

BREAKINGBARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

Spring 2020 | Theme: Visual impairment and blindness

People with visual impairments or blindness tell stories of welcome, rejection, and finding their way in life and in the church.

The Flute is My Worship Voice

by Erica Van Harten

Hope CRC, Port Perry, ON

I was struck by encephalitis when I was nine months old. After some time at SickKids hospital in Toronto, I went home with an undetermined amount of brain damage. My parents were told I had probably lost my sight, but the rest was “wait and see.”

When I was 10 years old, my parents enrolled me in flute lessons. My father had been a church organist, and music was a big part of our lives. Due to my short-term memory loss, reading music was too difficult, and I learned to play by ear. I played what I heard and quickly memorized melodies.

Years ago, I sang using a braille *Psalter Hymnal*. As churches began using songs from multiple sources, it became onerous to put into braille all the new material.

One Sunday when I was away visiting family, I didn't take my braille *Psalter Hymnal*—four very large volumes! My aunt suggested I bring my flute to participate in worship by playing instead of singing. I was nervous and unsure if that would be appropriate. My aunt assured me my flute playing would be welcome, and it was. Playing the flute became my gift and my voice in church.

Now, even though I could sing along with many of the familiar songs, I prefer to play the flute. Sometimes I play at the front of the church, but mostly I'm in the pew. I often get comments from those sitting nearby—always words of wonder and encouragement. Parents often explain to their little ones about the “lady with the flute,” and it has become a way of breaking through the barrier of “different.”

I have spoken at the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act training session at our church, explaining how to approach and assist a person with a visual disability. I participate in a life group and enjoy the interaction with others. In these ways, I

hope my blindness can be accepted as a normal part of our church family.

Shifts in Attitude Take Time and Effort

by Casey Dutmer

First Reformed Church, Grandville, MI

Totally blind since I was born in 1952, I grew up at Beverly Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan. My mother or grandmother read the Sunday school and catechism lessons to me because no materials were available in braille.

As an adult, I requested a braille hymnal, but the consistory and the minister opposed it. They said it was too much money to spend on one person, the one blind person in the congregation. I felt angry and disappointed, wondering why mission work among people with disabilities in our own community was less important than missions around the world. Eventually a fellow church member donated the money for a braille hymnal. When the church saw how much it meant to me, I was asked to teach catechism or Sunday school. After I agreed, materials for both were put in braille, thanks to assistance from Jim Vanderlaan, another blind person who was then the director of CRC Disability Concerns.

As hymnal usage has declined, I've continued to ask for accommodations. In the late 1990s, my congregation changed hymnals. When the publisher refused to allow the book to be put into braille, the church purchased a scanner that read the material to me. I was able to convert the hymns each week to braille with my braille notetaker. Using these and Microsoft Word documents, I built my own hymnal.

As praise music and visuals have become a bigger part of worship, I still need Word files in advance. Purchasing my own technology has allowed me to find information on the Internet and use audio books. Better technology has allowed easier access to church material, but many books and Bible study materials are not accessible to a totally blind church member.

Technology does not change the hearts and minds of people to provide information in a format that people who are blind can use. Everyone needs to advocate for a lifetime to achieve this, which is one the reasons I agreed to become my church's disability advocate.

A Picture of Contentment and Grace

by Calvin Bandstra

Peoria CRC, Pella, IA

Kent Henne swept in unannounced from the busy western suburbs of Chicago to the farmland of rural Iowa, where he discovered his church home in a sleepy, unincorporated village. A Baptist by birth and confession, Kent arrived as a unique stranger to those of us steeped in Reformed tradition and comfortable in our local, multi-generational connections.

Kent had become blind at age 13 when surgery to remove benign brain tumors severed the optic nerve. In 1997, his aging parents learned about Christian Opportunity Center in Pella, an organization caring for and finding work for people with disabilities. Kent relocated there, and nearby Peoria CRC became his new family as church members took him to doctor appointments, visited him, and provided transportation to other activities. Kent graciously accepted whatever help was offered, often providing a joke and a hearty laugh. One time, a church volunteer took him to the airport so that he could go visit his mother. While in line and holding his distinctive cane, the security officer stated, "I'd like to see your boarding pass." Much to the amusement of those behind him, Kent replied, "I'd like to see it too!"

Kent's health ailments continued into adulthood, expanding into heart, weight, and breathing problems. As these progressed, he was forced to quit working, leave his

independent apartment arrangement to live in a group home, and then finally move to a nursing home. Each of those tough adjustments without the benefit of sight was met bravely by Kent, and he never failed after a ride or visit to say, “Thanks so much.”

Kent’s trials and tribulations ended on June 1, 2019, when at age 57, he died unexpectedly. Through it all, God used Kent as an example of contentment and acceptance to remind us of our need to be wholly dependent upon our Savior’s love for us. Church members provided a plot in a rural cemetery where the memorial service was held. And when, along with singing birds and soft breezes rustling the leaves in the trees, the voices in that isolated prairie cemetery were raised in the acapella singing of “Amazing Grace,” the phrase “was blind, but now I see” made all of *us* see how much we were truly blessed by Kent.

Ways to Get Involved

Without monetary support for Disability Concerns, we wouldn’t be able to share these stories. To help us make sure that “everybody belongs, everybody serves,” would you please consider praying for us and making a financial contribution? It’s

quick, it's easy, and it's a gracious and beautiful act of obedience.

Give to RCA Disability Concerns:

www.rca.org/give/disabilityfund

Give to CRC Disability Concerns:

www.crcna.org/disability and click on "Donate"

Technology and the Accessible Church

by Dr. John Jay Frank

Westwood CRC, Kalamazoo, MI

As a young teenager, I believed in Jesus Christ as my Savior and was baptized. My church gave me a Bible with standard print that was too small for me to read even with glasses. They probably did not know large print existed, and neither did I. Twelve years later, by the grace of the Lord, I discovered larger print Bibles and became an avid Bible reader.

In a church I recently visited, an usher wearing a nametag with letters too tiny for me to read gave me a bulletin with tiny print, well below standard 12-point Arial font. When I asked if he had

one in large print, he had a shocked expression as he said “No.” The next week I asked another usher, who laughed while he said “No.” I did not pursue this as I know the burden it is to ask for or search for access.

I could read the giant projected notice OFFERING. The projected song lyrics, however, were small white letters on a background of white. Both the lack of contrast and small letter size made the words nearly invisible. More words, lyrics, and Scripture passages were projected on pictures, with some slides changing too fast to read and process. The computer projection seemed to me to be more a cultural condiment rather than a teaching tool; slides should not exceed 15 words.

Accessible use of information technology takes effort, but it is not difficult, expensive, or time consuming. Many churches still misuse their technology. Some confuse accessibility as referring to what a church could provide through a special “disability ministry,” when it is really about how churches can regularly set up their technology using universal design in order to be a welcoming place that includes more people.

Perhaps as many as 100 million people in the U.S. (almost a third of the population) and 18 million people in Canada (almost half the population) can see, read, or hear somewhat, but not as well

as their neighbors. How we set up and use our communication technology in church is about evangelism, missions, the care and nurturing of believers, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission.

Focused on God's Purposes and Plan

by Nicole Davis

Brookside CRC, Grand Rapids, MI

I start every day drinking a cup of coffee, praying, and reading my Bible. I wake up my boys with a song of the day. I make their breakfast and see them off to school, praying that their day will go well.

I'm a mother, wife, follower of Christ, and I live with a disability.

I was born with an inherited eye condition called congenital glaucoma. Despite many surgeries, this stubborn disease took my eyesight at an early age. After losing my sight, I learned to read using braille. I learned to navigate my world using a white cane and relying on my hearing to help me recognize spatial locations. Ultimately, I had to relearn who I was as a blind person.

In spite of the many obstacles that I have faced, one constant reality remains: I'm a child of God. My heavenly Father wasn't

surprised by my blindness, and he still has a plan for me. Others may look at me and see only my blindness, but my Father looks at me and sees what he can do through me.

My blindness changes how I do things, but it will never change what I can do with the help of my Father. My blindness is not a limitation, but it is another way that God can use me for his purposes. My identity is found in Christ alone. Only on him can I stand, move, and live. I hope that if you have the opportunity to meet an individual who has a sight impairment, you will not focus on their limitations but will take the time to know them as a fellow image-bearer of God.

Serving my church as the faith formation coordinator has allowed me to engage in some of my favorite activities. I help coordinate many of our adult educational opportunities, outreach, and prayer ministries. Every time I am allowed to introduce Christ to someone or to assist someone on their faith journey, I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God has me right where he wants me.

Yes, I'm a wife, a mother, a blind woman—and Christ has made me so much more.

A World that Presupposes Sight

by Bert Neutel

Hope Fellowship CRC, Courtice, ON

Blindness, in my case, is not absolute. And it is not so obvious to me, since I do not know what I do not see.

I have retinopathy, and the 18 laser surgeries I've undergone to salvage my sight have left me with tunnel vision, poor light differentiation, and night blindness. (To see what I see, look at the world through a paper towel tube.) I see one person at a time, but usually only the face. In church, I sit in the back so that my tunnel includes a wider portion of the front of the church. I see much of the world through my white cane.

The world around me presupposes sight, and that is the greatest frustration. If you cannot see, the world does not see you. Transit—a requirement for people with disabilities—is designed for people without disabilities. Sidewalks and walkways, low-hanging signs, and short road signs are obvious to everyone, so they should not be a problem! Any questions or concerns, just read the instructions!

People in general may be blind to how others experience the world, but they are usually gracious and helpful when I run into these issues. Still, it frustrates me to admit I need help.

I am blessed to have a loving family, a supportive community, a rewarding career, and a loving and enabling God. I have learned to overcome blindness, sickness, tiredness, and my own stupidity. It is not through my own strength that I have done so, but by God's strength and the support he has placed in my life.

Disability has hidden blessings as well. I must walk everywhere using my white cane—to the bus, train, stores, even church at times. Walking every day keeps me fit. I also have more empathy for people than I did when I was young and able-bodied. It has made me look at what is normal and what we are “owed” as people. Health, access to healthcare, food, equipment, cars, homes, not to mention any of our toys—all these are blessings that much of the world lacks. I praise God that he has blessed me so, and I try to assist others to recognize their blessings too.

Editor's Note

Simple, Inexpensive Changes. Really!

I worshiped at a church that projected song lyrics over beautiful photographs. In addition, we read in unison Scripture projected onscreen. The slide designers gave no thought to people who have visual impairments. With varied colors and levels of light

and dark in the photographs, any choice of color for song lyrics would be washed out by parts of the photograph. In addition, the small font size of both song lyrics and Scripture made them difficult to read.

Many designers place form over function, thereby excluding some members of their congregation from participation in worship.

About 15 percent of people with visual impairments have no vision or no light perception. Others are considered legally blind, which has the same definition in Canada and in the United States; their corrected visual acuity is 20/200 (or 6/60) or less in their better eye, or their visual field is 20 percent or narrower. (Someone who is legally blind qualifies for various programs and benefits.) Still others have low vision, or “uncorrectable vision loss that interferes with daily activities,” according to afb.org (American Foundation for the Blind).

This issue of *Breaking Barriers* tells stories of people living with visual impairments; it’s likely your congregation has several such people. I hope these stories will motivate you to find out how your church can become more accessible to them with changes that are usually simple and inexpensive.

—Mark Stephenson

Upcoming Themes

Summer 2020—Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Though completely preventable, millions of people live with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). If you or a loved one has FAS, please tell us your story (400 words) by **April 24**.

Fall 2020—Travel

Many people with disabilities find travel to be challenging, if not difficult. Please tell us your adventurous, difficult, or hilarious story (400 words) of traveling with a disability by **July 24**.

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