

LENTEN CHALLENGE

CENTERING THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY



**SOUTHWESTERN
PENNSYLVANIA
SYNOD** EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA

A PROJECT OF THE SYNOD'S AUTHENTIC
DIVERSITY AND JUSTICE WORKING GROUP

WEEK 1:

This year for our Lenten Series we are working on centering the largest marginalized group, the disability community*. It's estimated that 26% of the adult population is disabled in some way, and it is the only marginalized group that you can become part of at any age. Disability can be physical or mental, it can be obvious or invisible. Over the next 5 weeks, we will provide you a brief history on disability rights in the United States, share the experiences of members of our local congregations, and close with some action items and a prayer.

We want to start off by remembering that before the 1970s there was limited support for people with disabilities and their families. For example, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were often institutionalized, mothers of autistic children were told it was their fault for being too cold and not loving enough, and support for wheelchair users was rare. If a disabled person could get a job, they had no protections or accommodations, and children were treated as separate but equal by the education system, if their district could even find a place for them to attend. Not to mention society still hadn't let go of the idea that these disabilities were caused by sin or that someone just needed an exorcism. American society neglected and avoided disability.

**In this series we will switch between identity and person first language, acknowledging that each person has the right to determine how they are labeled. It is always best to follow the language preference of the person with a disability than to decide how they should be identified.*

CONNOR'S STORY

Hi, my name is Connor. I am a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy. I am in seventh grade and I love sports. I have been attending Our Redeemer in McMurray since I was born. I have attended Sunday School here since I was little. My Dad always attended class with me to help me while my mom was teaching another class until I was old enough to be in her class. I always feel included in class but do need the extra assistance. I have also attended Bible School but my grandma attended with me so she could assist me. My family also assists me with communion, carrying my cup for me because I need two hands on my walker. The pastors help me by putting the wafer in my mouth.

I do have some issues getting around the church. Anything held outside at the church at the playground or in the parking lot is difficult because of the uneven surfaces. When I was little, I could not get upstairs to Sunday School class in my walker unless I walked out the front door and all around the building to the top door, luckily my parents were strong and managed to carry me up the steps. Because the pews are close together, I can scoot into my seat holding onto the backs. When I am walking back after communion, the pianist always makes sure I have enough room to walk.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Look at the spaces around your church - how easy are they to navigate? A general rule is that you should allow a minimum width of 32" to be accessible. Note changes that need to be made and then share with your pastors, council, and other church leaders. Talk about what plans could be made to make your church easier for everyone to move around in. It could be as easy as rearranging furniture, or something as big as installing a ramp or elevator into the building.
- Churches aren't the only places that can be tough to navigate. Many of our towns have old store fronts, restaurants trying to squeeze in one more table, or public spaces that have not been updated to include everyone. You can help others know what to expect by uploading accessibility information on Google Maps.
- Did you know that "handicapped" is considered an outdated term? Practice calling parking spaces "accessible spaces" and using phrases like that's the "accessible stall" for bathroom stalls.

PRAYER:

Lord, we thank you for our bodies, and we praise you for your diverse creation of bodies in both how they look and how they move. We also thank you for including us in your body, and acknowledging that each of us has unique gifts that work together to share your love. Help move us towards inclusive practices in our church, home, and community that allows everyone to fully participate. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.