

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 3:

Last week we learned that Section 504 passed in 1973, but remained unenforceable. This was because despite passing a law, Joseph Califano, head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), refused to sign regulations that would define disability, discrimination, and enforcement. After 4 years, this led disability rights organizers to protest, creating a nationwide sit-in across 10 HEW offices starting on April 5th, 1977. While some sit-ins only lasted a few days, the San Francisco sit-in was in place much longer. The protestors celebrated Passover and Easter together (including an egg hunt). One of the protest leaders, Judith Heumann, noted: "It was also the seventh day of Passover, which I normally celebrated but hadn't had any time to think about. Now, the symbolism hit me. The deliverance of the Israelites from slavery. Freedom." Local churches, community groups, businesses and advocacy groups supported the protestors by sending in supplies, food, and medicine. As time went on, the federal government put in changes to make it uncomfortable for the protestors - for instance, the payphones were jammed, so those fluent in American Sign Language communicated to and received updates from the protestors on the outside. The government started bar entry into the building, so the Black Panthers stepped in and delivered the food. Eventually a small delegation of protestors were flown to Washington DC to meet with Califano (arranged and funded by the International Association of Machinists). The group was housed at Luther Place Memorial Church, who literally tore down walls, altered their bathrooms, and installed ramps to accommodate everyone. The delegation met with politicians, officials, and continued protesting in DC. Finally, after 23 days of protests, on April 28th, 1977, Joseph Califano signed the regulations and paved the way for future disability rights laws.

## **ALFIE'S STORY**

Hi, this is Alfie, I am 7 years old, and I am sharing about what it's like to be autistic. When there are loud noises like hand dryers and my school cafeteria at lunch, it's so loud and hurts my ears and it feels like a sore back. I need my ear muffs and they lower the sound. When I find something I like, I don't stop looking or talking about it. It makes me really happy to share those things with other people. I like talking about video games, the old testament, jokes, and other stuff. It can be hard to make friends but sometimes it's not. Because sometimes they don't understand how my brain works. Sometimes I repeat words over and over again, because it makes me happy and calm. I like to be in tight spaces, like between the couch and the wall in my classroom, or in my cozy canoe.

Once we were at a new church, and the light from the window hurt. We didn't know what to do, we didn't know if there was a space we could go to. I had to curl up in the pew until church was over, and I felt better.

## **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Consider the sensory experiences in your church, like sound quality and volume, lighting, and smells. Think of ways you could help those with sensory issues in your congregation. A big idea may be creating a sensory or meditation room. A smaller change could include having fidgets and/or ear plugs available in your narthex.
- Autistic individuals often have a subject that they are enthusiastic about. Give space to listen to their interests - you may learn some interesting new facts.
- Many individuals with Autism find comfort in routine and schedules. When possible give them an idea of the order of the day or a printed schedule.

## **PRAYER:**

Dear God, we thank you for our minds, and that you did not make all of our brains think the same way. Help us embrace neurodiversity, and use our voices to change systems that exclude others from full participation. Open our hearts and ears to justice, and let us be a voice in creating a more just world. We ask all this in your name. Amen.