Approved by the Felm Board on 10 April 2010

POLICY ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

1. Summary

The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission's (Felm) policy on the rights of persons with disabilities lays the foundation for Felm's work toward promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The theological basis of the policy emphasises the equality of all people, as we are all created in the image of God, and calls the Church to dismantle discriminatory structures. The policy is also tied to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which emphasises the agency and equality of persons with disabilities in society. Felm promotes inclusivity and accessibility in all its programme work and supports the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making, both in the Church and in society. The organisational culture is characterised by promoting diversity and strengthening the capacity of our personnel and partners. Felm cooperates with organisations of persons with disabilities and actively strives to remove barriers posed by discrimination.

2. Purpose and objectives of the policy

This policy describes Felm's goals and operating methods regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. The policy steers all our work and conveys the approach and views we apply in specific focus areas of our work to different stakeholders. In the hierarchy of documents guiding Felm's operations, the policies stand between the strategy and programmes.

3. Theological foundation and principles

The theological basis for Felm's efforts to promote the rights of persons with disabilities is the theological document *Towards Life and Justice* (2015) and the summary of said document, *The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission's (Felm's) understanding of missionary work* (2024). Furthermore, *The Gift of Being* (WCC, 2016), published by the World Council of Churches, is an important ecumenical document that brings together the theology of disability and human rights.

The starting point for the theology of disability is creation: All human beings have been created in the image of God. The value of human life arises from the idea that life itself is a gift from God. The value of life does not depend on human achievements and abilities. Human beings were created to exist in a relationship with God, and creation itself was an act of love from God and an expression of his love.

Vulnerability and affliction are an inherent part of the essence of humanity. By being born as a human in Jesus of Nazareth, God Himself exposed Himself to human vulnerability. In the theology of disability, it is important to notice that even after he was resurrected, Christ bore the marks of crucifixion on his body. Against this interpretation, disability can be seen in an entirely new light: a disabled body is an image of the body of Christ.

The theology of disability understands how the image of humanity in the Bible era affected the Holy Scripture: disability was seen as a consequence of sin, and diseases could even be of a demonic origin. However, Jesus takes the side of the excluded in an extraordinary manner. He asks those who were pushed aside: "What do you want me to do for you?" In doing so, he highlights the role of marginalised individuals as equal conversational partners and active operators. This is an example of the commitment required from the Church in its theology and activities: its task is to break down the walls

of prejudice and power and to eradicate mindsets that divide people into “us” and “them”. This change must take place both in decision-making and in actual operation. The Church must foster a more equal society in which persons with disabilities are guaranteed the same dignity, rights and opportunities as everyone else. The Church must challenge detrimental cultural assumptions and stereotypes regarding disability. Furthermore, the Church shall offer a safe haven and a resource that provides pastoral support to strengthen individuals, support families, and promote the experience of belonging to a community.

Many factors, such as wealth, geography, disparity in education and knowledge, social status, gender, ethnicity, disability and age, create centres of power and marginalise people. The Church must recognise the theology created in the margins. In disability theology, a comprehensive change – transformation – means that persons with disabilities can assume agency in their own lives and act as full members of their communities. Persons with disabilities are not the subject of pity or charity. Transformation is needed by communities that, even today, isolate and hide persons with disabilities, violate their human dignity and rights, and discriminate against their families.

We strive for contextual disability theology, which recognises the wide variety of contexts of disability. For example, some cultural and religious ideologies perceive disability as something of demonic origin. Such a setting poses very different issues than, for example, in Finland.

Persons with disabilities should not be used as tools for implementing one’s own spirituality. This means, for example, that one should not pray for the recovery – or any other reasons – of a person with disability without the consent of the person concerned. Unfortunately, many persons with disability are forced to face unwanted and even violent attempts to be cured. The numerous Bible stories about the healing of the sick and the disabled should be viewed comprehensively and more extensively than by simply focusing on the removal of a sickness or disability: these stories always involve an aspect of healing the relationships with God as well as with other people and communities. The healing stories are first and foremost about the Kingdom of God breaking into our midst.

4. Human rights-based approach and principles

Felm is committed to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and complies with the principles of the Convention in all its work. The Convention adopted in 2006 does not contain any new human rights but aims to confirm that persons with disabilities are fully and equally entitled to the same fundamental and human rights as everyone else (Human Rights Center, 2024). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is built on a human rights-based approach in which persons with disabilities are seen as active citizens and members of their communities, not as objects of charity or medical acts. Therefore, the Convention also strengthens the agency of persons with disabilities in exercising their own rights. They can make decisions about their own lives and be active members of society (UNDESA, 2024).

According to the CRPD, disability is a developing concept. The CRPD defines disability as the relationship between impairment and environmental barriers: *“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”* (UN CRPD, 2006).

The Convention includes general principles that affect Felm’s approach to promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. These principles are the following: a) respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons; b) non-

discrimination; c) full and effective participation and inclusion in society; d) respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity; e) equality of opportunity; f) accessibility; g) equality between men and women; h) respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

5. Operating environment

Persons with disabilities are one of the largest minority groups in the world, and they often face the most discrimination. Of the world's population, approximately 1.3 billion, or 16%, are persons with disabilities. It is estimated that 80% of all persons with disabilities live in low or middle-income countries (WHO, 2022:23). There has been a global increase in the number of persons with disabilities due to conflicts, disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and population growth. Although persons with disabilities are often referred to as a single group, it is important to understand that disability is part of human diversity, and that disability is a unique and diverse experience.

Despite decades of hard work, almost 80% of persons with disabilities live in poverty. Disability and poverty are closely intertwined; disability can lead to poverty, and poverty can cause disability. As adults, persons with disabilities face discrimination in working life, and children and young persons with disabilities may not get an opportunity to go to school. This has far-reaching impacts on the income level of persons with disabilities. Moreover, disabilities often involve additional costs, such as hiring a personal assistant or acquiring assistive devices, meaning that households with a similar income level cannot enjoy the same standard of living (UNDESA, 2018 & 2024). However, although disability often correlates with poverty, discrimination and injustice, it cannot be assumed that all persons with disabilities have similar experiences of inequality or discrimination. Gender identity, age, sexual orientation, skin colour, ethnic origin and a person's financial background may have an intersectional impact on the discrimination of persons with disabilities (multiple discrimination).

In developing countries, children and young people make up a large demographic. The UN estimates that 11% of children with disabilities have no access to basic education, whereas 32% of children with disabilities do not get to attend upper secondary education (UNDESA, 2024). Only 47% of countries have educational materials supporting the education of children with disabilities (UNDESA, 2024). Moreover, shortcomings in teachers' skills, challenges with school transport, inaccessible school facilities, and discriminatory attitudes are known to be common obstacles to the education of children with disabilities.

Conflicts and crises, such as wars, climate disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, have extensively exacerbated the discrimination and inequality experienced by persons with disabilities. In developing countries, the multi-layered nature and simultaneous occurrence of crises further increases the risk of social exclusion for persons with disabilities. In fact, persons with disabilities are often only viewed as victims of crises and disasters, which means they are excluded from the decision-making processes. For this reason, the needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities have been almost completely ignored in, for example, adaptation measures to tackle the climate crisis, humanitarian work, measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and peacebuilding processes (OHCHR, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Persons with disabilities are generally underrepresented in management tasks of different levels and in societal decision-making processes. Furthermore, quite often they have no way of participating even in decision-making processes concerning their own rights. Compared to men with disabilities, women with disabilities are underrepresented in decision-making in general as well as in organisations promoting the rights of persons with disabilities (IDA, 2024; UNDESA, 2018). There may also be

inequalities between persons with different impairments, as the degree and form of discrimination they face may vary depending on how visible, socially understood or accepted impairment is and how the social norms, policies and forms of support are constructed.

Persons with disabilities face discrimination even in religious communities, such as churches and congregations. The idea of disability as suffering or sin stems from interpretations according to which disability is the result of sin. The Bible contains certain choices of words and healing stories that continue to affect how some churches perceive the equality of persons with disabilities. Christian theology includes an aspect that emphasises the dignity of all humans, which, for example, in today's world highlights that disability is a part of human diversity. However, this is not a prevailing ideology in many churches, as persons with disabilities are still often seen as objects of care and assistance, instead of being active and equal actors. In addition to attitudes, few churches comply with the principles of accessibility, leaving persons with disabilities unable to participate in the activities. These are just some of these reasons why persons with disabilities do not find employment in the church or have access to the church's administrative and leadership positions (Okola & Kilonzo, 2024).

Disability is also gendered. According to estimates, 14.9% of men are disabled, while the figure for women is 18%. In other words, almost one in five women in the world are women with disabilities (WHO, 2022: 25). Women with disabilities remain underrepresented in public and political life. Moreover, women with disabilities are at least two or three times more likely to experience violence than other women. They are also three times more likely to be illiterate than men without disabilities, and two times more likely to be unemployed (UN WOMEN, 2019).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol to the Convention have been ratified in many of Felm's operating countries. However, although legislative advancements have been made in many countries, the resources available for practical measures are often insufficient, and the support offered by society to persons with disabilities remains inadequate. In many countries where Felm is active, the platform for defending human rights is extremely small, which weakens the opportunities for exercising societal influence.

6. Policies

6.1 Principles

1. **Human rights-based approach:** Felm is committed to a human rights-based approach, both in its domestic work and global operations. Felm's work is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Felm undertakes to comply with the principles of the Convention as described above.
2. **Multiple discrimination:** Felm recognises that persons with disabilities are subjected to multiple discrimination. Therefore, Felm is committed to an intersectional approach in order to eliminate multiple discrimination against persons with disabilities. Felm also pledges to ensure in all its work and the efforts it supports that disabled children, young people, women, and sexual and gender minorities have full access to all their fundamental human rights.
3. **Nothing without us and inclusivity:** Felm is committed to promoting the "Nothing without us" principle. We ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities are taken into account in all our activities, and that all our work is carried out in collaboration with persons with disabilities and disability organisations. We recognise that for the rights of persons with disabilities to be truly enforced and disability inclusion to be realised, persons with disabilities must partake in our activities in a meaningful and comprehensive manner. Being included in the community and society is at the heart of both human rights and Christian faith. Inclusion is both a means of

implementing the rights of persons with disabilities and a goal in itself. Felm undertakes to promote the full inclusion of all people and not to organise or support discriminatory activities.

4. **Self-determination:** Felm is committed to respecting the inherent dignity of persons with disabilities, their individual right to self-determination, and their freedom to make their own choices.

6.2 Programme work

1. **Twin-track approach:** Felm undertakes to promote the rights of persons with disabilities in all programme work based on a human rights-based approach. Felm uses a so-called twin-track approach, which means it promotes the rights of persons with disabilities through disability projects and by ensuring in all programme work that the rights of persons with disabilities are taken into account, persons with disabilities are guaranteed opportunities for active and meaningful participation, and the principle of accessibility is complied with. The goal of Felm's programme work is to eliminate discrimination and participation barriers, reinforce the right of persons with disabilities to make decisions regarding their own life, and support their participation in social and church-related decision-making.
2. **Comprehensive nature of the programme:** Persons with disabilities shall have equal opportunities to participate in the activities of churches. Felm is committed to deepening its knowledge of the theology of disability and to promoting the theological education and leadership of persons with disabilities in churches. In diaconal work, we recognise the role of persons with disabilities as active agents of change. Felm promotes the inclusive education of children with disabilities. We support the active participation of persons with disabilities in peacebuilding and climate adaptation measures, and we take the inclusion of persons with disabilities fully into account in our humanitarian work.
3. **Support for organisations of persons with disabilities (OPD):** Felm supports the organisations of persons with disabilities and cooperates with them in several sectors, both in Finland and internationally. We also consult persons with disabilities and our OPD partners throughout the different stages of the programme.
4. **Mainstreaming:** We take the inclusion of persons with disabilities into account in our programme work budget by, for example, earmarking a part of the budget for reasonable accommodations. Felm is committed to a continuous dialogue on disability inclusion with all its partners and supports its partners in enhancing disability inclusion. Furthermore, Felm contributes to its partners' accessibility solutions and supports the partner organisations in strengthening their competence regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, disability inclusion, and theology of disability.
5. **Knowledge-based advocacy:** Strengthening the rights of persons with disabilities requires research-based knowledge and competence. Felm monitors research in the field, collects information on the impacts of its work, and supports its partners in knowledge-based advocacy. Moreover, Felm also promotes the sharing of good practices and peer learning among its partner and peer organisations.

6.3 Organisational culture

1. **Positive discrimination in recruitment:** Felm is committed to applying positive discrimination to promote the employment of all minority groups. The right of persons with disabilities to work is fostered by employing persons with disabilities, investing in an accessible working environment, and promoting diversity as part of recruitment processes.

2. **Reasonable accommodation:** Felm pledges to implement reasonable accommodations, i.e. necessary and appropriate arrangements to be made in individual cases, which enable the realisation of the right to work of persons with disabilities.
3. **Accessibility:** Accessibility refers to the physical operating environment as well as, for example, information systems and knowledge. Felm is committed to the implementation of accessibility in its own activities and favours "design for all", meaning that products, environments, programmes and services are designed so that everyone can use them as extensively as possible without adjustments or special design needs.
4. **Enhancing personnel competence:** Felm undertakes to systematically strengthen the competence of its personnel regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, disability inclusion, and theology of disability, and to support peer learning on these issues among its personnel.
5. **Consulting:** Felm's management is committed to consulting persons with disabilities and disability organisation partners in Felm's decision-making processes.
6. **Communication:** Felm undertakes to comply with disability legislation in its communication.
7. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Felm will regularly assess the implementation of the policy on the rights of persons with disabilities as part of its monitoring processes.

7. Felm's added value

Felm brings added value to the work toward promoting the rights of persons with disabilities through its role as a global Christian organisation that supports the marginalised and promotes the human dignity and rights of the excluded in accordance with the example set by Jesus. Felm's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to WCC's document The Gift of Being lay down a human rights-based and theological framework that guides the operating methods and quality of the work.

Felm is actively involved in international ecumenical movements, such as ACT Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation, and is one of the few included organisations that systematically promote the rights of persons with disabilities in ecumenical networks. As part of ACT Alliance's working group on disability inclusion, Felm promotes good practices for enhancing the inclusion of persons with disabilities and advocates for the strengthening of their rights. In addition, Felm builds networks and engages increasingly in collaboration with disability organisations both in Finland and in operating areas, strengthening the agency of persons with disabilities as decision-makers and drivers of change.

Felm has conducted long-term efforts to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, especially in the field of inclusive education. In Ethiopia, for example, Felm has carried out pioneering work to advance the education of children with disabilities by strengthening the rights of the deaf and promoting the use of sign language. Our projects support the equal participation of persons with disabilities in society by strengthening their own role as change-makers.

Felm is committed to promoting the meaningful and active inclusion of persons with disabilities in all areas of its work – both in Finland and abroad, and also within its own organisation. This commitment shows that Felm is determined to serve as an expert and example for other actors also in the future.

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