

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 2:

It can be hard to believe, but it's only been 50 years since the first disability rights laws were passed. Before 1973, public spaces were not required to be accessible, there were no job protections, nor were schools required to educate students with disabilities. Families were encouraged to send their disabled relatives to institutions, and were made to feel ashamed for birthing a child with disabilities. Unfortunately, the wider church did not help in this regard, often blaming the parents' sin for birth defects, autism, and intellectual disabilities. The Civil Rights, Women's rights, and LGBT movements of the 60s as well as the returning disabled veterans from Vietnam helped pave the way for the Disability Rights movement. People with disabilities organized, supported these other movements, and worked to get their own protections passed. The first law is known as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. The nondiscrimination requirements of the law apply to employers and organizations that receive financial assistance from any Federal department or agency. These organizations and employers include many hospitals, nursing homes, mental health centers and human service programs. Section 504 forbids organizations and employers from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services. It defines the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate in, and have access to, program benefits and services. Section 504 was passed in 1973, but remained unenforceable until 1977...

JUDY AND DREW'S STORY

Hi, I'm Judy and I'm the mother of a 34-year-old man with multiple mental disabilities. Andrew (or Drew as we call him) had a normal birth, but at 6 months, had a 15-minute-long seizure. Told not to worry, as many infants and toddlers have seizures associated with fevers, we moved onto our life, until his next seizure, 20 minutes long. After many trips to the ER and visits to doctors and neurologists, he was diagnosed with epilepsy of unknown origin. His mental disabilities began to show themselves as he got older. Not talking by age two, not keeping up with his peers' abilities of academics and many other indicators led to a diagnosis of intellectual and developmental disabilities. But he has a smile that could last forever and a silly sense of humor. Many people that we would run across had different ways of responding to Drew: looking at him strangely, ignore him, pull their children close to them – like he was contagious; it could be very frustrating. But, then there were those others who would talk to him like he was you or me, who would shake his hand, have a real conversation with him as much as possible. These were the golden angels who lit up our life and we knew that there were people who cared about those whose lives were like Drew's. We met some of the best people in our lives because of Drew. People who also had disabled children whose lives were far more impacted by the gift that had been given them and we realized that we were so much more blessed in our lives that we knew. As Drew has gotten older, he has begun having emotional/mood issues which at this point in his life are fairly well controlled after many anxious moments that we all had to endure. But, with the help of God, Jesus and many good, supportive people, we are on a pretty even keel right now. Our journey would not have been a very good one without the people we have met and come to love in our churches. We have been to some churches where we could tell this was not the place for us – either by the looks that were given Drew or no one speaking to us. We stayed at our churches due to the support and love that they gave and give Drew. They accept him as he is with all of his highs and lows and oddities. You know it is a real Christian community when the real love of God is in the people who love Drew - I was going to say the least of us, but I don't consider Drew the least of us – he is a part of us.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Take the opportunity to look at your church's education materials, what can you alter to individualize and contextualize for all learners?
- If you already have supports in place for individuals with disabilities, have you re-visited to see what is working, what could be changed, and if there are any new things you can do to be more supportive?
- Take time to reflect on respite care opportunities and consider if you have a calling to provide relief to caregivers. This can be a huge blessing for the entire family, but you may need to consider what qualifications, training, and clearances you need to help.

PRAYER:

God, we thank you for the people in our life that bring us joy and bring us closer to you. We ask that you give us the opportunity to also bring joy to others, and partake in your work here on earth. Help us act in love towards those who are different from us and help us fully embrace them as you have done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.