

*“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.*

## Let’s Talk About Ableism

This March, in honor of National Disabilities Awareness Month, let’s talk about ableism. Ableism is the way society and people within it favor those we deem able-bodied and discriminate against people with disabilities. Here at SHUMC, we are pretty good about making spaces handicap-accessible and making experiences kid-friendly and neurodivergent-friendly, but ableism goes deeper than that.

Did you know that a lot of disabilities are only disempowering because of the way society is set up? Think about it. If everyone learned sign language alongside verbal language growing up, and things like drive-throughs reliably and consistently had accessible methods for Deaf people to communicate, would deafness be an impairment or simply a different way of experiencing the world? The Deaf community is a vibrant one with fully-developed language and slang and subcultures, and anyone plugged into that community gets to experience a whole world that hearing people miss out on entirely.

Unpacking ableism means letting go of the thing in our minds that’s convinced that able-bodied-ness is the ideal and that any other way for a body to be is sub-par. As someone with chronic migraines, I will readily admit that this is not always easy! And yet, I really do love my body, and the migraines are part of the package.

To imagine what it would look like to stop idolizing able-bodied-ness, most of us don’t have to look past our noses. We have already made big progress with this regarding a couple disabilities: nearsightedness and farsightedness. We don’t really treat people (or think of ourselves) differently for wearing glasses or contacts, and by and large the world is set up in ways that make these vision differences less disabling than, say, a similar degree of auditory processing disability.

So, what can we do to welcome people with disabilities? And how can we dismantle ableism in society and ourselves?

1. Listen. One great way to become more aware of how ableism influences our thinking is to follow content creators who talk about their disabilities on social media. This list is a great starting point: [\*\*8 Disabled Influencers to Follow\*\*](#)

2. Read. Disability Ministries of The United Methodist Church put together this great list of [\*\*Do’s and Don’t’s for Disability Allies\*\*](#).

3. Wonder. Next time you get bored at church (it’s okay; it happens to me, too!) take time to wonder: Who might have trouble accessing this space or activity? Is anybody here right now having a hard time accessing this experience? Are there folks we assume might participate but not lead?

The more we learn, the more authentically and wholeheartedly we can welcome and empower each other to fully participate in the life of the church. Whether or not you have a disability (or more than one,) I hope that this month, ableism will be a little less powerful in your life.

*Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at [virginiag@smokyhillumc.org](mailto:virginiag@smokyhillumc.org).*