



Disability Ministries



Anita K. Smallin, youth and family ministry director, Trinity Lutheran Church of Bethesda, Md.

"Language around Disability"

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



The Rev. Lisa Heffernan, pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church of Chamberlain, S.D.

For many people in the ELCA it means coming to worship with the assistance of a mobility, audio, visual or sensory device. Unfortunately, in many of our churches or places of worship it is our siblings in Christ who have disabilities and need such devices who feel the least welcome at the table. Why? A lack of ramps, braille or large print hymnals, or elevators are not the only (or first) obstacle encountered. Many times it is the language used when talking about or concerning disability that is problematic or unwelcoming to many.

Talking about disability can feel awkward 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 are. What needs to change? Where do hospitality and authentic welcome to worship begin?

Using person-first language is a great place to start. This language is meant to acknowledge that a person is not their diagnosis or disability in a negative way. It reminds us that someone is a person first and foremost, whose identity is rooted in being a child of God. Also, in person-first language, we avoid language that talks about suffering, or that victimizes or infantilizes the person.

Example: a wheelchair bound person vs. a person who uses a wheelchair.

Disability Ministries has prepared a document that can help us think about how to use person-first language in worship and in the whole of our lives together. The document helps us understand what person-first language is and provides examples for how it can be used in worship. It also serves as a reminder to us that language around disability is constantly evolving and is often contextual.

Disability vs. varied ability vs. differently abled

"For myself (Lisa Heffernan), terms like varied ability and differently abled wrap up disability into too nice of a little bow. This language feels condescending to me. I have a disability. I own it. I'm OK with it. This is how I was made. Yes, we all have varied and different abilities. I am a paraplegic. I use a wheelchair. Saying I have a disability does not take away my identity or sense of self and who God made me to be. 'Varied' and 'differently abled' don't 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 it the gift it is. I HAVE a disability, and that's OK. The self I bring to worship has a disability but is not broken or 'less than' 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 language isn't perfect, but we serve a God who guides us as we come together as the whole body of Christ, where all are truly welcome.

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

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

New ELCA cultural competency resources recommended by ELCA Disability Ministries

The ELCA Disability Ministries Advisory Team worked with three expansion teams throughout 2019. One group, the Faith Formation and Resources Team, reviewed several recent materials written and/or produced by ELCA members, leaders and young adults. Below are a few items we suggest ELCA members can benefit from as they explore together and grow in their awareness of how churches can build cultural competency in leaders and members across the denomination. Language, accessibility and relational/social practices are some of the major contributors to dissatisfaction in church life by members living with disabilities. In addition to feeling unheard and/or undervalued, 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, intergenerational social gatherings and youth groups.

"Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections" by Joseph Bocko, editor (Augsburg Fortress, 2019)

"Luther's Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures" by J. Paul Rajashekar, editor (Christian World Imprints, 2019)

"Rooted, Lent 2020" by LEAD

ELCA Spanish Language Resource webpage

Visual Accessibility



We're excited to share that the ELCA website is now fully accessible for members and visitors living with low, no or partial vision. AudioEye allows readers to turn blind accessibility toolbars off or on to improve visibility and/or accessibility through audio reader. Members living with temporary visual impairment from eye surgery or disease can benefit, as well as members whose blindness or visual impairment is sudden or progresses over time. Even readers living with dyslexia can benefit from special font and text features now available on all ELCA webpages. AudioEye tools are also compatible with braille device readers, JAWS and a variety of other assistive devices for computer users living with disabilities, yet many features are available to any computer user who does not have such special devices. Learn more by visiting audioeye.com or simply visit elca.org and click on the blue bubble to activate your toolbar.



We will track user activity to assess whether such improvements can be made on a longer-term basis in late 2020. Be on the lookout for some of our ministry partners to join us in this effort to create greater accessibility for all members and magazine subscribers of the ELCA.



Find additional information on Disability Ministries or contact us.