

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 4:

Section 504 brought a lot of great changes, like accommodations in schools and the workplace, as well as adaptations like curb cuts, it was just a start. The Disability Rights movement knew to be able to fully participate in American life, there needed to be more. Institutions, after being exposed for their inhumane treatment of people with disabilities, were starting to close and more everyday supports were needed for people and their families. Additional laws regarding education passed, including IDEA which requires a free and appropriate education be available for students with disabilities from ages 3 through 21, as well as early intervention resources. While schools became more supportive, there still wasn't enough support everywhere else. In 1986, the National Council on Disabilities recommended a new act to prohibit discrimination, require reasonable accommodations by employers, and require accessibility in public transportation, public places, and telecommunications. This is known as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and was introduced to the House and Senate in 1988.

KELLY'S STORY

Hello. My name is Kelly. I am a member of St Andrew Lutheran church in the Shadyside neighborhood of Pittsburgh. I live with a disability called Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy or FSHD. FSHD is one of forty neuromuscular diseases covered under the title of Muscular Dystrophy. FSHD varies among different families and individuals within that family. It is caused by the lack of or total absence of the protein dystrophin. This disease runs in my family – my grandfather, my mother and my uncle all were afflicted by this disease. I was diagnosed when I was 14 years old when my mother noticed that I was having trouble lifting

things. At that time I was told that there was really nothing that could be done and I may or may not become worse or be unable to walk or be totally disabled. At 14 I had really no idea what to expect and thought it was pretty cool that I had some disease that wasn't really affecting me. Oh - to be 14 again! I am explaining this so you are aware of what I am dealing with and so I can explain what obstacles I face within our Synod congregations when attending worship and other events.

When I first came to St Andrew there was no ramp to get into the church and no ramp to access the sanctuary. As I became more and more unable to get into the church, the council began looking at just how "welcoming" we were as a congregation. We had always welcomed all people and wanted to continue that. One council member put it like this "if we were truly welcoming maybe we should make the church building accessible for all people". The funny thing is was that I was not the one suggesting that we make our building accessible. I didn't want to be the one for whom a major portion of our monetary resources were being spent. As we began to make our building accessible more and more people began coming into St. Andrew because they could now get into the building and sanctuary. These were people that the church had forgotten. You see once you became unable to access the church you became a shut-in. I did not want to be a shut-in. That's not who I am.

I want to be able to serve the church and be active within not only my congregation but within the Synod and the ELCA. Unfortunately I am not always able to do this. Many of the congregations within our Synod are not accessible. If the building is accessible often the sanctuary and/or bathrooms are not.

I will continue to speak out for the inclusion of all people within our congregations and our Synod. We should no longer be an after thought as to where to put us or how to accommodate those with not only mobility issues but also those with hearing, sight, and speech issues among others. As Christians we should be welcoming ALL that wish to learn of the love of our Lord no matter their abilities. Sometimes in order to do that we have to think beyond our beautiful edifices and look at how to make our buildings accessible to all of God's children.

ACTION ITEMS:

- For event planning, consider how you will make it accessible for all? Consider where you place lecterns, trash cans, and other things that could be a barrier for full participation. Does your seating allow for all to be included, or leave some people on the fringes? Can everyone get on the stage or altar easily? Is the building truly accessible, or does it have even one step that could make it difficult for someone to get in? Is the signage in the building clear?
- Listen to someone with a disability when working on making bathrooms accessible. Adding bars to a stall does not make it completely accessible. Consider the height of sinks, soap dispensers, and towels.
- In general, make accessibility a part of your planning process, rather than an afterthought. When we make accessibility a priority, it means that everyone can participate with us.

Thank you to Kelly for this week's suggestions.

PRAYER:

Lord, we thank you for our communities, especially the public spaces that bring us all together. We ask that you help us to remember who may be left out, and give us the foresight on how we can better plan our worship, activities, and events to include. Thank you for the voices that lead us to advocate for change and help us support them. Give us grace for when we forget to think about everyone's needs. Amen.