"Language around Disability"

When we come before God in worship, we bring our whole selves. What does that actually mean?

I am a paraplegic. I use a wheelchair. Saying I have a disability does not take away my own identity. I am, in fact, a child of God. My wheelchair and spinal cord injury are not the only (or first) obstacle encountered. Many times it is the language we use when talking about or concerning disability that is problematic or unwelcoming to many.

Talking about disability can feel overwhelming sometimes. The language doesn’t feel right. We often don’t know what to say or how to speak publicly in our liturgy, sermons and prayers.

At times we will fall into the trap of affirming who a person is “despite” their disability, rather than simply honoring who they are. A beloved child of God. Whole, complete. Just as they own it. I’m OK with it. This is how I was made. Yes, we all have varied and different abilities. I am not perfect. I am a wheelchair user. I am a person who has a disability. I do face challenges. I am also a child of God and a full member of the Body of Christ. I am a person first and foremost, whose identity is rooted in being a child of God. Whole, complete. Just as they own that part of who I am enough for me. I am not ‘disabled’; my wheelchair and spina bifida do not hinder my life. They, largely, make the gift that I am. I HAVE a disability, and that’s OK. The whole Person is a worshipper and has been created to share their gifts because of it.

We hope this document is a starting point or a conversation starter as we work toward making our worship and the language we use in it more inclusive and barrier free. Our goal is not perfect, but we serve a God that is perfect, and we come as we come together as the whole body of Christ, where all are truly welcome.

Witten by Anita K. Smallin and the Rev. Lisa Heffernan of the ELCA Disability Ministries Advisory Team

Find our “Language around Disability” resource at both elca.org/Resources/Disability-Ministry#Other and elca.org/Resources/Worship#General

We've discovered there is a deep enrichment for the entire church when we all learn from the life experiences of others, especially those who are not seen as the majority. Please consider including the following resources in your confirmation classes, Bible studies, and a variety of other assistive devices for computer users living with disabilities, and visitors living with low, no or partial vision. AudioEye allows readers to turn blind accessibility tools on or off to improve visibility and/or accessibility for all users.

Find our “Language around Disability” resource at both elca.org/Resources/Disability-Ministry#Other and elca.org/Resources/Worship#General.