

BREAKINGBARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

Spring 2018 (Welcoming worship)

Churches can help people with disabilities feel welcome (or not welcome) in their worship. The articles in this issue of Breaking Barriers describe a variety of ways people with disabilities contribute in worship.

Loved and Accepted as We Are

by Adrian and Rosanne Eising

Fellowship CRC, Big Rapids MI

It's wonderful to be part of a church where the whole family is welcomed. After we moved, we needed to find a new church home. Our first stop was Fellowship CRC in Big Rapids, where we immediately felt at home and have been ever since.

Our sons Elijah and Joshua have disabilities. Our challenges include autism, blindness, paralysis, and developmental delays. Shortly after joining Fellowship Church, members of the disability committee asked how they might help our boys.

We began by removing a chair from a sanctuary row for Joshua's wheelchair. We chose a row that was conveniently near a door so that his brother Elijah could get in and out easily (which sometimes needs to happen during the worship service).

Joshua is now part of a praise team once a month. He loves doing that; it gives him a real sense of belonging and participation.

Elijah is a big fan of classical music. One man befriended him, and they listen to music together after the service, which allows us to visit with others during the fellowship (coffee and cookie) time.

The Sunday school classes have welcomed our boys, and from time to time the teachers ask how they might improve the class experience for our sons or what would be the best way to incorporate them into events such as a Christmas program.

We really appreciate the openness of those conversations. Disability committee members ask if everything is OK and if there anything else they can do. They encourage us to bring any concern or need to them at any time. In addition, plans continue to be made to find more ways to make other people with disabilities feel that they have a place here. No one ever says that everything is finished now. Rather, we all look for ways to make things even

better.

These actions by members help our whole family feel like we are an important part of the congregation. The boys are loved and accepted for who they are. Fellow congregation members recognize and attend to our sons' needs as much as possible, and they give them opportunities to share their gifts and abilities. It's a blessing to belong.

Odyssey Worship Is Judgment Free and Safe

by Steve Dambra

Odyssey (RCA), Poughkeepsie NY

When you enter Odyssey, Clarence welcomes you warmly and makes sure you have a bulletin to follow the worship service. Next you are greeted by a member of our welcoming team—Sarah, Jan, or Jane—who helps you find your nametag from one of the eight boards that are arranged according to group homes and agencies. All who attend Odyssey receive a nametag to allow everyone to know each other better and know they are welcome as part of the Odyssey family. First-time attendees are given a handwritten tag, but a printed tag with the Odyssey logo will be waiting for them the next time they attend.

Odyssey is a church that focuses on reaching people with disabilities. Everyone is welcome at Odyssey and everyone is welcoming. A few weeks ago a woman who had heard about Odyssey came with her 27-year-old daughter who is on the autism spectrum. The team welcomed them, gave them nametags, and ushered them into the worship area. Recognizing a young woman that the daughter works with, they greeted each other with a hug, and the friend invited mother and daughter to sit with her and her housemates. This heartfelt, sincere, and joyful approach is our way at Odyssey. We recognize and welcome people as they are, whatever their abilities or disabilities.

We worship freely and embrace the Holy Spirit's working among us. During our praise and worship time members clap, raise their hands upwards to heaven, sing with excitement, and even dance. They do this knowing they will not be judged, but will be accepted and welcomed by their Odyssey family.

The preacher delivers the five- to seven-minute sermon in language that is easy to understand, usually accompanied by a video, slides, or some other visual aide.

During our prayer time, we share what God has placed on our hearts, including prayers for ill family members, friends, staff, or housemates, people grieving over the death of someone close to them, prayers for a sick cat or

for a favorite pro wrestler who has been injured. Prayer time can become lengthy, and is critical to our mission that everyone feels valued and loved by God.

Odyssey has also become church for the staff of the group homes that transport folks with disabilities on Sunday mornings as well as members of our parent church (Hopewell Reformed Church) who frequently attend. Often people comment that they keep coming because they sense the power and the joy of the Holy Spirit. They appreciate the freedom to just “be,” allowing the Spirit to touch them in unexpected ways.

Odyssey is a judgment-free, safe place of worship, without expectations or agendas. We pray that God will make us a welcoming, accepting community for people of all abilities to know the welcoming, gracious love of God in real and tangible ways.

The Surrender of Power and Brokenness

by David Fik

The Church at Benjamin’s Hope, Holland MI

The surgeon explained that his life had gone from doctor to patient as he looked at his own x-rays, which revealed cancer with a three-year life expectancy. Miraculously,

10 years later, he was able to say, “I thank God for the cancer.”

After that powerful testimony, Pastor Eric faced a tent full of individuals who have their own sobering realities stuffed into bodies that are “imperfect” by conventional standards. Eric spoke words that defy logic, about how each developmental difference was in fact more special than different, more gift than curse. That one set me back. The tent was alive with human movement, but little of it would be welcomed as special in most of the world.

I thought of Jesus’ absurd metaphor from Matthew 7, “No loving father would give a stone or a snake to a hungry child who asks for bread.” I wrestled with the incongruity. None of the people in this tent asked to have the disabilities that they carry. I sat there with a heartbroken, widowed father on my right, and my still-exhausted wife cautiously handing fruit snacks across an empty seat to an agitated Bethany, our beautiful daughter who lives with, what seems to me, a cruel disability. The enormity of it all overwhelmed me.

Then, a young man named Max bounded toward the tent, visiting the gathering at Benjamin’s Hope for the first time. He too carried the label of “disability.” One of the people at worship that evening knew Max loved vacuum cleaners and brought one to the tent to bring

Max joy, which it did.

I watched from 30 feet away and wondered about Max's disability. I saw no pain or confusion, only a gentle love for everything he encountered.

Max traded the vacuum for maracas and danced with abandon. I was suddenly, painfully aware of my own flawed thinking. I had divided people into those with ability and those without. In that moment, I saw clearly that it's not my job to understand, fix, or judge brokenness. I was the most broken. Not Bethany, not the surgeon, not Max, but me. Jesus Christ, the perfect one, chose to be broken that we might be whole.

During that worship service, I found freedom and power in surrender, acknowledging that we are all broken. The people in this tent live each moment from a place of simple surrender. I am learning from Bethany, from Max, from a surgeon expressing gratitude for cancer. "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

(This article is abridged from the Benjamin's Hope newsletter and used with permission.)

Upcoming themes

Summer 2018—Aging and disability

The average age of people in churches and throughout North America keeps increasing, and the percentage of

people with disabilities increases with age. How are church members 65 and older encouraged to participate and use their gifts in ministry? How does your church minister with shut-ins or those with dementia and/or hearing, physical, and visual impairments? Please send us a note (400 words) by April 18.

Fall 2018—Disability advocacy

Are you serving formally or informally as a disability advocate in your church? Please tell us about it. What gives you joy? What have you found effective? Why did you get started with this work? Please send us a note (400 words) by June 20.

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Working, Growing, and Serving Together

by Amber Vanderhout and Erica Howard

Fruitland CRC, Hamilton ON

Special Needs SERVE is an opportunity for youth with and without disabilities to worship, have devotions, and engage in work and recreation activities. Youth with special needs and their mentors work together to serve God and grow and develop in our faith. Fruitland CRC hosted Special Needs SERVE three times and will again in

July with the support of Mountainview CRC (Grimsby ON), Smithville (ON) CRC, and Ebenezer Reformed Church (Stony Creek ON).

One of the favorite daily activities, worship, begins with singing led by our incredible praise team. Some people sing along with the words. Some do actions with the song. Some reflect quietly. Some perform liturgical dance. Others have painted beautiful pictures or joined the praise team with instruments that they brought along.

After singing, dancing, and praising God, we settle into our seats to hear the message. The interactive sermon reflects the theme for the week, with each day preparing youth to go back to their hometowns to share what they learned. Visual activities, science experiments, puzzles, and tasks keep everyone engaged and involved in the message. Each year we have had a cross message in which we reflect on the sacrifice Jesus made for us through participating in the Lord's Supper as a group and having our clay heart stamped with God's seal.

Worship services are planned to encourage full participation by everyone, whatever their ability, and to ensure that we have the most amazing worship experience possible. We welcome members of the

supporting congregations and others to attend and engage alongside the SERVE group. We like to say, “You haven’t experienced true worship until you’ve been to a Special Needs SERVE worship.”

To view videos and pictures from Fruitland Special Needs SERVE, check us out on Facebook at

www.facebook.com/fruitlandsnserve.

Editor’s Note

Wide Boundaries

Our daughter Nicole, who has lived with severe, multiple disabilities throughout her 30 years, frequently engages in worship through vocalization. Because she lives in the moment, when she feels happy she makes happy sounds, and she is usually happy during worship.

Years ago when I was pastor of a small congregation, she made even more sounds. Her vocalizations were louder, and often she would clap.

As people at that church got used to Nicole, some found her sounds distracting. They approached one of our elders who lovingly told me. Since I was usually leading worship,

my wife did what she could to help Nicole be quieter, including putting a sock over one of her hands to muffle the sound of her clapping. We didn't receive any more complaints, even after one Sunday evening when she had the giggles throughout the service.

When Nicole moved into a group home, she could no longer worship with our family at morning worship. People noticed! Many commented to my wife and me how much they missed Nicole.

For these good people, Nicole moved from a distraction to someone whose contributions to the church's worship life were embraced. The articles in this issue describe a variety of ways people with disabilities contribute in worship. I hope that your church sets wide boundaries for what is considered "appropriate" during worship, so that the whole congregation can benefit from everyone's gifts.

—Mark Stephenson

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