

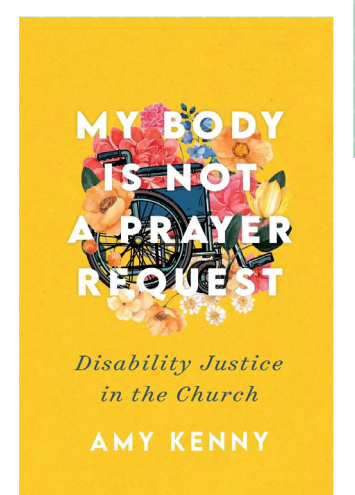


CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Rev. Meg Lacy Vega

My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church

By Amy Kenny



About the Author

Amy Kenny is a disabled scholar, a Shakespeare lecturer, and a person of faith, passionate about advocating for disability justice in the church. She is the co-founder of Jubilee Homes OC, a permanent supportive housing initiative in Orange County, CA, and a scribe for Freedom Road Institute, an initiative founded by Lisa Sharon Harper (author of *The Very Good Gospel*). You can find her work at *Huff Post*, *Teen Vogue*, *Daily Beast*, *Sojourner* and in many other publications. At the heart of her work is Amy's belief that "every human is an image-bearer worthy of belonging."

How to use this Guide

Kenny's explorations in *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* lie at the intersections of theology and disability. Her reflections will likely stir strong emotions for her readers, and the following discussion questions and activities are an invitation to wrestle with those emotions through conversation and reflection.

This guide is shaped by three broad sections that loosely follow the chapters and themes presented in the book: Disabled Life (chapters 1-3), Disabled Theology (chapters 4-7, 9), and Disabled Church (chapters 8, 9). However, you do not need to move through the guide in sequential order. Allow the conversation to move where there is the most energy and interest for your group. If your book club will be meeting only once, you may want to pick just one activity and two or three questions for discussion. If your group will meet multiple times, you may want to expand more on some of the topics below, or identify other themes and activities that resonate with your context. Along the way, offer regular space for silence and reflection. Consider opening your gathering(s) with a moment of silence, or inviting participants to journal on particular questions before jumping into discussion.

Optional Opening Activity: In advance of your gathering, you may wish to ask participants to take the Harvard Implicit Association Test for Disability that Kenny references (p. 18), and invite participants to share reactions to the test and their results. The test can be found at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/selectatest.html>.

Rev. Meg Lacy Vega is a writer, speaker, yoga instructor and retreat leader who is passionate about creating spaces for rest and spiritual renewal. Meg lives outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, with her husband and two pups, Ruth and Olive. You can find Meg on Instagram at @meglacyvega.



Book Discussion Questions

Disabled Life (chapters 1-3)

“I wish my prayerful perpetrators were free from the lie that I am worth less simply because my body works differently”

—Kenny, p. 3

- Kenny opens her first chapter with a story that puts a “disability curative” approach on full display, when a woman approaches her, insisting that God told her to pray for her so she could be healed. What has your experience been with the “disability curative” approach to theology and disability? Have you seen this in your church, or experienced this yourself?
- Kenny states: “When strangers desperately covet a cure for my disability, it reveals a deeper discontent about their lack of control of their bodies and lives” (p. 15). Do you agree or disagree? Do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable when interacting with an individual with a disability? Where does this come from within yourself?
- Read aloud Talia Lewis’ definition of ableism, found at www.talilalewis.com/blog/ableism-2020-an-updated-definition. Discuss your responses as a group. Consider: Have you heard of this before or is this a new concept for you? What do you find energizing in the definition? What do you find challenging?
- Kenny shares about the obstacles she faced when seeking disability accommodation from her high school under the Americans Disability Act (ADA). Ableism, Kenny says, can take the form of actions, words or ideas. Of what ableist actions (behaviors), words (language), or ideas have you been guilty? Practice honest repentance as a group.
- Invite participants to take the quiz on pages 52-53. Discuss your results together.

Disabled Theology (chapters 4-7, 9)

“Disability helps reveal the Light of the World to people who think of themselves as holier than disabled people”

—Kenny, pg. 6

- Throughout the book, Kenny draws on biblical stories as a framework for disability theology and justice. She uses the story of Zacchaeus (John 9) to unpack the role of healing social structures in disability justice (p. 13). She recounts the story of Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32) to reformulate physical difference as divine blessing, rather than divine punishment (p. 77). Was there a biblical story Kenny referenced that surprised you or stuck with you? Are there other scriptures that come to mind that might be reinterpreted to celebrate human diversity and the blessing of physical or mental difference?
- Have you ever considered the “crip tax”—the cost for mobility services, medical care and assistive technology? (p. 63) What other justice issues does Kenny raise, and what do you think is the church’s role in addressing them?
- Kenny reminds us that language matters because it is “a repository for our biases” (p. 93). Our language often tells us something about what is going on below the surface of our thinking and behaviors. So often, our spiritual language is ableist. Using “blind,” for example, as a metaphor for lack of faith, without acknowledging that literal blindness may have as many blessings as it does challenges. Consider:
- For ministers: How have you used biased language regarding physical difference? What would you like to change moving forward? How can you go about soliciting feedback from individuals with a disability about non-harming language in your biblical interpretation and preaching?
- For parents: How can you coach your kids when they speak about disabled persons? What words might be harmful? What words uplift and celebrate difference?

- For everyone: When have you been a “mosquito bite” for a disabled person?
- Perhaps one of the most profound contributions of disability theology is the image of a Disabled God. Kenny references the vision of Nancy Eiesland, a pioneer in disability theology, who pictured God “in a sip-and-puff wheelchair” (p. 150). What is your first reaction to this image? Why?
- Kenny draws on many images of God in the biblical narrative as she portrays a Disabled God in Chapter 9. This includes Jesus on the cross and Good Friday theology (p. 166), God in Crip Time as pictures in Psalm 90 (p. 162-3), God as deaf and/or blind—a frequent image through the Psalms (p. 156-7). We often consider disability from a “loss” model, rather than noticing what we can gain. What is gained in each of these images of a Disabled God? Are there other images that come to mind that may help reshape our understanding of God?

Disabled Church (Chapters 8 & 10)

“Ableism is not a system bug but a calculated feature in many churches in the United States. The erasure of disability in church spaces was deliberately manufactured because disabled people were (and still are) considered too pricey and profane to include”

—Kenny, p. 29

- Accessibility matters. Kenney states that disabled people are more often excluded from church communities via neglect (lack of accessibility) than they are intentionally barred (pg. 131). Complete an inventory of your church or group’s gathering spaces and etiquette toward disabled people. How are disabled bodies neglected in your space, your worship or your activities? (A list of items to consider can be found on p. 18.)
- The history of assistive technology for disabled people shows that “when we are too focused on universal design for the mainstream, we are not as innovative” (p. 142). Kenny lays out a number of items that have their origins as assistive tech: potato peelers, screen-based computers and bikes! If your church were to become a more accessible and inclusive space for disabled people, how might this cultivate innovation?
- Accessibility is a point of departure, not a destination. Crip space, Kenny states, is more than just a physical space. “It is a disability justice ethos that Christian communities can embody” in leadership, accessibility and language (p. 135). Your church can even display a disability icon to signify intentions and actions of welcome and access. What is your worshiping community doing well in embodying a disability justice ethos? Where are you struggling to en flesh God’s welcome?
- As a group, or individually, rewrite the lyrics to a worship song you love, prioritizing non-harming language regarding disability. (Don’t know where to start? Try Amazing Grace!)

Optional Closing Question: How are you different after reading this book? What is your “right next step” and action, small or large, that you or your church can take to embody God’s radical welcome for people with disabilities?



Further Reading

Article: *Resisting Ableism in the American Church* by Shannon Dingle in *Sojourners*.

<https://sojo.net/articles/resisting-ableism-american-church>

Book: *Disability and The Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* by Bethany McKinney Fox.

Podcast: Lisa Sharon Harmer, “Disability and Its Intersections” on Freedom Road Podcast.

Book: *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* by Lamar Hardwick.

Podcast: Alice Wong’s Disability Visibility Podcast, or her edited collection of writing, *Visibility Disability*.

Movie: *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, 2020 (Documentary)

Movie: *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019

More books and articles are listed on p. 106 of *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*