

# 10 Minutes with . . .

## Mona Fuerstenau



BY KATIE SCHUERMAN

*One mother encourages involving everyone in the body of Christ.*

Disabilities are some of the primary civil rights issues remaining in the country,” says Mona Fuerstenau, a ministry consultant for Bethesda Lutheran Communities and chair of the LCMS Disabilities Task Force. An advocate for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including her twenty-two-year-old son, Ben, Fuerstenau works tirelessly to educate congregations on how to become inclusive communities that encourage meaningful participation and fellowship for everyone in the body of Christ.

**LW** | Why are you so passionate about advocating for those with disabilities?

**MF:** I live it. As a parent to Ben for twenty-two years, I have tried to educate my own congregation on our journey as a family, our need for sanctuary, our need to belong and the kind of support we need. More importantly, I have tried to show them that we have our own gifts to bring to the life of the congregation.

**LW** | What current myths and stigmas surround those with disabilities?

**MF:** People with disabilities are seen as being needy rather than needful, yet people with disabilities have unique gifts to give and lessons to teach others. My son Ben teaches lessons in joy and perseverance. He brings perspective to peoples’ lives, especially to teens and young adults who struggle with appreciating their own value in life. Being around Ben can help them focus on what’s important, on their gifts instead of their perceived flaws.

There’s also a myth in the Church that it requires programs and money and volunteers and lots of training to be with people with disabilities when all it really requires is a welcoming and accepting attitude. In my lifetime, I would love to see the Church welcoming people with disabilities the same as any new visitor is welcomed, asking them questions like, “What are your interests and talents? How can we get you involved in the life of the Church?”

**LW** | What does Ben want from the body of Christ?

**MF:** Ben wants to serve; he wants to give; he wants to be loved; he wants to light the candles; he wants to play the drums; he wants to belong; he wants to bring his friends to church and expects them to be treated just like he is.

**LW** | Language itself can be a barrier. How can we in the Church best refer to our brothers and sisters in Christ with disabilities?

**MF:** We are all people first, and then we have other things that describe us; so, it is respectful to refer to those with disabilities first as people. For example, it is good to say “a person with an intellectual or developmental disability, a person with blindness, a person with deafness, a person who experiences mental illness, a person who lives with autism,” and so on.

**LW** | What kind of work is being done by the LCMS Disabilities Task Force?

**MF:** The LCMS Disabilities Task Force is made up of thirteen individuals with and without disabilities. The main focus of the task force is systems change, on how to educate and make a better communication network

between congregations, schools and resources within the LCMS. We are concerned with universal access for all persons with disabilities, and we're talking about blindness, deafness, mental illness, intellectual and developmental disabilities, wounded warriors and acquired disabilities that might be a barrier to participation in church communities. We want to help the Church see value, learn lessons from and be in ministry and fellowship with people with disabilities as equal members in the body of Christ.

**LW** | What can the Church do to break down the myths and stigmas surrounding those with disabilities?

**MF:** This issue of *The Lutheran Witness* is a good start. Frank conversations need to be had about where we are in our Life Together and where we need to be. In fact, in regard to our Synod's mission of *Witness, Mercy, Life Together*, I would like to see us make an intentional move away from thinking about those with disabilities in terms of mercy only and more in terms of life together. Individual congregations can help make this attitudinal shift toward life together by considering what persons with disabilities can do for the Church, not just what the Church can do for them.

