

BREAKINGBARRIERS



everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

Winter 2021 | Theme: Unexpected Access

During the long stretch of isolation and distancing imposed during the coronavirus pandemic, people with disabilities found that some barriers to participation actually were removed. The articles in this issue tell a few of those stories of unexpected access.

How Pandemic Life Opened Up New Access

by Michelle McIlroy

Delmar Reformed Church, Albany NY

While the rest of the world, it seemed, collectively mourned the loss of closeness and community this past year, I suddenly found myself a new reason to smile each Sunday: *church that came home to me.*

Over the years, I've learned that I had to just accept the days when my participation in the church community would be sporadic. Whether because of my unpredictable health, or occasionally due to a child being home with a bout of some

illness, I always felt isolated on the Sundays that found my family sitting out a service. After losing my job due to a traumatic brain injury, the isolation felt by the rest of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic was all too familiar. I knew isolation like others knew community.

Still, church was one place I clung to for a sense of togetherness and love. The weeks I missed left a sadness over me. So, when church leaders got creative and decided we could “gather together,” albeit virtually, a brand new reality became mine: *I could still worship with my church family, even on my worst days!* I no longer needed to choose between staying home and hauling a wheelchair into the car. Perhaps more significantly, I was no longer alone in attending church from the couch. Imagine my delight when our pastor even wore pajamas underneath his robe to the amusement of us all.

Life in a pandemic has certainly created challenges and pain for many people. It's been a time of tremendous struggle. Still, if we look a little closer, perhaps we will see that there is light in the dark places. In my case, it was the chance to attend church from home, regardless of my health any given week. It was an opportunity to be *just like everyone else* in the church. It was a moment of unusual togetherness, despite the physical distances that separated us all.

One day, my hope is that hugs and handshakes can again be the norm, and perhaps “Zoom Church” won’t be the usual for everyone. Yet, now that we see it can be done, maybe it will continue to be an option for those of us who need it. Perhaps the separation we’ve had to endure during this pandemic will, in the end, keep us closer.

Singing Hymns, Checking In

by Rev. Lesli van Milligen

Willowdale CRC, Toronto ON

Willowdale CRC has addressed a variety of accessibility challenges over the last year. Zoom has opened doors to some people who otherwise would not have been able to participate in the life of the congregation. Pastor Tom van Milligen has been helping them with a virtual hymn sing, which is turning into a robust and growing small group that not only celebrates the music of the church, but also has become a place where folks can check in with each other during a time of isolation.

Older members have had difficulty contributing to others’ lives during a time of social distancing. One of the beautiful aspects of this hymn sing is that members not only suggest songs to be sung, but also volunteer to look up the history of those songs and share it with the group. They pray with each other after they check in together, contributing to the pastoral care of the

members of the group. Thanks to Zoom, this group is made up of folks who never would have attended an evening event and who never had attended any other small group offerings previously. What changed? A felt need to connect and the ability to do so via technology.

Willowdale made a concerted effort to help its seniors navigate the technology of Zoom so that they could connect using the devices that they already were familiar with. Worship is also held via Zoom, and congregation members contribute to the service from their homes. It is so rich and meaningful to hear a child sing a verse of a song followed by an 80-year-old singing the next verse. Ministry leaders have noticed that former members of the congregation are returning to Sunday morning Zoom church because they can attend from a nursing home many kilometers away. Post-sermon reflection groups are growing with people who would not have been able to attend face to face. One gentleman joins from China because technology has made this possible.

A growing portion of the congregation speaks Farsi, requiring translation of sermons and other ministry programming. Ministry leaders are currently looking into how Zoom can support simultaneous sermon translation and breakout rooms where the Farsi members will be able to reflect and ask clarification questions of the preacher. Online worship has enabled both the Farsi group specifically and the congregation in general to invite newcomers to experience worship and fellowship without distance being a barrier.

Slowing Down to Serve and Be Served

by Rev. David Zomer

Bethany Reformed Church, Kalamazoo MI

During this pandemic, God has been removing personal barriers related to time and community in my own life and the life of someone I serve alongside.

Carolyn, who is almost 70, has been a member of Bethany Reformed Church her entire life. I grew up in Bethany and now, many decades later, I serve as Bethany's senior minister. I have known Carolyn my whole life, but I didn't know her well until this year. Carolyn lives with intellectual and speech-related impairments. She has remained independent her whole life, thanks to her tenacity and stubbornness. Carolyn relies mainly on the bus system, but she also knows she may call the church for a ride or help when needed.

Even though Carolyn seldom misses a worship service or church activity and is always present, she often seems to be on the outside of the circle of fellowship. People don't truly know her.

The pandemic has forced all of us in the church to slow down. Meetings, groups, and Bible studies have slowed way down. Because some church services can be recorded weeks in advance and I have more time for contemplation, God has been showing me it is time to slow down and refocus.

Carolyn called me one day for some help. Normally, I would have handed her off to someone else. Because I was having difficulty understanding her request on the phone, and since everyone else was isolating at home, I went to pick her up. We had banking to do; Carolyn had left her ID card at the bank.

As it turned out, this hour blossomed into a regular outing together over this pandemic: picnic in the park, a ride to the lake, rides to the cemetery to find her relatives. I've learned to listen to Carolyn as her pastor and found she communicates extremely well when given the time. Carolyn's depth of faith is admirable and worthy of praise.

During this pandemic, I'm grateful that God has removed the barrier of this pastor "not having time" or "not giving time." Quite unexpectedly, God has given me access to rich blessings from a sister in Christ who normally is relegated to the sidelines.

A Breakthrough from Feeling Stuck

by Lori West

Heritage Fellowship CRC, Brampton ON

For me, one of the blessings that has come out of COVID-19 (yes, I did say blessings) is the livestream worship services. I know that's not been everyone's cup of tea, but I've found them very meaningful.

I've had the opportunity to tune into a service from the church of my childhood and have been blessed to listen to a young pastor (whom I used to babysit) of a thriving congregation in Newfoundland. Recently, I got to listen to one of my nephew's family lead worship in the online service at the church they attend. Also, I followed a sermon series on the book of Esther, one of my favorite characters from the Old Testament.

I believe that Esther's life is relevant to where we are today. Esther was stuck between a rock and a hard place! Would she risk her life to see the Jewish people saved from being wiped out? Have you ever felt stuck?

Stuck comes at us out of nowhere, and it hangs around way too long. Illness lingers, financial troubles worsen, relationship squabbles get more complicated, delays lengthen, and the solution or breakthrough we anticipated stays frustratingly out of reach.

Be encouraged and trust that God cares about you and he walks with you, even through the difficult places in life. Wherever you find yourself today, "God is an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

This article has been adapted from the October 26, 2020, edition of Lori's Scribble, a self-published newsletter of personal reflections. Lori was born with a progressive neuromuscular

disease that has left her dependent on a wheelchair and seeks to silence her voice. For the last four years, she has resided in a long-term care home.

Editor's Note

Accessibility in a Pandemic

As much as we long for certain practices to return, we also recognize that some things have changed forever—in some ways, for the better.

This issue of *Breaking Barriers* is focused on people with disabilities unexpectedly discovering new places of access during the pandemic, like connecting with others digitally, participating in worship on an equal basis with others, joining in hymn sings and prayer groups, and slowing down the pace of a task-driven life to focus on people.

We all have examples of how life has changed during the course of this pandemic. Ten days before I was scheduled to begin two weeks of travel to the East Coast last March, travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders were issued. All of my plans were canceled or put on hold, and I've been working from home ever since.

Through technology, I've been able to host meetings and to preach—from churches located in the same city where I live to

as far as 800 miles away. RCA-CRC Disability Concerns transitioned its annual three-day leadership training in August from an in-person event to two days of virtual meetings—and at a fraction of the usual cost. Our virtual gathering allowed a cadre of people with disabilities unable to venture to Michigan to join us, and we were freed up to enlist presenters and panelists from other countries and continents who never would have joined us in person!

Overcoming barriers and gaining access often requires persistence, determination, creativity, planning, and agility—in everyday life, and in unexpected, transformational times like these.

—*Terry A. DeYoung*

Upcoming Themes

Spring 2021—Race and disability. Daniel Prude might still be alive if he had not been Black or disabled. If you are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color and live with a disability, please tell us your story (400 words) **by January 29, 2021.**

Summer 2021—The arts and disability. If you live with a disability, please send us your poems, short stories, photographs, or photos of visual works of art you created. Items do not need to be about your disability. Our typical word

limit for written pieces is 400 words. Send your submission **by April 2, 2021**.

Additional Formats

You can find this issue in a variety of alternative formats (print-friendly layout, large print, audio, Spanish, and Korean) in the *Breaking Barriers* section of the Network website at bit.ly/bbwinter2021.

In addition, find back issues of *Breaking Barriers* and editions in Español and in 한국어, plus a link for electronic subscriptions, at either the CRC website (www.crcna.org/disability) or RCA website (www.rca.org/disability).

This newsletter and the Disability Concerns blog (network.crcna.org/disability), co-published by CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries, received two Best in Class awards of merit from the Associated Church Press in 2020: for *Breaking Barriers* (newsletter category) and for Disability Concerns on the Network (blog category).

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