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Perspective: God revealed through people with disabilities
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**Evangelical Lutheran
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God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Perspective:

God revealed through people with disabilities

By Robert C. Blezard

Our culture has changed significantly in the last 50 years in both its awareness of the needs of people with disabilities and its willingness to accommodate those needs. Of course, much work needs to be done to change attitudes and remove barriers. How are you and your church doing?

Exercise 1: "Who sinned?"

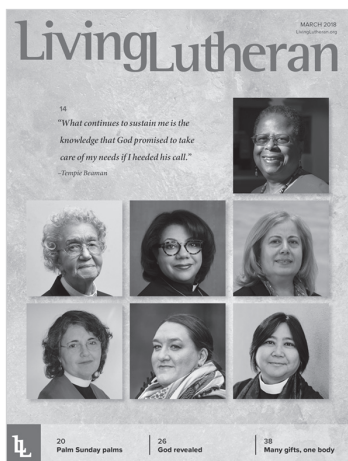
The account of the man born blind that unfolds in John 9 tells us a wild romp of a story involving the man, his parents, the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples and, of course, Jesus. The story is worth an in-depth examination, but John 9:1-3 reveals the essence:

As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

- The disciples believe that in order to have someone born blind, someone had to sin. What does that say about their understanding of people with disabilities?
- How would the above understanding result in justification for bad treatment of people with disabilities in Jesus' day?
- How does our understanding of the cause and effect of disabilities differ today?
- In what ways are people with disabilities still looked down on in our culture? How do they face obstacles in such things as architecture, language, infrastructure, social acceptance, employment? What are other areas where the disabled face obstacles? Can you share a story?
- How is God's work revealed through disabled people? How do they reveal God's image? God's strength? God's vulnerability?

Exercise 2: Learning about disability

It's been observed that people who don't have disabilities fall into the trap of taking their abilities for granted and simply forgetting that not everybody is like them. They aren't inconsiderate so much as they may



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be unthinking. An exercise for the fully able may provide greater understanding.

For a period of time, find a way to experience the loss of some ability and learn from it. Here are some simple ideas to try. Agree in your study group to undertake one of these experiments and talk about it next time you meet.

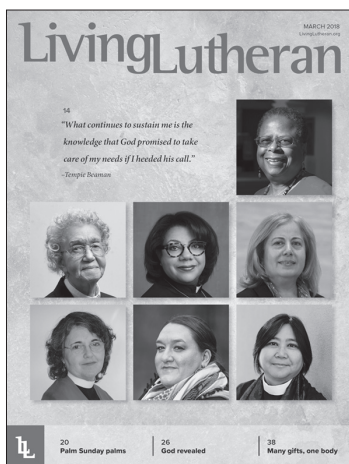
- When arising, cover your eyes with a blindfold and get washed up, get dressed, then make and eat breakfast.
- Keeping your dominant hand limp, as if you did not have use of it, take a shower and get dressed. Don't forget your shoes! Prepare and eat a meal.
- Pretend you are completely unable to go up even one step, which is the situation that faces people who get around in wheelchairs, and spend a day going through your usual activities.
- Spend a day without talking, communicating instead with your gestures, facial expressions and writing.

Gathering back as a study group, share your experiences. What did you learn? How did you learn it? How much did you take for granted? How can you and your congregation be more sensitive to the needs of people who are not fully abled?

Exercise 3: Scan your church

How accessible is your church and its activities to people who live with disabilities? Tour the building, grounds and parking lot.

- Is there ample parking for people with mobility issues or who use wheelchairs?
- Are there ramps to take people who get around in wheelchairs into the building? Once inside, can they access every room? What areas are not accessible?
- Would people who can't climb stairs be able to get into the building, and then to every room on every level?
- In the sanctuary, are there special spots for people who get around in wheelchairs?
- Do you provide large-print bulletins for people with poor vision?
- Are there devices to help the hard of hearing?
- Do you reserve pews for people with mobility issues?
- If people use walkers, is there a convenient place in the sanctuary for them to sit with room for the walkers to park?



About the study guide author:

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Study guide: **God revealed through people with disabilities** *continued*

- Are the bathrooms accessible and usable to people who use wheelchairs or walkers?
- What other issues need to be addressed?

For action: From this exercise, make up a list of needs and suggestions and give them to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

Exercise 4: For discussion

- Because of the expense, some congregations are hesitant to spend the money to eliminate architectural barriers that could make their physical plants more welcoming to people with disabilities. Similarly, they may be hesitant to spend the money to begin programs. Has your church fallen into this trap? How could you reframe this as less a cost and more of an investment in people?
- Does your congregation engage in sufficient productive conversation about the issues of ability and disability in their many forms—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual? If you don't talk about it, how do you know whether your congregation is doing enough to accommodate people of all abilities? How can a congregation be aware of an issue if it's not discussed?
- Does your congregation have members who don't have full ability? If not, why not? Are there barriers your congregation has to overcome in order to create a welcoming atmosphere for them? If so, has your pastor or congregation council engaged them in conversation to see if there is anything the church can do to make their experience better? If not, why not?
- Share a time when you experienced or witnessed discrimination against someone who was not fully abled? What happened? Why did it happen? How did it make you feel?
- Share a story of when a person who was disabled could not participate fully in some activity or event. What happened? Why did it happen? How did it make you feel?
- How have our culture's attitudes toward disabled people changed in your lifetime? What were things like for disabled people when you were growing up? What are the reasons for the changes? How much farther do we have to go?

God revealed through people with disabilities

By Beth Wartick

His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:2-3).



I was born with one arm. I was 10 when I heard my mom tell the story of bringing her newborn to worship, only to be confronted by another member who insisted that God was punishing one or both of my parents by sending them a child with one arm.

Experiences like this have left me asking: “Is that what the church thinks of people with disabilities?”

When congregations never talk about disability, it sends the message to people with disabilities and their loved ones that they don’t really matter to the church. And when congregations talk about disability thoughtlessly or unkindly, it sends another message—that people with disabilities aren’t really welcome.

I’m a lifelong Lutheran and a lifelong person with a disability, and I need both of those parts of my identity to be welcome in the church. It’s not just up to leaders like pastors and deacons to make a congregation welcoming to people with disabilities. Every member of the body of Christ has the responsibility and power to make every other member welcomed and included.

How can congregations make intentional space for people with disabilities? There is no one right way, but rather many opportunities to be inclusive.

For example, in my congregation we pause long enough between prayer petitions to allow time for those who need a little longer to get their responses out. You could also use large-print bulletins. And ask yourselves and others if the language used in worship unintentionally sends



the wrong message. For instance, the hymn “Amazing Grace” with its line “was blind but now I see” may sound different to a person with a vision impairment than one without. A leader could also easily say, “Please stand in body or spirit” instead of “everyone rise” to include those who can’t stand.


It’s simple to ask your congregation if any accessibility challenges prevent them or their loved ones from participating, yet so often we don’t even think to ask.

In addition to including people with disabilities as equal participants, we need to include them as equal leaders. I was in my 20s before I knew of any people with disabilities who served as leaders in the church.

How might you make room for a person in a wheelchair to read the lessons during worship if your lectern is up a set of stairs? Your microphone could be moved to the floor.

How could you make sure youth with intellectual disabilities are included in Christmas programs with their peers? Check with them and their families to see how their gifts can shine.

It might take creativity and work, but I’m certain it’s worth the effort. When I serve communion, I place the bread on a small stand made by a member of my congregation to leave my hand free to distribute it. It’s not the way other pastors have done it, but it’s a way that, as Jesus put it, “God’s works might be revealed.”

When congregations include people with disabilities as full participants and leaders, God’s work is revealed. God works through people like me—people with disabilities—knowing that we are truly part of the community, truly part of the body of Christ. May all our congregations be places where God is revealed through people with disabilities. 

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Beth Wartick is pastor of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tipton, Iowa.

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