Toni: Hello, and welcome to the Personal Touch in Peters Township! My name is Toni Sulkowski and I am the host for this show. We’re so glad that you could be here at the Personal Touch, and to learn how so many of our residents are reaching out to help others, both within the community of Peters Township and also outside of it. Many of us are blessed and we’re fortunate to have the time and talents and the means to provide a helping hand to others. Today’s show is going to highlight one special way in which one local church is reaching out to a specific segment of the population, the deaf and hard of hearing. According to Pennsylvania’s statistics in the census department, about 8.6% of Pennsylvanians are either deaf or hearing impaired. They have no specific information or data as to how many people within the different counties so they tell you to apply that 8.6% to the population of each to get an average. So there is a definite need for the deaf community to have access to things such as a church service. So it’s my pleasure today to welcome Jeff Vanderhoff, and member Caleb Wysocki, from Trinity United Methodist church right here in Peters Township.

They have partnered together along with the members of Trinity United Methodist Church to provide a worship service specifically aimed at welcoming those who would need an interpreted sign language service, and this helps them to also engage in the worship service. So I want to welcome both of you today. We’re glad to have you here and to learn a little bit more about this unique initiative you have at Trinity United Methodist Church. I think, Pastor Jeff, we’ll start with you. We want to learn a little bit more about you and Caleb prior to getting into knowing more about the ministry. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, and what brought you to Trinity United Methodist?

Jeff: Sure! I’ve been a pastor for about 18 years, and have been moved around a little bit. I’ve served a few churches in Ohio, and in Western Pennsylvania, and we most recently came to Peters about a year ago, we started in July of 2016. The way the Methodist Church works, our Bishop pretty much tells us where we’re going, and we go there. But we have loved it, I have 3 of my 4 children that are in the Peters Township School District. My father was a minister, and I’ve kind of followed in his footsteps. I went to Penn State University and started out in Marketing and Business, did a couple of years in retail management, and then felt a calling to pursue ministry. So I went to seminary and became a pastor, and have been pursuing that call ever since and have loved every minute of it.

Toni: We’re so glad to have you here in Peters Township. Welcome to you and your family. Caleb, I’ve known you all the way back when you were a little guy, so it’s great to reconnect with you. How about telling us a little bit about what you’ve been doing since you graduated from Peters Township?

Caleb: Alright, so I graduated from Peters Township in 2012, and then I went to the University of Pittsburgh. I graduated from there in the spring of 2016 with a degree in linguistics and a certificate in American Sign Language. After that I went to work for Pressley Ridge School for the Deaf. It’s more of a special needs school, more troubled children. So I worked there for about a year and a half and then I transitioned into interpreting for various agencies around the Pittsburgh area. Pittsburgh has a pretty large deaf population so their service is in great need.

Toni: So, we have your passion, and what you’re certified in doing with the deaf community, and you’re a member at Trinity United Methodist Church?

Caleb: Yes, I’ve been a member for a long time.

Toni: Now we have the deaf community that you mentioned in the Pittsburgh area. Can you tell us who the people are that comprises community? How do you label… I don’t want to say label, but how do you identify somebody as being deaf?

Caleb: So the people who identify as being deaf generally use sign language as one of their forms of communication if not their main form of communication. There are many deaf people who can speak and hear to an extent as well, with new technology, and hearing aids, and cochlear implants. But inside the deaf community there are many different levels of hearing loss and signing ability. You have anywhere from somebody who is hard of hearing, who wears hearing aids and can hear almost perfectly, but they still sign, they learn sign language, they’re involved… to somebody who is completely deaf and doesn’t speak at all and only uses sign language. So that’s a pretty wide spectrum of people, and those people are involved in the deaf community. They like being deaf, they enjoy the deaf experience, and they embrace it and take it on as their own. As opposed to people who are not in the deaf community, people who kind of reject that, and want to be part of the hearing world. They want to speak and hear and not sign. They may know a little bit but they don’t use it often or participate in the deaf community.

Toni: So, when you talk about signing, now, are there different types of sign language, just like we have different types of linguistic languages? What about in the deaf community, do they have variations?

Caleb: So yeah, in the United States there’s kind of like a spectrum of sign languages. There’s one called cued speech with is a language that has signs that match the sounds. I don’t know that one, it’s a very specific type of sign language. Then in American Sign Language there’s anywhere from English, matching the structure and the words of English, all the way to American Sign Language using your space structures specific to American Sign Language. So it’s a pretty wide spectrum.

Toni: And so you are using…?

Caleb: I tend to match whoever I’m interpreting for. So if I’m interpreting for someone who’s using straight English, I’ll try to match their signing style, but if there’s a large group, I will try to be as ASL as possible.

Toni: OK, so a new pastor comes to the church, and how do you start this whole process of getting this ministry at Trinity United Methodist? How did you guys connect and come up with this?

Jeff: Well, first I have to say it wasn’t me. It’s been a great idea, I wish I could claim credit for it. But we have a Disability Awareness Committee at our church that has been wonderful. Every year the United Methodist Church has a Disability Awareness Sunday where we focus our attention on Disability Awareness, and someone had mentioned that we have Caleb in our church who does sign language interpreting, so the committee asked him if he would be willing to come and interpret a service. Now at that time we didn’t have any deaf people in our church, and just wanted to do this as a way to raise awareness. So we did, and Caleb did a great job. We kind of let that sink in, and I think God used that as the way to generate and idea, and kind of ignite a spark that said maybe we could do more than just one Sunday a year with this. So our Disability Awareness Committee began to meet and pray about it, and just thought let’s see if Caleb would be willing to do this every week, and what would that look like? Is there a need for that in the community? Do we have the funding for that, and is that an avenue of ministry we’d like to pursue? And, it was, so we started looking into it, and it came about.

Toni: So what has been your length of time that you think this process has gone on to leading you to now offering it at your church?

Jeff: I think it started in the Spring of 2017, so it’s moved pretty quickly from that time. The folks on the DAC started looking into it and established that there is a need. There are not many churches in the area that offer it. There are a few in the Pittsburgh area, but no Methodist churches that we could find. And as a result of that, we thought, “This is a ministry that we need to look at.”

Toni: I don’t imagine… are there any in Washington County?

Caleb: I know there’s one large deaf church called “The Deaf Church” on Mt. Washington. Other than that, there are a few who hire interpreters as needed, but a lot of deaf people can’t get that interpreted. There are a lot of interpreters that don’t do religious services because they don’t know the vocabulary and aren’t comfortable in the setting.

Toni: OK, so you needed to know that, also.

Caleb: Right.

Toni: So this is more than just bringing in that interpreter for that hour of service. So now, the next step is then, what did the people within the church do to prepare for this? So you have a committee that says, “Oh, we’re going to do this, and we have Caleb as a resource,” but did you have to do any work with the congregation as well?

Jeff: Yes, we did. We started talking about it, because it’s not the type of thing where you just say “Next Sunday we’re going to start this.” So we began to talk about it and share with people that we wanted to do this. It would involve having someone up at the front of the sanctuary every week, having some special seating and letting people become aware that we were going to be adding a new ministry. We also had Caleb offer for 4 classes throughout the summer and we scheduled those and had a signup sheet. And we had over 20% of our congregation come and take part in the classes.

Toni: That is awesome!

Jeff: Yeah, it really went well. Caleb did an outstanding job.

Toni: Well, he has a teacher gene.

Jeff: He really does!

Caleb: My mother, yeah.

Jeff: We did basic finger spelling, and the alphabet, and he introduced us to the ins and outs of deaf culture, helped us with some of the terminology. And that’s been a blessing to us.

Toni: So, the people in the congregation that came – could they come just out of a general wanting to know more, and awareness, or was that also for some specific training that they’re going to do, or was it both?

Caleb: Yeah, it was both. It was, these are people who might be coming to this church soon and this is what I’m going to offer to them, and this is what you should know about their backgrounds in general. And then it was also, well how do I connect with these people, how do I communicate with them, because that’s the biggest part of when you meet a deaf person. Most people that they meet can’t communicate with them in the way they can communicate, with sign language. So, teaching the church how to effectively communicate with people who are deaf, even if they can’t sign, that was an important part of welcoming them to our congregation and to our church.

Toni: Did you teach the people any basic signs that they could use so if a deaf person came to the church they’d be able to communicate a little more than just kind of talking and listening?

Caleb: Yeah, so the most basic form if you’re unwilling, or just don’t have the time to learn, is just writing notes back and forth. Usually deaf people have a decent literacy. They can read and write. The next level would be finger spelling. So that’s just the alphabet on your hands, and you can literally spell anything. And then the next level above that is basic signs, and basic vocabulary, and basic structure, which was about as far as we got in the classes.

Toni: So you’ve had people in the church embrace this, they’re supportive of it, and then it’ll be time to start the ministry. We’re going to pursue that and actually learn what you are doing at the church for this ministry, but first we’re going to take a brief break and take a pause here for a little commercial message.

Toni: Hello, welcome back to the Personal Touch in Peters Township! IN this segment we are talking with pastor Jeff Vanderhoff and member Caleb Wysocki at Trinity United Methodist Church here in Peters Township who are telling about their new initiative of providing a service that is signed in sign language for the hard of hearing and also the deaf community. So I’d like to start out with, what is the outcome that you hope will be provided with this service?

Jeff: Well we would like to create a worship space where the gospel can be communicated in a way that is understood by people that don’t hear, either because they’re deaf or because they’re hard of hearing. And we wanted to create not only a worship space, but also a place where they can find some connections and be in ministry. And from the beginning, we’ve tried to call it a ministry WITH the deaf, rather than a ministry to or for the deaf and hard of hearing, because we really want to be in ministry with them and we want to find ways that they can engage in living out their calling as disciples and as children of God.

Toni: That’s wonderful, so they will then become a part of the community.

Jeff: That’s the hope, yes.

Toni: And being deaf and hard of hearing is not going to impact them being able to participate actively within your community at Trinity. And so, do you know of anybody specifically within our community, or generally, I should probably say in the Greater Pittsburgh area?

Caleb: Yeah, there’s a large deaf population in the Greater Pittsburgh area. I can’t give specific numbers, but there are in the hundreds if not thousands. I know in Peters Township School District there are a few kids who are deaf, and who have interpreters in the schools. But the adult population is harder to pinpoint, so in this specific area there are a few. In the Greater Pittsburgh area there are a lot of people in need of these services.

Toni: So how are you getting the word out about these services?

Jeff: Again, the DAC did a great job of getting the word out. We started at Peters Township Community Days, at the Park, with a booth for the church and we handed out flyers then. We have also connected with different fb groups, word of mouth, we contacted the local paper, there’s going to be an article in the South Hills Living magazine, and just really trying in as many ways as we could to get the word out to people and hopefully find someone who’s looking for a church.

Toni: I know that this has already started, so Caleb is already signing at a service. Did you get a response?

Jeff: Yeah we did! Our first service was September 17, and we were really hoping that somebody would come, and we did, we had one person come all the way from Jefferson Hills, and she has come every week since. She told us that she was thrilled to find a church that was offering this service. She has brought family members with her, and just continues to come. We’ve got one person so far, along with her family now, and we are hoping that it will grow from there.

Toni: And so when a deaf person or a hard of hearing person comes to Trinity, what can they expect when they arrive at your church?

Jeff: Well, I hope that they can expect to be greeted and warmly welcomed just like everyone else would. We try not to treat anyone any differently than anyone else, although we realize that communication is going to be something that we need to work on. So we have Caleb here every week, we have another volunteer named Karen who started a ministry like this at another church she was at. And she has been here every week just to facilitate and to interpret. There’s times where I’ll say “Hey, Karen, come here I want to say something,” and she’ll interpret for me while I talk. We also have pads of paper for people to write things down if they need to, and we hope to be able to offer more classes and get people more able to communicate through sign language.

Toni: OK, so everybody comes into the sanctuary, gets ready for the service, and I’m sure you have your pulpit or wherever you’re going to be speaking from or whatever you do at the church, and Caleb where are you in relationship to the service?

Caleb: So, when he’s preaching he likes to move around a lot, and I don’t really want to chase him, so I stand right next to the pulpit. We have usually a worship leader who makes announcements at the service and keeps it flowing, so usually I stand right next to them. It’s on the right side in the front, very visible. You can’t miss me.

Toni: And do you sign all elements of the service, for instance, if there’s a praise band or a choir and they’re singing a song, do you sign that?

Caleb: Yes, all the songs, the prayers, the Bible readings, the message, all of it.

Toni: The children’s message?

Caleb: The children’s message is also signed, yes. All of it.

Toni: Everything. So what’s it like now to have somebody there, not really imitating but being behind you in the background, or in the foreground depending on where you’re standing?

Jeff: It’s great! It has affected my pacing, sometimes I have to slow down a little or pause, but I don’t really have to do that, I just do that as a way to make sure that Caleb is keeping up. I’ve never noticed a lull or a lapse, he does a great job with that. It’s funny, because sometimes I’ll compliment him, and I realize he has to compliment himself through sign language. So we have a good time with that. Yeah, it’s been great.

Toni: Do you give Caleb anything in advance, so he knows what to expect, so he can do a little rehearsing, practicing beforehand?

Jeff: Yeah, I try to. We give him all the songs, so he has all the words for those, and all the announcements. I don’t write out my sermon, I preach from an outline, so it’s usually a challenge for Caleb to know where I’m going to go. I try to give him some key words and some themes overall to prepare him, but some of it is spontaneous and he just has a great vocabulary, and he does a great job.

Toni: Just out of curiosity, and we hadn’t talked about this, but how are the children reacting? Do they follow you intently and watch you? Are they trying to imitate you, mimic what you’re doing?

Caleb: When I’m interpreting I don’t really focus on that. If I focused on that I’d get distracted and fall behind. I try to focus on the speaker and translating it accurately. If I try to focus on something else or focus on someone else I really get lost. So I kind of just like zone everybody out, so I can’t really answer that question, I don’t know what the children are doing.

Jeff: I will say Toni that we did have some teenagers come to our classes with Caleb.

Toni: Oh, that’s wonderful!

Jeff: Yeah, and so, certainly some of the youth in our church are interested. My son John has learned some sign language on his own just through Youtube videos, and figuring it out and he was able to communicate with our visitor and he’s looking forward to working with Caleb and learning more. So some of our youth are learning about it.

Toni: It is a great way to spread awareness within the congregation and for everybody to show love, because that’s the whole point of being there together. So, what particular service are you doing this at at your church because I know you have multiple services?

Jeff: Yeah, we have two services, and this is at our 9:30 service, which we kind of call an informal service. At 11:00 we have a traditional service where we sing hymns and have a little bit more liturgy. But this 9:30 service is, we have a praise team that does selections of different music. Sometimes we’ll have a hymn or have a small liturgy, but it’s more laid back. We have a lot of families that come to this service, a lot of kids. That’s where we do the children’s message, at that service. So 9:30 is our main service, and that’s where we’re offering this.

Toni: OK, that’s wonderful. And that’s open to anybody, you don’t have to be a member at Trinity? You don’t have to live in Peters Township?

Jeff and Caleb: Correct.

Toni: It’s anybody who would like to come and worship and learn more about the gospel and the good word.

Jeff: Absolutely.

Toni: That’s great! And could you also let us know that if people have any questions about the service and what goes on, how would they get those answered?

Jeff: They could contact us at our church. Our phone number is (724)941-4770, and ask for Pastor Jeff. They could send us an email. Our disabilities awareness committee actually started a new email address. It’s trinitysigns530@gmail.com. And that’s because our address is 530 Center Church Road in McMurray. So there’s a few different ways to contact us, and we would love to hear from you and welcome you in.

Toni: Well that’s great. And we know that this is a wonderful ministry here in Peters Township, and Pastor Jeff and Caleb, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for sharing all of this great information with our audience here in Peters and in surrounding communities, and we hope that you too will spread the good word about what’s going on here with this initiative at Trinity United Methodist church with their new outreach program. So I also want to let you know that I want to thank the students here at Peters Township High School as well as their teacher Robin Hodgin-Frick, and Kelsey Sylvester and Ryan Boni from Peters Township Cable and Channel 7 for helping us put this program together. It’s wonderful to know that there are people in our community who are willing to step up and help those who are disabled, and they may seem at times disenfranchised from us. But your congregation is certainly going above and beyond and demonstrating that a personal touch does exist in Peters Township, and we thank them for their service to others. So thank you for viewing this show, and remember that you too can reach out and help somebody because it’s all about that personal touch!