

Breaking Barriers
everybody belongs • everybody serves

Summer 2017 (Pastors with a disability)

Challenging My Own Expectations

by Kyle Crist

Rejoice! Community Church (RCA), LeMars IA

Disability has been God's ordained thorn in my side since birth, when I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. I live in a wheelchair with chronic pain, muscle spasms, lack of dexterity, etc., but these seeming limitations are used for God's glory in the church and beyond.

Physically, emotionally, and spiritually, people with disabilities can be easily overlooked. In some churches, it is as if a large "Disabilities Unwelcome" sign could be hung, simply because wheelchair accessibility is so terrible. On the spiritual side, it is difficult for people to see me as more than a charity project or an inspiration, or to move from praying for my healing or praising God for my saintly presence.

However, at Rejoice! Community Church, where the

unofficial greeting is “Come as You Are,” my own expectations have been challenged.

Entering the church as an attendee, then a member, and now as director of congregational care, I have enjoyed fellowship with people who are so willing to admit their own brokenness and spiritual and emotional “disabilities.” Though the bathroom stall needed some work to prevent people from knowing me too well, and though the curb cut is a little difficult to manage, I know I am welcome. And though I cannot open the exterior doors on my own, I know the doors of people’s lives are open to me.

Rejoice! has taught me more about how to give grace to those who are trying. The building and its people are not perfect, but the goal is still to glorify Christ. Preaching on stage requires a dramatic entrance on a steep ramp, but the entrance is forgotten in light of God’s marvelous plan, filled with drama in a much better sense.

Working at Rejoice! as disability advocate has taught me more about how to balance grace with truth, too. Having heavy doors and lacking proper seating are problems to be solved. Such limiting factors will keep away people who may need God or people who we may need to teach us

more about God and his goodness. Yet, as God is patient with us, we must be patient with others.

In John 9, Jesus is patient with his disciples as they assume a man is blind due to the sin of himself or his parents.

Jesus reveals that this man's disability is to shine light on God's ability to use us regardless of our brokenness—and in spite of it—to reveal his glory. This reminds me that, though I hate being called inspirational, God might use me to inspire others since his power is made perfect in weakness.

As Joni Eareckson Tada puts it, “God wants to use our lives as blackboards upon which he chalks marvelous lessons about himself.”

Themes

This issue—**Pastors with a disability**. Clergy with disabilities reflect on the interplay of disability and ministry.

Fall 2017—**Learning from children with disabilities**. What have you learned from a child with a disability in your church? Or, do you have a favorite children's book about

disability? Please send us a note (up to 400 words) **by August 25.**

Winter 2018—**Employing people with disabilities.** Do you employ a person with a disability, or have you had someone with a disability do contract work for you? What have you learned by giving this person a chance? Please send us a note by October 25.

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A Lengthy Tenure Guided by Grace

by Tom Vos

retired CRC pastor, Wellsburg IA

A year after I became pastor of First CRC in Wellsburg, Iowa, my field of vision had shrunk so much that I could no longer drive safely. I am grateful for the elder who said to me, “This is going to be good for us!” My wife and children and many congregation members served as my drivers for pastoral calls. Over the years these congregation members and I, their pastor, clocked many miles together. By putting us together, God opened a door for me into their lives, their families, and our community.

When I started using a white cane to navigate, it reminded others to step aside or help me through the crowded foyer, but meeting and greeting people was difficult. Though elders worked to help me, I would often find out, too late, that so-and-so had been in church some morning, and I had missed them. Catechism classes began with an informal roll call so that I would know who was there. Doing evangelism and meeting people in the community became increasingly difficult.

After I wandered into the surgery area of our local hospital by mistake, my drivers began guiding me in unfamiliar settings. Crossing the road from parsonage to church on a windy day became increasingly difficult. The council graciously allowed me to move my study to the house, but there were still a couple of times while crossing the road that I realized a car had stopped to avoid hitting me.

I became dependent on a computer with screen-reading software, and over time I was no longer able to read enlarged text. I had learned to read Braille, but I was not proficient enough to use it for reading in public. So, using a specialized computer in a “voice over” manner, I could listen to Scripture and notes and repeat them aloud. I was afraid of hearing damage caused by listening at high

volume during two worship services a week and other meetings, so after 28 years together we agreed that I would retire.

While this disability affected my ministry at Wellsburg, much of my service there was the same as a sighted pastor would experience. Through worship, youth group, committee meetings, pastoral care, funerals, baptisms, professions of faith, and weddings, we grew together. The people of Wellsburg became very close to us, and perhaps in ways we would not have realized had we not walked this path together. From a human point of view, we can explain why my ministry in Wellsburg extended 28 years, but I am convinced that God put me in a pleasant place among the noble people of First CRC (Psalm 16:3, 6).

'Best Newsletter' in 2016

For a second straight year, the Associated Church Press (ACP) named *Breaking Barriers* the best newsletter in its class in 2016.

The ACP judge said *Breaking Barriers* does “not sugar-coat issues or concerns...The writing and editing, topics covered, and format and design well complement each other,

resulting in a reader-friendly publication that provides broad coverage of disability and God's work in the midst of those issues. Each issue has a high 'pass along' (print or electronic) value because of the useful, informational, and inspirational content."

Breaking Barriers was honored with two other awards:

- The award of merit (second place) for "Yearning, Treasuring, Hoping," by Eric Groot-Nibbelink, in the devotional/inspirational category. "A raw, heartbreaking yet uplifting account of the trials and tribulations that come with physical therapy after a horrific car accident," wrote one judge.
- Honorable mention for the theme issue on "abuse and disability" (Winter 2016). The judge said the writing "pulls the reader right in" and the "compelling material is excellent."

A Ministry of Transparency

by Joe Cusack

retired RCA minister, Zeeland MI

When I received my first call to pastor a church in October 1990, I tried to keep my dyslexia a secret, but quickly I realized that this was not going to work. I first shared the reality of my disability with the consistory and a few church members. We worked through how this would affect our ministry life together, including worship. Eventually my dyslexia was made public to the congregation and the vast majority rallied around me with prayers and support. As time went on we instituted lay leaders for Bible readings and other parts of worship.

Why did I try to hide my disability? When I was in second grade I was held back. At the end of the year all the students in second grade lined up to move on to the third grade classroom to meet their new teacher for the next year—everyone but me. I remained seated in my second grade desk. A few moments later all the first-graders being promoted marched into the second grade classroom while I was still seated at my desk. I overheard one little girl asking another, “What’s wrong with him?” The other girl replied, “He’s stupid!” Thus began my campaign to hide my disability by covering it up with laughter and lightheartedness and being the class clown.

This defensive posture continued until my 30s when, as a student at William Paterson University, I realized that it was better to be open and honest about who I am as a person with a disability.

Over the years the Lord has graced me with encouraging and affirming ways of sharing my disabilities with others so we can grow on the journey of serving Christ together. In the 27 years the Lord has blessed me to do ministry as a pastor or chaplain, I have learned that transparency and honesty is the only road to being a good servant of Christ. In fact, sharing the reality of my disability has made me more effective because the Lord has brought incredible people into my life who have received my ministry abilities without hesitation—and with God’s love and grace.

As I have grown older and the damage to my hearing from military service in Vietnam added another ministry challenge, people continued to support and pray for my potential and effectiveness.

Disclosing my disabilities has been life-affirming and a source of team-building for me, plus it has blessed countless people struggling with uncertainty about their own disabilities.

Picking up the Chalk

by Ron Nydam

retired seminary professor, Grand Rapids MI

Deadly quiet washed over the classroom when I slowly bent over, pushing my partially paralyzed hand toward the carpet to pick up the chalk that had fallen from my

partially paralyzed fingers. I wondered how students were experiencing my new physical limitations and my awkward embarrassment at, once again, dropping something.

At age 65 I was scrambling to make my last year of teaching a good one, despite the beating I had taken from two rounds of acute leukemia and brachial neuritis, caused by an infection that destroyed about 65 percent of the nerves in both arms and hands. I had joined the ranks of persons with disabilities.

Until about age 58, I had lived a charmed life. As a teacher since age 49, I had enjoyed every minute of the classroom conversation with Calvin seminary students who were looking toward pastoral ministry in its many forms. The magic of the classroom, the delight of learning and teaching, blessed me daily.

But now, after nearly a year of hospitalization and recovery that included a stem-cell transplant, I was back in the classroom, being restored and sometimes pastored by my students. They were the ones praying for me; the role reversal in terms of caring was both powerful and embarrassing. I struggled to admit to myself that I needed help from others and wondered how my disability affected

my students.

As I look back, I can see one way my personal disability enhanced learning in the classroom. In experiencing my obvious neediness, they had to engage in self-examination as the chalk lay on the floor. For some, I would guess, the impulse to help—to run up and pick it up for me—was quite real; we like to be fixers in troubled situations. Others, perhaps, were paralyzed by indecision. Still others may have tasted a simple moment of empathy when these pastors-in-information wondered what the suffering of another child of God was like.

As persons, and certainly as students of pastoral care, each was challenged to walk in the shoes of another and, with the gifts of curiosity and hospitality, learn by way of experience what it is like to enter the life of another, to engage human suffering. Jesus did that. Scripture tells us that “because he was God, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” My disability gave my students the opportunity to be Jesus Christ to me.

Editor’s Note

Lessons in Hospitality

When a pastor lives with a known disability, ministry naturally becomes a shared endeavor—by necessity if not by design. Particularly when a disability emerges after a ministry relationship or covenant has been established, there’s a mutual desire to “figure things out through respectful negotiation.”

Without wishing it on anyone, the quickest route to raising awareness in a congregation sometimes comes through a pastor’s acquired disability, temporary or long-term. Their shared dependency morphs into gifts of interdependency, and that opens all kinds of doors.

Although not specifically addressing pastors with disabilities, [“Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities”](#)—an RCA Theological Commission paper available [online](#)—puts it this way: “Hospitality will naturally find its culmination when persons with disabilities are no longer merely the ‘recipients’ of the church’s ministry, but when they find their rightful place within the body of Christ, assisting the church as a whole to embody the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Churches that acknowledge, honor, and engage the gifts of all people—with and without disabilities—are healthier for it. Sometimes it takes a pastor’s disability to realize that.

—Terry A. DeYoung

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