

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

ISSUE #92 WINTER 2012

A Ministry of Christian Reformed Church  and Reformed Church in America  Disability Concerns

Theme

Winter: In this issue, we hear stories of **deacons, elders, and pastors who live with disabilities.**

Spring: Among other things, living longer increases the incidence of disabilities. How has your church accommodated or assisted **aging** adults with disabilities—and/or their children? Send us articles by February 15, 2012.

Summer: The Internet has created new possibilities for connection and ministry. What opportunities has the **Internet** created for people who live with disabilities? What must your church do online to enhance ministry with people with disabilities? Send us articles by May 10, 2012.

When Understanding Leads to Serving

Elizabeth Schultz, deacon at Faith CRC, Holland, Michigan

Growing up with cerebral palsy that affects my movement and my speech, I constantly had to prove myself. As an adult, I had to tell people that I have a college degree so that they would not “baby talk” to me. Some thought of me only as a “project.” They saw my chair and heard me speak, then assumed that I was intellectually disabled. They certainly didn’t think of me as a leader.

When I joined a new church (Faith CRC), the shift in public perception—from being a project to being a leader—was just mind-blowing. After 44 years, a body of believers truly understood me. I have real friends who are my age.

This shift became clear one Sunday evening when Pastor Jim told me that I had been nominated to be an administrative deacon. At that moment, I knew that I had been blessed with a church family that “got it.” I may not be able to do everything physically that most other people can, but I can do ministry.

After I was elected as a deacon, I wanted to do my part, but at first I didn’t think I could take the offering. Then, in conversation with another church member with a disability, we came up with an idea for an attachment to my chair that would hold two offering plates. I presented the idea to a metal worker at church, Paul Rietveld, who made it for me. It was especially cool that the first time I took the offering independently was on Independence Day weekend!

I also serve on our church’s administrative team, on the council, as liaison between the worship committee and the council, and as one of our church’s deacon delegates to classis meetings.

Because I live with disabilities, I can provide a perspective that others can’t. For example, at the last classis meeting a new church plant was discussed that will make ministry to people with disabilities a significant focus of its work. I was able to ask questions that others might not have thought about, and I could provide answers to some questions that others asked.

Besides my involvement at Faith Church, I serve as president of the Haworth Holland Toastmasters and work part-time as an instructor for Ottawa County Community Mental Health, teaching county employees about working with people with disabilities.

Although “I” appears a lot in this article, it’s really not about me. It’s about God, who has blessed me with a church family that understands and celebrates differences. If it wasn’t for God, I would not be here. I give all the glory to God. In fact, I thank God for my disabilities, because through them I am the woman I am today.

Of the Way and in the Way

Robyn Saylor, RCA minister and coordinator of Sunrise Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

It’s awkward to feel “in the way” of others. In fact, for me there is no worse state than to sense that I am impeding the progress of others. As a person living with cerebral palsy, I’ve frequently felt like I have been a burden to others. During my youth I felt guilty for requiring a great deal of help; one way my family tried to ease my feelings of inadequacy was to have someone go with me during overnight trips with the youth group. To this day, in fact, someone comes to Trinity Reformed Church (where I serve as Coordinator of Sunrise Ministries) to assist with my personal needs. That assistance helps me and my coworkers concentrate on the tasks we need to do.

I have used most of my strength to become as independent as possible. Over the years, I have turned down engagements and opportunities to serve God and the church because I could not perform independently what I was asked to do. Physical barriers,

as difficult and imposing as they are, cause a fraction of the problem. The real wall is the way I and community members react to my disability.

Forty-five years ago, there was no disability rights movement, much less the notion that “everybody belongs, everybody serves.” It took the efforts of people with disabilities, their families, sympathetic pastors, and congregants to see all people as made in the image of God. It took time to see that all people are capable of using the gifts given to them for the glory of God.

From Genesis 1 on, God calls us to include everyone as a precious creation. Jesus himself identifies with the outcast and forgotten among us: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me.”

We still have a long journey of faith together. Our faith communities must grow in their sensitivity to the needs of people and think creatively about accommodating and including everyone. People with disabilities and their families also must step forward to serve on committees and take an active part in shaping the future of their churches. We who are affected by disability need to speak up and advocate either for ourselves or for our family members about changes that need to be made to improve the richness and depth of the church’s programming.

My thinking has evolved over the years. I now understand that inclusion is a biblical principal; and, like the early Christians who called themselves “people of the way,” my being “in the way” may be exactly where God wants me, bringing inclusion to the front lines of the church’s mission.

Serving with Mental Illness and with Christ

Ron Hathaway and Jill Fenske, Franklin Reformed Church, Nutley, New Jersey

Over three decades my disability found its ability in Christ. Through encouragement, tolerance, and time my life was emboldened by faith. Jesus said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Paul writes, “I can do all things through [Christ]...” (Philippians 4:13).

I am serving my second term as an elder with Franklin Reformed Church. I have also preached here and consider that ministry to be well received and effective. My two three-year terms of praying with, working with, laughing with, and loving others in this church have made being a Christian an easy burden. I have always tried to lighten another person’s load by writing that person a letter or sending a card. The church has helped with stationary, cards, and stamps. I have a great deal of empathy for people who are suffering, for I know what that can be like.

My disability—mental illness—can be a cruel and crippling disease, but I’ve found support, encouragement, and acceptance in our church; it is “my home.” People who have mental illness often are afraid of others, withdrawn, and elusive. There are many stereotypes, stories, and stigmas attached to paranoid schizophrenia, but I have found nothing but inclusion, tolerance, and acceptance in my church family.

—Ron Hathaway, elder

The gifts that Ron Hathaway brings to the church are varied, and sometimes they don't feel like gifts until we unwrap them a bit. He has been an encouragement to others in keeping connected with other members, especially during difficult times. His preaching (as a younger man he studied for two years at seminary) comes from a place of deep humility and reverence for the text. Sometimes he struggles with articulating his ideas and has trouble with memory, but this has helped us to learn ways to be patient, attempting to make him feel comfortable even when we struggle to hear and understand his ideas.

Ron has helped us learn to be open about disabilities. We are able to talk to one another honestly about our own brokenness without fear of judgment, because we have seen the acceptance that he has received among us. Our church community has been able to provide assistance in the form of gifts, rides, bus fare, personal items, etc. We also have developed a relationship with the home where he resides with other veterans living with mentally illness; we offer assistance that ranges from direct donations, sharing "leftovers" from church events, collecting things such as new socks and razors, and caroling there each year at Christmas.

We have found that in the process of opening our eyes and hearts to others whose life circumstances are difficult, and who society might want to ignore, we have met Jesus.

—Jill C. Fenske, pastor

Creativity Prompts Attitude Changes

Pat Huisingh, Regional Advocate for Classis Zeeland (CRC)

On Sundays at Borculo Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan, Dan Woodwyk, age 39, does what he loves to do: he helps out in whatever way he can. Dan, who has Down syndrome, has been ushering for over 13 years. He knows everyone in the congregation and knows where to usher in the elders so they can sit with their families. He enjoys seeing his name in the bulletin for the ushering schedule. Dan wanted to help in another way too, and so in December 2005 Dan was installed as an assistant deacon. He takes the offering a few times each month during his regular scheduled services and fills in when other deacons are gone.

“He just loves doing it,” said Brenda Woodwyk, Dan’s mother. “He is especially ecstatic when he gets to carry the plates up front for the offertory prayer. This has been great for his self-esteem, because we’ve had to say no to many things that realistically he can’t do. But this is one thing we could definitely say YES to. He looks forward to Sundays!”

As a fellow member of Borculo Church, I see firsthand how Dan’s role has affected him. His face tells you that he is proud to help. His position is renewable each year, and he does such a good job that it’s been no question that he is right for the job.

Because our church has a number of people with disabilities, we have become aware of a number of things that needed to be done so that everyone will be welcome. When we added a classroom wing, we made a number of changes to make the entire building accessible. We added a full-size elevator that

opens at ground level, basement, and first floor. Every Sunday deacons run the elevator and provide a car valet service for anyone that needs help. Their work helps people year round, especially in the winter. We also have added a hearing loop, accessible restrooms, and several pew cutouts in the sanctuary for wheelchairs.

Brenda Woodwyk said that she has seen a lot of difference how people with disabilities are treated in churches compared to 39 years ago when Dan was born, and she believes that the ministry of Disability Concerns has helped to bring that change in attitudes. I hope and pray that more churches will think creatively to use the talents of everyone in their congregation so that churches are open and accessible to all who come through their doors. When we do that, we see how the body of Christ grows with each person having a place to use their unique talents for the glory of God.

Ministry, Like Life, Happens Best in Community

Joy Poot, member of Drayton Reformed Church, Drayton, Ontario, and student at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan

Three years ago I was blessed with a cyst in my brain that causes epileptic seizures—a blessing that was added to hearing loss and central auditory processing difficulties. I choose the word “blessing” intentionally, because on a good day I can recognize these challenges as blessings. (A bad day is a completely different story!)

Every new day I'm faced with these challenges. Not every lecture hall or classroom is conducive to hearing, not every congregant has speech that is clear enough for me to read, and not every destination is within easy walking or biking distance. In spite of the frustrations, these challenges are a blessing because they have taught me many things.

First, I've learned that not everyone is what you can see on the outside. Unless you see me actually having a major seizure, you would have no idea that I have epilepsy. Unless you notice my hearing aids or happen to catch me signing in a moment of frustration, you would have no idea that I cannot hear or understand a large part of what goes on around me. Likewise, I will not judge people by how they appear. Everyone has a deeper story—from parents who seem to have perfect children, to church members I see as ideal “saints of the faith,” to people who appear to have traveled the rougher sides of life. Their lives are more complex than I could imagine.

Second, I'm learning to listen well. I can't hear perfectly, and even when I can hear I have a hard time understanding what is said due to my auditory processing disorder. Listening well means I have to look at your face when you talk to me, check for clarification on what I think I heard, and slow down and be fully present when you are talking to me. I also need to laugh at misunderstandings and ask those around me for clarification. (The words “scrolls” and “squirrels,” for example, sound remarkably similar. It's a good thing I have classmates who help me when I get confused!)

Third, I've learned that we can't do life alone. I can't do it alone, and neither can you. We each come into life and ministry with

our own challenges and difficulties, but we don't come into them alone. We come into communities that surround us and lift us up when we discover that we can't do everything on our own. That is the most important thing: we can't do life alone.

There are days when frustrations are high, when I lose sight of the blessings and only see the challenges. Those also are the days when the Lord works in me and other people most clearly, reminding me that he is using these blessings to draw me closer to him and to his people.

Editor's Note

Disability: Liability or Asset?

My wide-eyed enthusiasm for ministry in the church when I graduated from seminary was tempered by the frustrations of a candidating process that went on for about a year. Dozens of resumes and follow-up letters were sent to a variety of RCA churches—large and small, solo pastorates and staff ministries, East Coast to West Coast. You name it, I applied for it.

The gnawing invisible barrier I sensed that no church would admit at the time was my disability, which I did not advertise but is visible. By the time I'd reached the interview phase with ten different churches and received ten “thanks, but no thanks” letters, my trust in God's sovereignty and providence was growing thin.

That was 25 years ago; and, though my faith in God and in his redemptive purposes have deepened, any rejection that feels linked to my disability still stings. In fact, the only time my

disability felt like an asset in finding gainful employment was when I pursued my current position as RCA Coordinator for Disability Concerns.

I am grateful for the ways God has directed my life, in spite of those occasions when it seemed that God's desires and intentions were being frustrated by the decisions of others. My hope for the church is that the gifts of all people will be affirmed and engaged, including those (with or without disabilities) whom God is calling to lead our congregations as deacons, elders, and ministers.

—Terry A. DeYoung

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