The Intersectionality of Physical and Mental Disabilities and Race

Faced with a multitude of challenges including accessibility, economic and educational opportunities, social acceptance, and unrecognized or ignored abilities, individuals who are physically and mentally differently-abled are often excluded from equitable experiences. The intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status compound the implications of disability. In other words, people of color who are differently-abled face even greater challenges than people who have physical and mental disabilities and are racialized as white. The Ohio Disability and Health Program released a report showing diminished access to healthcare, education, income, healthy environment, employment, housing, and safety for differently-abled people of color*. Thus, for those whose need for access is greater, the reverse is, often, true.

Take a look at this video from Al Jazeera Media Network, or AJ+, that explores the difficulties many people of color have in receiving quality mental health care. Consider the following questions, first individually, then with a group of clergy and/or lay leaders from your church or conference.

1. What are some of the underlying, cultural reasons people of color do not receive care for mental disabilities?
2. Why is it important for doctors and other caregivers to understand the unique socioeconomic, cultural, and social realities of their patients’ identities? How does this knowledge help their ability to offer care that is equitable and fair?
3. How do our own biases not only about disabilities but also race and ethnicity, limit our ability to offer holistic (spiritual and concrete) care to those around us? How can our churches become increasingly culturally competent about physical and mental disabilities within different racial and ethnic backgrounds?
4. How can our church be more responsive to the needs of persons who are physically and mentally differently-abled – especially those from ethnic or racial groups different from our own?

*"The Double Burden: Health Disparities among People of Color Living with Disabilities"

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