“I know people are discriminated upon because of their religion” one of the Shakers said, “and it’s unacceptable.”

Our conversations often, rightly, focus on protecting children from any kind of discrimination based on religion. But equally, adult religious leaders are responsible for creating religious worlds for children that are free from discrimination.

I’m cross appointed between the Department of Public Health and the School of Religion at Queen’s. My research looks at the ways that religion supports and impedes the health of children, and today I want to make a few comments about the reports through the lens of religious studies. I could develop this any number of ways, but I was inspired by the Carleton report “Can disability be positive?”

I was struck by the number of times the children at Carleton said they had faced social exclusion, labelling, and barriers to full participation. I don’t think religious groups get off the hook for thinking about how this applies to them, and I want to share some ideas about discrimination in religious participation through the lens of disability.

Because of time, I’m going to talk about this through the lens of the Christian church, which doesn’t do justice to our important religious diversity in Canada. And I apologize for that, but you’ll be glad I stick to my five minutes!

Christianity has a nebulous history with disability, which has often been regarded as punishment from God for sin; or as a test of faith. With some stunning positive exceptions, much of the church’s historic relationship with disability has tended towards paternalistic attitudes, charity models and exclusion. Is this what our kids are experiencing? I wanted to use data to find out.

My comments are based on analysis of data from the 2016 Canadian Health Behaviour in School aged Children Survey. I looked at the 20% of children who report being involved with a religious group, and within that sample of about 6000, I compared the religious involved children who self-reported a disability with those who did not.

What this analysis showed is provocative: the children who report two particular disabilities are experiencing a different, and less protective benefit of religious involvement, than children with no reported disability or who had a more of what might be considered an “acceptable” disability in this context.
One of the two disability states that lit up in our analysis was behavioural disorders. It may be that children with these disorders are struggling at church or are treated differently because of unrealistic expectations about what constitutes good behaviour.

As we are well aware, childhood is a time when lifelong trajectories are set, including about our own sense of self-worth. It is a dangerous time for children to receive messages that they are bad or inadequate because their legitimate needs are misunderstood, or because their disability is equated with bad behavior or even with sin.

The other disability that lit up was certain kinds of physical disability states, including blindness. How do we interpret that one? I can’t say definitively, but here is something to consider.

There is a well-loved hymn that you may know. It goes like this.

Amazing grace, how sweet thy sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

Some may argue that the hymn is purely metaphorical; it’s only in talking about it with a colleague who is blind that I have come to realize how offensive it is to equate the physical experience of blindness with sin, even metaphorically.

Of course it would be simplistic to interpret a whole religion based on one verse of one hymn. But metaphorical correlations of blindness and other physical disabilities with sin are woven through much of Christian discourse, and I’m not sure that’s helpful to developing a healthy sense of self.

The youth who contributed to this shaking the movers report said “if society understood disability as strength, then the stigma might lessen” I have a feeling they would have hated those words to Amazing Grace. The Shakers said they want us to know that sometimes disability enables people to see the world in a different way. I’m no song writer, but I like this better:

Amazing Grace, how sweet thy sound,
That tells me I am free.
I once was lost, but now I’m found
I’m blind, and I’ll help you see.

If religious groups are going to be protected by rights, the “duty bearers” who give shape to religious narratives and worlds need to be accountable to rights.

And that includes being accountable to providing an environment that is free of discrimination for every single child— of any gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status or disability.