

# BREAKINGBARRIERS



everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

## Summer 2018 | Theme: 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. This issue of *Breaking Barriers* tells stories of ministry with, for, and by church members 65 and older.

## Christ's Body Has Big, Long Arms

by **Roze Meyer Bruins**

Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids MI

As the minister to seniors at Central Reformed Church, it's gratifying to witness the range of God's reach in the world around us.

Scene 1: "I wish my church would do that," said a staff person at a local retirement facility. She had asked about the basket I carry that contains the tableware and elements for the Lord's Supper—the communion basket.

This family of faith in downtown Grand Rapids has big

arms, long arms—big enough and long enough to reach into the dozen plus homes and retirement communities of its homebound members to regularly offer the Lord’s Supper. The communion table, usually a walker, is set with a satin cloth in the current liturgical color. The gold military communion tableware, a gift from an Army chaplain, is sufficiently large and bright for the older eye. To accommodate arthritic hands, the communion juice is poured into plastic shot glasses. The bread takes many forms—from naan bread to wafers to croissants—whatever is easiest for the particular parishioner to swallow. “Take, eat...Take, drink...Remember and believe that the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was given and shed for a complete forgiveness of all your sins.” We are the church, the body of Christ, remembered, not forgotten.

Scene 2: “My church did this for me?” an elderly and bedridden saint asked as she clasped the soft prayer shawl next to her face. Assured that her church remembers, loves, and prays for her, she smiled. A year later, this soft and brightly colored prayer shawl would cover this beloved child of God as she breathed her last. At her loved one’s request, the shawl, a sign of God’s abiding love, was included in the cremains.

Scene 3: “Tell us about our prayer partners,” excitedly

asked the elementary church school classes. “Does mine have a cat or dog?” Each student receives the name and profile of a homebound parishioner, with whom they would correspond, visit, and pray. And, the big and long arms of this faith family? They make a covenant connection between the young generation and the older a living reality, maybe including a pet or two!

Scene 4: No talk, just doing, by parishioners age 66 and older (186 of Central’s parishioners were born before 1953):

- Knitting prayer shawls.
- Corresponding with homebound siblings in Christ through cards, visits, phone calls.
- Serving as church elders, musicians, liturgists, committee members.
- Making meals for caregivers, providing transportation.
- Keeping the hearing loop, large print bulletins, magnifiers, Braille hymn copies, and elevators accessible to all.

# Freedom to Serve Brings Life

**by Per and Chris Knudsen**

Cedar Grove Reformed Church, Port Alberni BC

We were invited by Cedar Grove Reformed Church to do one Sunday of supply pastoring, preaching to a wonderful group of retired professionals. That was 10 years ago, and we continue our journey together to this day.

Thanks to a revisioning process prior to our arrival, we discovered tremendous buy-in to participating in ministry by this small congregation on Vancouver Island. Still, with very few young people, there remained a nagging feeling that the church was dying.

Believing that God is not about death but about life, we started creating space at least four times a year for a family service, making a welcoming space for people to bring their children and grandchildren with a message geared toward them.

The congregation was already invested in the Port Alberni community, freeing people to do ministry as God puts it on their heart. When God gave them an idea for ministry, they pursued it—feeding kids at school, giving baby baskets with handmade items to new families, working in the blood bank, making cancer bandages, etc. Since energy

levels diminish with age, we continue to encourage people to be the church in the community—instead of wearing them out with programs inside the church.

Our members and leaders also value the community that exists within the congregation and are faithful to visit those struggling with health issues, dementia, and other limitations. We have a great visitation program; when God puts an idea on someone's heart, they act on it and are a great blessing.

Dealing with the physical limitations of getting older, one of our members prints the songs weekly in large print for people who need them. We have invested in a large print pulpit Bible. We are intentional about adjusting microphones so that everyone can hear. We are gradually making the building we share more accessible, putting sturdier railings in the stairwells and building a wheelchair ramp for the outside entrance. We may add a sturdy railing to the pulpit. Basically, whenever one of our members has a need, we have tried to adjust things to make church as great an experience as possible.

We are so blessed to serve with people who are a little ahead of us on the road of life.

# Caring Role Models Lead the Way

by Colleen Cosgrove

Marble Collegiate Church (RCA), New York NY

Aging in a busy, bustling city of 8 million people can be challenging, but Marble Collegiate Church has taken measures to welcome people when they experience limited mobility and other age-related disabilities.

Ramps lead into the sanctuary and the fellowship space known as the Marble Loft. Designated wheelchair seating is at the front of the sanctuary. A sound system is available for people with hearing impairments.

But it's really the members of the church who go above and beyond to make Marble a place of welcome for all. A member of our Gospel Choir, herself blind, has provided a connection to a nearby university that provides the Sunday bulletin in Braille. One of the Sunday ushers and his partner shepherd their friends who are blind to the monthly Sunday brunch. At the Wednesday 60+ Fellowship, a longtime member who has begun to experience signs of dementia can be found enjoying the program along with his young aide. All are welcomed at table as important members of the community.

The connection to Marble doesn't end when a member

experiences sickness or becomes homebound. One 60+ member celebrated birthdays 100, 101, and 102 at the Wednesday Fellowship. When he no longer felt up to the trip, two 60+ members marched over to his home to check in. Another homebound member, who hasn't crossed Marble's threshold in more than 10 years, delights in receiving the bimonthly 60+ newsletter. She also feels blessed by weekly phone calls from her Stephen Ministry caregiver. Marble's Stephen Ministry and other pastoral initiatives invite the congregation to join ministers and staff in reaching out to people who are sick or homebound. Cards are sent, Easter lilies delivered, prayers offered. It's all a way to let folks know that the trials of aging are not a barrier to being thriving members of the Marble community.

As the staff leader of Marble's 60+ Fellowship, I look to the congregation as role models in caring for each other in the good times and the not-so-good times—sharing creative gifts of music and writing, assisting in worship and communion. The contributions of the 60+ Fellowship enhance the life of the church while giving them purpose and a sense of belonging.

## **Upcoming themes**

### **Fall 2018—Small group ministry**

In healthy small groups, people can share life, study the Bible, and discern God's guidance in their lives. How is your church engaging people with and without disabilities such as hearing loss, intellectual disability, dementia, and mental illnesses in small group ministry? Please send us a note (400 words) by June 20.

### **Winter 2019—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 October 24.

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## **Frailty Can Be Our Friend**

**by Ken Koeman**

Sonlight Community CRC, Lynden WA

Frailty is one of the most unwelcome knocks on our doors as we age. We do our best to mask it. When



people ask how we're doing we say, "Fine," even though we've been awake since 5 a.m. because we can't get a full night's sleep anymore.

I've noticed recently that I'm becoming more forgetful. I prided myself in remembering people's names well; now, if someone tells me their name, I must repeat it to myself two or three times in the next five seconds or face the embarrassment of asking them again, which I'm usually too proud to do.

We dread frailty, and yet frailty can be a gift. Look at what Jesus did through Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic!

The apostle Paul makes a radical claim: weakness, or frailty—whether incontinence, deafness, dentures, baldness, wrinkles, bags under the eyes, poor eyesight, or forgetfulness—is a kind of gift, because our weakness is God's tool through which his power is made perfect inside of us.

When a person who loved independence must move to assisted living, they may discover the joy of community. A woman I know got arthritis so bad that her hands were crumpled in on themselves. Those fingers still managed to create little dolls that she sent to a mission field. As her body crumpled, her spirit soared.

Although frailty can generate self-pity and bitterness,

people can become more tender, humble, and grateful for the smallest kindnesses. Weakness helps us swallow our pride in a hurry. Now, someone else dishes up your food, feeds you with a spoon, even gives you a bath. The very thing that seems to take away your dignity, if it is accepted and welcomed, can turn you into a person who is joyful over the smallest gifts.

Frailty has the power to cleanse the soul of its last vestiges of pride. Frailty helps our souls discover that to be loved, to be cared for, to be on the receiving end, is a pathway to an unexpected joy: discovering that we are being loved, through people, by Jesus himself.

## **More Online**

Along with large print, audio, Spanish, and Korean versions of this issue, look for a web-only article by Gayle Beltman (“Adapting Ministry after a Stroke”) in the *Breaking Barriers* section of the Network website. Go to <http://bit.ly/breakingbarrierssummer2018>.

# Disability Concerns Receives 5

## Awards

The Associated Church Press (ACP) awarded CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries five awards for their communications. The Disability Concerns Network blog ([network.crcna.org/disability-concerns](http://network.crcna.org/disability-concerns)) received ACP's "Award of Excellence" (first place) in their "Overall Excellence/Best in Class Blog" category, and *Breaking Barriers* received the "Award of Merit" (second place) for "Overall Excellence/Best in Class Newsletter." The Winter 2017 *Breaking Barriers* also received an honorable mention for a theme issue ("Disability and Spiritual Practice"), and articles by Jenna Hoff and Stacey Midge likewise received honorable mentions. Go to <http://bit.ly/breakingbarrierssummer2018>.

# Editor's Note

## Taking Our Time

During communion at our church recently, worshipers were invited forward to receive the bread and juice. As ushers dismissed people beginning with the front rows, it happened on this Sunday that nearly all of the first dozen or more people were senior adults. All of them moved slower than they did years ago, many due to mobility-related limitations. Some relied on canes or walked with assistance from a companion.

Seated directly behind them, I found myself grateful for leading the rest of us in a relaxed, deliberate pace that made communion more meaningful. The same pace continued even as younger, more mobile people went forward after these senior adults with disabilities had returned to their seats.

Speed and time often prevent us from noticing the needs of others.

In *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship*, John Swinton writes, "God's time is gentle time...When we slow down and pay attention to the

slowness of God's time, we encounter one another differently."

Jesus took time for people who were marginalized. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," he said.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart."

The church has much to learn from older adults. For those who live with disabilities, perhaps one of the most obvious lessons is the value of taking our time and practicing gentleness.

—*Terry DeYoung*

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