

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

ISSUE #93 SPRING 2012 A Ministry of Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America Disability Concerns

Theme

Spring: Among other things, living longer increases the incidence of disabilities. In this issue learn ways that churches have accommodated and assisted **aging** adults who have disabilities.

Summer: The Internet has created new possibilities for connection and ministry. What opportunities has the **Internet** created for people who live with disabilities? What must your church do online to enhance ministry with people with disabilities? Send us articles by May 30, 2012.

Fall: In celebration of CRC Disability Concerns' 30th birthday, we will feature stories about ways churches have been **changed by people with disabilities**. We welcome stories about RCA and CRC churches. Send us your stories by August 1, 2012.

We Bless When We Provide Access

David Van Ningen, member of Faith Reformed Church in Rock Valley, Iowa, and executive director of Hope Haven, Inc.

When I was a kid, my dad played softball on the First Reformed Church team in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Like many other dads, mine also served on consistory, taught Sunday school and catechism, helped with the youth group, and made visits with the pastor. First Reformed was central to our family life. Every

Sunday Mom would get us all ready for church, dressed in our best. We would climb the few steps to the front door, and then ascend more stairs to the sanctuary. Sunday school rooms were down in the basement, and so was the fellowship hall.

My dad no longer plays ball; rounding the bases with a walker would be a challenge. His role in the church has changed, too. He misses being as involved as he once was, but First Reformed is still central to him and Mom. They worship and serve the God they love there.

First Reformed moved from the old church to a new building over twenty-five years ago. Unlike the church building of my youth, this one welcomes people who no longer can run the bases. Mom parks the car near the door. No steps keep dad from the building or the sanctuary. Restrooms are nearby; Sunday school rooms are on the same plane as the sanctuary, as is the fellowship hall. Mom and Dad worship in this place without structural barriers.

I am delighted that I can worship together with Dad and Mom because of the work done twenty-five years ago. This privilege prompts me to imagine how we will embrace many others in the years to come. Not only must we embrace new ministry opportunities such as welcoming young families to our congregations, but also we must support those who have led us to where we are today—those like my dad and my mom and my mother-in-law Kay, too.

Kay recently went to be with the Lord. In the months prior to her death she could no longer attend her church. Yet the comments of her friends and family revealed that her church was still central

to her life, and her church understood that well. Those of us at her funeral were blessed to celebrate her life in the same place where she taught Sunday school, where her children were baptized, and where she worshiped her Lord.

Accommodations can take many forms for people whose advancing age means living with disabling conditions:

- the removal of physical barriers, or something as practical as valet parking
- visiting the “shut-ins,” or recording worship for those who can’t attend
- saying “thank you” to that man in the wheelchair who was once your Sunday school teacher, or providing an opportunity for him to share his stories.

We honor God when we honor the people who have faithfully served him by providing reasonable accommodations that bless them and their relationship with God.

Parish Nurses Minister to Body and Soul

Mark Stephenson, Director of CRC Disability Concerns

“Parish nurses help people foster a sense of a life well-lived,” says Marj Taylor, who served as a parish nurse for ten years at Hope Church (RCA) and Beechwood Church (RCA) of Holland, Michigan. Parish nurses do more than help with medicines and ensure that people are eating properly. According to the World Forum for Parish Nursing Ministries, parish nurses provide

“intentional care of the spirit by integrating faith and health in holistic nursing.”

“Many older people have to deal with role adjustments. They have obvious disabilities, but learning to depend on other people is hard when it is forced on you,” says Taylor. “As people see the effects of a stroke or dementia on their own lives, they are afraid to let others know. They fear being a burden, and they fear having things taken away, such as their driver’s license.”

While helping people learn to cope with new limitations, parish nurses provide care for the spirit. Taylor emphasizes, “We have to help people find ways to continue to bless others, especially if they cannot do the same kinds of things they were able to do in the past. People need to know that they still have a purpose in life.”

Judy Vander Plaats, volunteer parish nurse at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Ripon, California, finds that the foundation of her work is building trust with people. “Older people need others in church who will connect with them and watch out for them. With increasing health problems they tend to get isolated. We need to seek them out.”

Vander Plaats says that when people need to visit the doctor, she helps arrange transportation and often goes along. “I go with them because doctor’s appointments go so fast now. People don’t always understand what the doctor says and don’t think of important questions to ask. They need someone who has had health training to advocate for them.”

Parish nurses do not work alone, says Vander Plaats. “The main focus is to educate people and give them and their families the resources they need to care for themselves and their loved ones.”

As part of its parish nursing program, Immanuel has a medical supply lending closet with donated crutches, walkers, commodes, wheelchairs, canes, and more. Members are welcome to use items as long as they need. The closet functions as an outreach tool as well; sometimes members check out items for neighbors or others in the community.

Parish nurses can serve congregations and communities well, but they need the support of church leadership.

One parish nurse has undergone training but has “gotten nowhere” in their church. “We have offered to make calls on people, tried to do blood pressure clinics, but we do not have the support of the leadership. This ministry needs to be integrated into the rest of a church’s ministry, not separate from it.”

In sharp contrast, Vander Plaats appreciates the support of her church council. “Now, younger nurses from our church are getting involved as volunteers. The future of parish nursing at our church looks good.”

Selfless Service in the Dementia Unit

Curt Gesch, member of Telkwa Christian Reformed Church, Telkwa, British Columbia, and Regional Advocate for Classis BC Northwest (CRC)

Recently, I attended a meeting for caregivers of people with dementia. It is a real pleasure to be in that group. Honesty is the hallmark. Or compassion. Or both.

I look forward to each time I go to work with people in the dementia unit in the local nursing home. Mostly I talk and they nod or agree or ignore me. But I still get to say, “I’m glad to see you, Vivienne” (or Alice or John or Eunice or Bud or Ivan).

At the meeting with caregivers we heard an inspiring story about a lady who has dementia (she’s 90) helping another lady (74) with severe psychological problems simply by being busy and sort of bossy. The 74-year-old is apathetic and uncooperative, but when the 90-year-old moved into the home, the younger lady began to work, to be busy, to be neater, etc. Of course, the older lady forgets that she has even helped. God’s grace, I call it. Everybody belongs; everybody serves.

New Access an Uplifting Change

Phil Assink, pastor of Faith Community Church (RCA),
Edmonds, Washington

“We’ll put it in, but who in the world will be using it?”

That question was on the minds of many at Faith Community Church (RCA) in Edmonds, Washington, in the late 1990s when we installed a Limited Use Limited Access (LULA) elevator. Since that time, our question has been answered again and again.

Today, the elevator is used at least three days a week to accommodate Bible study groups as well as Sunday services. Whenever groups from the community use our facility, we can now say that our building is wheelchair accessible. People have used the elevator after experiencing injuries or surgeries that temporarily prevented them from using stairs. Others who

once wondered, “Who might ever use this thing?” are now weekly users.

Several in a women’s group appreciate it. One said, “It takes me so long to go down the stairs that I feel like I am holding everyone up, so now I just take the elevator.” Another who is recovering from a knee replacement said she can climb up stairs but the elevator is much easier for going down.

We’ve learned from our own experience and from other churches that the elevator provides both a physical and a spiritual lift. For instance, the elevator has made it possible for one family to take a parent struggling with Alzheimer’s disease to church. They found that the continuing participation in church provided spiritual and emotional help for everyone.

One of our members has been doing rigorous rehabilitation work for a spinal injury. She fell and has not been able to walk, and had been away from church for over a year. Recently, with the assistance of a walker, she was able to use the elevator and return to worship, and the entire congregation benefited from her return.

The elevator project was made possible in part by a \$15,000 grant from the RCA’s \$9.8 by ’98 fundraising campaign, so we remain grateful to our denomination and all those who gave generously more than a decade ago. None of us realized then that their gifts would help so many.

These are the kinds of questions and issues that were not considered when our split-level building was constructed in the 1960s with no ground-level entrance. When exploring

accessibility options many years later, we learned that a ramp, though less expensive, would not be practical, but a LULA elevator provided a cost effective option for a ground-level entry point and access to the upstairs and downstairs levels.

More than a decade later, a new question people are wondering is, “What would our church be like without an elevator?”

Staying Connected in Spite of Vision Loss

Many older adults feel isolated, in part because vision loss prevents many of them from reading favorite publications or using Bible study materials. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) offer a variety of publications in alternative formats so that people can stay connected.

Large Print

Bible studies in the Word Alive series from Faith Alive Christian Resources (FA)

RCA Lord’s Supper Pew Card (FA)

Psalter Hymnal (FA)

eBooks with variable font sizes (FA)

Inclusion Handbook and Breaking Barriers newsletter (from CRC and RCA Disability Concerns)

Today and Words of Hope devotionals

Pages on the RCA and CRC websites can be enlarged (using zoom) as well as all electronic publications (PDFs) such as the Words of Hope and Today devotionals, ministry resources, and much more

Publications on cassette tape

The Banner magazine of the CRC (FA)

Breaking Barriers newsletter of CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries

Today devotional

Podcasts

Today devotional

Programs from ReFrame Media: Under the Radar, Groundwork, Walk the Way, Kids Corner, Spotlight

Apps and Kindle

Today devotional

About 21 percent of people over age 65 report some form of vision impairment. That number increases to 26 percent of people 75 and older. To order any materials above marked “FA,” call Faith Alive Christian Resources (800-333-8300). For all others, call CRC Disability Concerns (888-463-0272).

‘Still More Can Be Done’

Joann Hoover, health ministry director, First Reformed Church, Oak Harbor, Washington

In 2005, when our church newsletter published health-ministry updates that were geared mainly to our senior adults and those who care for them — topics such as fall prevention, medication safety, hearing loss, demystifying long-term care, help with Medicare, etc. — we learned that providing a safe place for worship and serving our community was an even greater need.

Among other things, we were reminded that people stumbled and fell over the elevated sills at the thresholds of the doors;

that the beautiful flagstone floors to the spacious narthex were very uneven for those who were not steady on their feet; and that attempts to make a stall in each restroom accessible were unsuccessful in accommodating wheelchairs.

Six years later, First Reformed Church (FRC) in Oak Harbor, Washington, underwent a major remodel of its 1963 facility, and many problems have been remedied:

- All entries to the building were resurfaced or ramped, so each entry can now safely accommodate a walker or wheelchair from car to interior.
- The three major areas of entry now have level sills, and one door in the largest entry has a push button for automatic opening.
- Flagstone has been replaced with a flat, nonslip surface tile that is just as pleasing to the eye.
- Lighting in the narthex is much improved.
- Two spacious bathrooms each have a wheelchair-accessible stall with one railing that swings up and out of the way, which allows users to utilize this area privately.

Several improvements also have been made to the sanctuary: a ramp with a handrail to the chancel or platform area for those in the choir or leading in worship; three more inches added between pews to aid entry and exit; and five exits from the sanctuary (two single doors to the outside and three double doors to the narthex). In addition, we use clearer print and new background

pictures so that words projected on the two screens are easier to read.

Besides facility improvements, we are also cognizant of the need to watch out for people who are homebound, or are finding it harder to keep things going at home. Every week, women who are part of our SonShine Visitors group take turns visiting those who are unable to leave their homes easily. The FRC Handymen go into homes to make repairs, build ramps, change light bulbs, and help homeowners maintain safe environments. With the aid of the local hospital, we provided a series of classes on fall prevention that was well attended and well received.

Are we done yet? Certainly not. We will continue to look at and make changes where they need to be made and help our members or their family members to care for them.

The Worship God Wants

At 90 years old, my mom has joined the majority of her similarly aged cohorts who, like her, live with disabilities. Mom has late-stage dementia.

About a third of all people between the ages of 65 and 75 and more than half of those over 75 live with a disability, that is, a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities. As baby boomers grow into their senior years, the number of people living with disabilities will swell dramatically over the next 20 years.

I'm thankful that the people at Mom's church continue to connect with her, even though she has not been in the church building for years. Members of the GEMS group have visited Mom and

brought her gifts. Her pastor of visitation, Jake Heerema, visits faithfully. Pastor Jake made sure that we kids could celebrate communion with Mom a few months ago. Mom's elder, Mike Oosterhouse, has seen her too. I'm thankful that her church connects with her even though she cannot give to the life of the church community anymore.

How well does your church minister to members like my mom?

Scripture's call to "meet together" (Hebrews 10:24) goes in two directions. Parishioners who are able must gather together regularly, and those who are not able must be visited regularly by fellow parishioners.

In many congregations, elders, deacons, and even pastors are visiting people less than they did in the past. This trend suggests that older people who cannot get out will become increasingly isolated unless congregations find creative ways to reach out to people who are shut in. (See article on page 3 about parish nursing.)

"The worship that God wants is this: caring for orphans or widows who need help" (James 1:27 ERV). Will your church fulfill this call to "worship" as God wants? Will you?

—Mark Stephenson

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