



Disability Ministries

Autistic self (imago dei)

Sometimes parents resist the news that their child is, or may be, autistic. Why do we need to label children so young? What good could possibly come of it?

As an autistic adult who was diagnosed at age 22, I wish my diagnosis had come much earlier in my life, because so much good has come of it. Getting diagnosed with autism is, quite simply, one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

The truth about labels is that they don't come only in the form of diagnoses. You can't protect an autistic child from labels by refusing to get them evaluated for an autism diagnosis or by refusing to accept that diagnosis if it comes. An autistic child who struggles with executive function will be labeled lazy. An autistic child who struggles with transitions will be labeled disruptive. An autistic child who struggles to take turns in conversation will be labeled self-absorbed. In my experience, being able to respond to those labels with "No, I'm autistic. I'm trying my best, but some things are harder for me than for most people" is much more empowering than concluding, "I guess I am lazy, disruptive and self-absorbed, and it's all my fault."

In addition to empowering me to reject pejorative labels that blame me for my struggles, my autism diagnosis has helped me figure out what I need and how to get it. When I'm bored and restless in a Zoom meeting, I recognize that I need more sensory input than I'm getting, and I start to knit. When I'm upset and want to destroy things, I recognize that I have excess negative energy, and I find a bare patch of wall to pelt with balled-up socks. When I can't choke down food that causes me sensory distress, I can explain that the food is triggering my sensory sensitivities. When I forget to ask questions in a social situation, I can forgive myself and also explain to my friends that I'm unlikely to ask for their input but they're welcome to spontaneously share information with me if they want me to know it.

This isn't to say nothing bad can ever come of an early diagnosis. If an early diagnosis leads parents to put their child in applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy, [which is linked to post-traumatic stress disorder](#), that can be bad. If an early diagnosis leads parents or teachers to believe that a child will never be able to learn or do anything worthwhile, that can be bad. But these are not necessary consequences of an early diagnosis; these are reactions to the diagnosis, and they can be changed or avoided.

An accurate diagnosis, whatever that may be, is the best way for someone to get

appropriate medical care. For autistic people, an accurate diagnosis also confers rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act, puts words to experiences that have previously been hard to explain, and unlocks a community of people with similar experiences. These benefits are extremely valuable.

This is not to say that being autistic is easy or that parenting an autistic child is easy. Both of those can be difficult. Both can also bring profound joy. But refusing to seek or accept an accurate diagnosis of autism will not make anything easier for either the parent or the child. On the contrary, receiving and accepting an accurate diagnosis can be immensely helpful for the reasons already given.

I love being autistic. Having a special interest brings me deep happiness. Properly calibrating my sensory input feels amazing. I enjoy having a logical bent to my thinking. This isn't to say I didn't cry the first time I contemplated getting evaluated for a diagnosis. I was afraid of what others would think of me. But it has turned out that I vastly prefer people to know that I'm autistic rather than to interact with me and draw their own conclusions: that I am weird, self-absorbed, tactless. After all, the diagnosis didn't make me autistic. That was already a part of me. My diagnosis just helped me explain why I am the way I am.

This piece was written using [identity-first language](#), which is the preference of most autistic adults.

By Linnea Peterson

Autistic adult attending Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minn.

Trauma-informed pastoral care within the church

A few months ago I was privileged to present a webinar on trauma-informed pastoral care (TIpC) for the Southeastern Synod. One may wonder how trauma impacts our faith life and why LGBTQ+ people are in desperate need of a trauma-informed approach when seeking pastoral care.

Trauma-informed care (TIC) stems from the medical community.¹ Physicians have begun to broaden questions upon intake because data reveals that trauma is held in the body.² Over time physical trauma works its way into our mental and spiritual lives, causing circumstances that often land in front of a pastor. Therefore, TIpC takes physical/mental health and the state of the soul into consideration. Medical practitioners aim to restore people to a state of physical health while ministry practitioners seek to help people return to a state of joy and reconnect with their purpose for practicing their faith. TIpC is especially important in caring for those whose disability is deemed invisible (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, gender dysphoria and body dysphoria, to name a few). Additionally, LGBTQ+ people (and families) bear an additional burden of religion-based trauma, a particularly harmful reality due to homo/transphobia and hate crimes.

TIC asks questions that clergy and lay leaders may find helpful when pastoral care relates to childhood trauma. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study³ can be a critical resource in knowing how adults and youth respond to circumstances in a way that problematizes their faith relationships. The study captures incidences of abuse before

the 18th birthday. These data may help us to consider and plan for person-led spiritual care. TIC is designed around core principles: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and humility and responsiveness. As faith leaders practicing TIpC, we aim to focus on resilience and the return of joy so that one is empowered to reconnect with their life's purpose as they understand it. Principles that support resilience include reducing the source of stress, strengthening core life skills and supporting responsive relationships. For those who suffer with invisible disabilities, pastoral care that employs a trauma-informed approach helps to further restore God's children to the life they were intended to live as God designed. For more information please visit the resources below or connect with me at nashvillerrainbowpastor@gmail.com.

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1. <https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org>
2. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking Press, 2014)
3. <https://centerforadolescentstudies.com/>

Additional resources:

- <https://www.traumainformedmd.com/churches.html#/>
- <https://www.samhsa.gov/programs>

ELCA Future Church design affirmed by ELCA Church Council

Dear members of the network of ELCA Disability Ministries. Please visit a message on behalf of the ELCA [here](#). The church is alive and organically living into a call that requires each of us to lay down our own desires to make room for what the Holy Spirit, through the very depth of breath of God, breathes into us. We surrender our own will and invite the Creator to pave the way for Christ to be known by new people and shared with any who will listen, and we assemble ourselves not only for fellowship but for our calling to be in praise of the Triune God.

I lay down my mantle, place myself in a posture of rest, knowing God is, and remain still with assurance that it is the Holy Spirit that leads the way. As we enter this Advent season, a time of waiting for our Lord and Savior, I pray that all creation breathes in the breath of God and breathes out anything that may hinder God's deepest desire. We empty ourselves so that what lies ahead is the Holy One's truest calling for our new way forward. Be well, dear church. God is within us; Emmanuel is coming; we pause and await the Holy Spirit that prepares us for the way forward.

With love and adoration for our Creator, Savior and Advocate,

Carol A. Johnson, Member-at-Large of the ELCA

A Message from ELCA Disability Ministries Advisory Team

The ELCA Disability Ministries team wishes you a Merry Christmas. We hold you all and the church in prayer during this important time of transition and look forward to our future together as the body of Christ within the ecclesia of the ELCA.



Find additional information on Disability Ministries or **contact us**.