that Jesus neglected His humiliation and endured the cross instead of joy for Him (Heb. 12:2). Jesus recognised the horror of the cross and His humiliation, but accepted it to fulfil God's plan of salvation. So God made Jesus " *teleiow* (perfect)" through suffering (Cf. Heb. 2:10). (Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, 2017) Jesus is a friend to people with disabilities.

## **Theological and Pastoral Implications for the Church Today**

### ***Disability is the Image and Likeness of God***

People with disabilities are an integral part of God's creation, made in His image and likeness (*Imago Dei*). This belief affirms that every human being, regardless of their physical condition, has dignity, worth, and purpose in life that comes directly from God. *Imago Dei* is not understood simply as physical similarity, but refers to the human capacity to think, love, build relationships, and carry out the mandate to manage creation. Thus, the existence of people with disabilities is not a deviation from God's design, but rather part of the diversity of creation that He presents. The Bible teaches that every human being is uniquely and intentionally formed by God, and that uniqueness is the basis of their worth. Therefore, people with disabilities are not only "worthy of love," but also have important spiritual contributions to make to the life of the church. Seeing them through the lens of *Imago Dei* helps the church develop an understanding that abilities, limitations, or differences are not benchmarks for a person's dignity. Instead, through their presence, the church is invited to be more sensitive to God's love that works through weakness, and broadens the meaning of the body of Christ that accepts every member without exception.

### ***God is present and works in people with disabilities.***

John 9:1-41 offers a radically different perspective on the existence of people with disabilities. In this passage, Jesus not only performs an act of healing but also restores the dignity of a blind man who had been viewed as an object of sin or curse. Jesus affirms that the man's condition was not the result of anyone's fault, but rather a space for God's work and glory to be revealed. Thus, the healing that occurs is not merely a physical act, but also a revelation that God's salvation and love are available to anyone willing to believe and obey Him. This passage demonstrates that the existence of people with disabilities is not a coincidence or merely a biological limitation, but rather part of God's providence, with purpose and purpose. They are endowed with abilities, potential, and roles that can be offered to the common life, so that their presence is not seen in terms of their shortcomings, but as individuals who can bring blessings through God-given talents.

### ***Becoming an Inclusive Church for People with Disabilities***

The church lives amidst the reality of a diverse society and is therefore called to manifest itself as an inclusive community. This responsibility requires the church to demonstrate real concern and accept people with disabilities as an integral part of its fellowship. As part of the social structure, the church needs to recognise that each person has different strengths and limitations, and these differences should not be the basis for limiting their scope of service or participation. Therefore, the church needs to foster a safe, welcoming, and open environment so that people with disabilities do not feel marginalised or ignored. This genuine acceptance allows them to feel valued as members of the body of Christ and provides them with the opportunity to develop their talents and participate in ministry according to the abilities God has entrusted to them. Therefore, what must be done to become an inclusive church for people with disabilities is as follows:

First, the religious experiences of people with disabilities demonstrate that spirituality is never limited to verbal or auditory abilities, but is rooted in human dignity *as the Imago Dei*. This means that every person, including those living in sensory silence, has the innate capacity to respond to God in ways appropriate to their physical condition. This challenges the church to broaden its theological understanding of worship, moving beyond vocal or normative forms of expression.

Second, the spiritual reality of the deaf and mute requires the church to develop an inclusive approach to liturgy. Inclusivity is not just about providing physical access, but also about recognising that sign language, body language, movement, and visuals are legitimate parts of the expression of faith. Therefore, the church is called to integrate alternative forms of communication into communal worship, so that the church community truly becomes a space that humanises all members of the Body of Christ.

Third, in pastoral care, the church needs to recognise that assisting people with disabilities should not be based on the assumption of their shortcomings, but rather on how they build relationships with God through their lived experiences. Pastors and church ministers need to develop a pastoral approach that is sensitive to sensory needs, including the use of visual language, gestures, and symbols accessible to the deaf-mute. Such assistance is not only a form of empathy but also a concrete manifestation of God's incarnational theology, present within human limitations.

Fourth, these implications encourage the church to re-examine its theological ministry and education structures. The church needs to recognise that disability is not a barrier to spirituality, but rather part of the diversity of the body of Christ that enriches the life of faith. Therefore, church theology must boldly position the experiences of people with disabilities as a source of theological reflection, not simply as an object of social service.

## CONCLUSION

Psalm 24:1 affirms that the whole earth and its contents belong to God, the true owner. With this understanding, humans are called not as owners, but as stewards who are responsible for God's creation. Awareness of humanity's position as an integral part of creation invites believers to carry out the divine mandate with humility, preserving and caring for the environment in a sustainable manner. Environmental stewardship in the biblical perspective is not only a physical action, but also a spiritual and moral calling that demands a collective commitment from the faith community to maintain harmony and the welfare of nature for the glory of God and the common good. Thus, humans act as God's partners in caring for His creation, maintaining a balance between human needs and environmental sustainability.

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