



# Takura Farera

## A Welcoming Church for People with Disabilities

Video (11:30): Takura Farera, a native of Zimbabwe, and master's degree student at United Methodist related Africa University

Takura Farera, a master's degree student at Africa University has a passion for welcoming differently abled persons in the church. He believes it is the mission of the church to create ministries and worship that welcome and involve people with varying physical, mental, and emotional abilities. He says the church should set an example for the rest of the world.

## A Welcoming Church for People with Disabilities

### **Preparation**

Select a room or location to offer the study. Every session needs a room that has the capability to access the video via Internet and to project the video for groups of various sizes. Conduct tests ahead of the session to insure that all equipment is working properly. *This video can be found at [www.gcorr.org/series/vc3](http://www.gcorr.org/series/vc3).*

**Preview the video.** Be mindful that this presenter is making a case for a caring church for people with disabilities largely in the context of his home annual conference in Zimbabwe. However, his proposals and his challenge to the church continue to be key for churches everywhere. You may wish to view the video a couple of times and make notes of key points that stand out for you. Post your group's covenant of care for the session.

### **Gather the following materials:**

- Bible for reading the Scriptures – 2 Samuel 9:1-9a and Acts 3:1-9
- Listening and Looking Guide, one for each person (or project on a screen)
- Words, sheet music (or CD) of song, "For Everyone Born a Place at the Table"
- Pen, pencils and construction paper

- Markers and crayons
- Blue painter's tape

**Also prepare [to mimic barriers and challenges to access]:**

- Set up the classroom in a haphazard fashion, as if the chairs should be in a circle but some are facing outward from the circle, some are turned on their side, others have “junk” – old newspapers, etc., on them.
- Also, place blue painter's tape across the doorway so that people may have to stoop a bit to enter the classroom.
- You may also place “reserved” signs on a couple of the chairs.

## THE STUDY SESSION

**Get Started [15-20 minutes]**

Greet group members as they enter. Do not comment on the layout of the room. Note the reactions of the members. Answer questions as briefly as possible. For example, if someone asks if they can sit in a reserved spot, simply say, “That seat is reserved.” If someone asks, “What happened here,” respond by saying, “It looks a mess, doesn't it.” You may also say, “If you cannot find a free seat, there is standing room at the edge of the classroom. We have to make this situation work.” Make note if anyone removes tape and sits down. Keep this observation going for at least three to five minutes or until most group members have gathered.

While everyone is still in various forms of “access and comfort,” introduce yourself and welcome everyone to the session; take care of housekeeping matters. Read statement of purpose (or recruit a volunteer to do so): “The General Commission on Religion and Race presents *Vital Conversations* to help start the dialogue on subjects that may sometimes be difficult to approach. We are all part of the beloved community, and we welcome perspectives that bring enlightenment and understanding.”

Begin the study session by telling anyone who is standing to be seated, to remove any items that may have been hindering their access to a free, clean seat, and gather in a circle. Explain that the session is about the church expanding access – “architectural access” and “attitudinal access” for people with disabilities, or as others say, people with varying abilities. Say further that the presentation and discussion is about access of physical entry and access of ministry and service.

**Read aloud one or both of the following stories:**

The Rev. Eric Pridmore is an ordained United Methodist minister and pastor of First UMC in Poplarville, Mississippi. When one of the United Methodist Women's “Mission U” studies was “The Church and People with Disabilities,” he was asked to teach. Dr. Pridmore is blind. He uses a seeing-eye dog and has support from his spouse, Lisa; he uses a variety of assistive devices as well. He enjoyed teaching, but had to ask: “Can I only teach the ‘disability’ study or can I teach any study United Methodist Women offers?” It was an “aha” moment for an organization that has a strong history of advocacy for access for all people. In that moment, Dr. Pridmore made it clear that access to his teaching was more “attitudinal” than “architectural.”

*[NOTE: This story is used with permission; Dr. Pridmore was the first person I heard use the terms “attitudinal access” and “architectural access.”]*

This is Aunt Mary's (not her real name) story about being differently abled, overlooked, and abused: I clearly needed help with everyday living tasks. I have Parkinson's. I have unrelenting shaking in my hands. And one of my knees no longer bends and I have to sit in a wheelchair with it fully extended all the time. I was excited when my niece offered a home for me with her and her family (husband and two children). We had an agreement that I would contribute a certain portion of my income (Social Security and pension).

Life was good for a while. I found a church home just down the street. It was small but I could be wheeled in and be "set" in the front. It was awkward trying to turn my head to see the preacher, but I was loved there. However, things took a downturn. Soon, all my independence was stripped away from me. My niece took all the money – if I wanted to give her children a "thank you" token for helping me, I couldn't. She did allow me to give money to my church, but it was an amount that she designated from my funds.

Eventually – and sadly – my niece was convicted of fraud and elder abuse (I won't even go into the way she treated me physically and verbally abused me). She went to jail. Her family sold the home that I had helped them purchase. Currently, I live in a nice, safe place but it is far from my church and other people I know; I had to go to a place that I could afford. Being disabled has its challenges. I know that for sure.

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**Invite participants to respond to the stories** or allow time for one or two persons to share about personal experiences (could be a family member) that they have had involving persons with different abilities in the church.

**Distribute the Listening and Looking Guide.** Explain that this is a resource to help them capture thoughts and ideas from the session and the video presentation; it also is a place to make note of visions they have for ministry. Allow time for them to scan the questions and statements to help focus the viewing and listening process.

**Read aloud or ask someone to read aloud these two Scriptures:** 2 Samuel 9:1-9a and Acts 3:1-9. Direct the members to their Listening and Looking Guides and ask them to respond to the Word by sharing briefly in writing what these Scriptures say about "making room" at the table for people with disabilities. Ask for volunteers to share thoughts. Then invite someone to lead the group in prayer; if no one volunteers, open with a prayer of your choice.

**Review and post a covenant that you have created (or group has created) and highlight the key components:** confidentiality; everyone's voice matters; disagree with care/do not attack anyone. Invite the group to add thoughts and ideas to the covenant.

**Introduce the video presenter:** Takura Farera is a native of Zimbabwe and is a student at United Methodist-related Africa University. He has a passion and vision for having the church be the leader of what it means to have a church where people with varying physical abilities can use their gifts. He offers a challenge — throws down a gauntlet, in fact — to practicing Christians in congregations, declaring, "We can be better than we are when it comes to having all God's children's gifts and graces used in worship and service."

### **Play the Video [20 minutes]**

Encourage participants to jot down short notes on their guides but, as much as possible, to remain attentive to listening to and experiencing the presentation. At the conclusion of the video, allow five to ten minutes for the group to add more information and answer questions on their Listening & Looking Guide. Tell the group that there will be another opportunity to add more information to the sheet and to reflect upon their notes.

### **Pair 'n Share [15 minutes]**

Take time to share reflections and comments related to the next two questions and statements on the guide sheet (after the Scripture reflections). Direct members to find a partner and talk about where their church “is” and where they would like their church to be in ministry with people with disabilities. Use the remaining time to begin to draft visions and the social media statement.

### **Prepare a New Vision [10-15 minutes]**

Ask each person to use a sheet of construction paper and markers to do the following (may do one or both). Draw an interior of a church (may or may not be one’s own) and make note of where adjustments and additions can be made to improve access (i.e., video screen, headphones, sign language interpreter). Because the focus needs to be on attitude as well as architecture, ask members to also list how to address people resources in the church (Are there ideas for ushers? Are additional people needed to serve in support of those with disabilities? Will people need to be challenged to listen more intently if a person has difficulties with speech?).

If people choose not to draw, ask them to make two columns on a sheet of paper. Label one “expanding architectural access” and the other “expanding attitudinal access.” Encourage everyone to dream big to make our churches truly places of sanctuary and worship where everyone’s gifts are embraced and used.

### **Closing Devotions [10 minutes]**

Ask participants to sit in a circle, bringing with them their papers of their church “remodels.” Lead the group in a litany of confession and prayer by introducing this line:

My church has done this: \_\_\_\_\_  
and I hope that they will consider doing this: \_\_\_\_\_

### **You may start the group’s time of prayer and commitment by sharing your own example or the one below:**

My church has installed screens and a camera, which allows two of our members who have macular degeneration to see the choir and pulpit areas more clearly. I hope that they consider making a pew cut on either side of the sanctuary. It was really sad when Daniel broke his leg that he had to sit on the back pew with it extended, head turned to the side to see the pulpit. I also hope they will be patient as we make changes in the service to allow Pam, who has speech difficulties, to read the Scripture. Continue sharing until everyone who desires has spoken. Then close in prayer (using one of your own choosing or this one). God of Mephibosheth, the blind man, the lame man at the Gate called Beautiful, and all whose abilities may differ from what is called the “norm” – we repent that we as a church and body of believers have not committed to full access in the ways that Takura Farera has challenged us to do. We hold in our hands a model for a more inclusive and a more accessible church. Help us to bring these visions to fruition. Infuse us with your strength. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

## Listening and Looking Guide: Takura Farera

What does the Mephibosheth story say to you?

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What does the story of the lame man at the gate (in Acts) say to you?

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Takura Farera is passionate about the church meeting the needs of people with disabilities or people who are differently abled and being a role model for society. In what ways is your church providing access and avenues of service?

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Think of a person who has a physical or mental condition that makes her or him differently abled (i.e., a person with post-traumatic stress disorder). Think of one or two ways to welcome them in the church and make it a place of comfort for her or him:

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Cultivate a new vision: Takura Farera says that where “love leads” the atmosphere will always provide warmth and joy as he talks about the gifts of the Zimbabwean cricket analyst (who is blind). How can you shift the atmosphere?

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Make a commitment: \_\_\_\_\_

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Tweet This/Post on your social media: \_\_\_\_\_

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