

# Breaking Barriers

*everybody belongs everybody serves*

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A Ministry of Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America Disability Concerns

## Themes

**Fall:** In celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CRC Disability Concerns, this issue features stories about ways churches and individuals in the CRC and RCA have been **changed by people with disabilities**.

**Winter:** What impact does a **spouse's disability** have on a marriage and the connections to church and family? Please submit articles (not to exceed 400 words) by October 15, 2012.

## An Engaging Vision for Families and Church

by Chris Lanham, pastor of Cascades Fellowship CRC,  
Jackson, Michigan

The special needs ministry of Cascades Fellowship (CFCRC) began as the vision of Rev. Bob and Alice DeVries, who, as they neared retirement, adopted four children who have disabilities. In fall 2004 the dream Bob and Alice carried around for years came to fruition: a worship service designed for children with disabilities.

Using visuals and good video renderings of the gospel story, Bob and Alice disciplined the children and young people, but the families did not want to worship separately from their sons and daughters. Soon several families were gathering weekly

in the basement of CFCRC making joyful noises, engaging the doctrines of grace, and growing in understanding.

This targeted service tapped into an unreached demographic—families who no longer trusted the church because of the way the church (in every stripe) regarded their children. One family even said the pastor of a church asked them to make alternative arrangements on Sunday. Translation: the parents were welcome, but not their children. By contrast at CFCRC this was their service. Movement, visual cues, and participation were expected. Even hand-flapping was allowed.

Later, Bob and Alice started a support group too: Parenting Challenging Children. Families came to our church once a month to join in a fellowship meal and to listen to well-known professionals. Our little church was having a big impact on the disability community in Jackson County.

When Bob was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he became less of a presence, and Alice focused more of her energies on caring for Bob. In March 2012, Bob passed away. The ministries remain, but only as shadows of what they were.

We could allow the ministries to fade, but God has presented us with a unique flock. We must care for them. We plan to make our two separate worship services one, using some of the same strategies Bob and Alice used: visual cues, participation, and encouraging appropriate movement. We will attempt a restart of the support group. The journey is not over and the vision has not died. It is changing and evolving to match the gifts and abilities of we who are now its keepers.

# More Than Caring

by a CRC mother in Canada

My 22-year-old daughter made profession of faith in June at the church we have attended for years. She has an invisible disability, Asperger's syndrome, which among other things causes her to hate being touched by people.

Because she also has a challenge sitting still unless she is doing something with her hands, she knit during the pre-profession classes. Our minister did not forbid her from doing that. In fact, he noticed that her attention was better. He said to me, "Hey, she's knitting, and she's asking good questions!"

She knit through her profession of faith, too. Knitting kept her calm and quiet. The minister and elders were surprised—both by the quiet and by the knitting. Most of the people in our congregation were just pleased that she was in church and making her profession.

Although we usually associate appropriate touch with love, in my daughter's case, love means NOT touching her or expecting her to touch others. So our pastor did the blessing for each person making their profession that day by holding his hand above them as he blessed each one, like he does when he gives the benediction.

My daughter was given the option of leaving after the service, but she chose to stay for about half of the "after service congratulations." People respected her need not to touch. No one tried to shake her hand, nor did anyone complain about that.

In fact, people were pleasantly surprised that she stayed for as long as she did!

Before my daughter made profession of faith, she filled out a “Discover Your Gifts” survey and had an interview with our ministry coordinator. One of her gifts seems to be service. After church, when we have coffee/tea, she collects the empty cups and brings them to the kitchen for washing. She has refilled pew cards and collection envelopes in the pews, too.

When people first realized that she was different from other kids her age, they would say, “Oh, the poor girl...” Although it took a while, people have stopped saying that. Now, for the most part, my daughter is loved and accepted and welcomed in our congregation as she is. And for that, I’m thankful to God and to the people of our church.

## **A Glowing Face of Rhythm, Autism, and Faith**

by Gisela Borowsky, Colonial Church (RCA) of Bayside, New York

It has been a number of years since Janet and her daughter Gracie came to Colonial Church (RCA) of Bayside, New York. Janet inquired whether Gracie, her nonverbal child with autism, could participate in vacation Bible school, and the answer was an immediate yes.

Over the years our congregation has had to get used to the typical outbursts and release of energy that Gracie displayed, but Janet and Gracie have changed our church in many ways.

Gracie is now 14, and I marvel at her joy and exuberance every Sunday when she enters the sanctuary. Even though she cannot express it verbally, watching her face light up when the praise team starts rehearsing speaks volumes. Gracie is with Janet and me every Thursday during rehearsal, and many Sundays she stands with us in the worship center as we sing songs of praise. Her eyes watch us intensely and a big smile radiates from her face.

During our annual talent show recently, Janet and Gracie sang “Jesus Loves Me.” Even though Gracie’s voice was barely audible, her simple words brought tears to my eyes. The two also performed a dance routine to a Beatles song, and while Janet moved around the stage, Gracie stood smiling while beating two sticks together in perfect sync with the music.

“Who knew she had rhythm?” said Colonial Church worship leader Brett Roelofs.

Soon an idea popped into my head: since we’re without a drummer, Gracie could be our rhythm section! Now when she joins her mom up front for worship, we all benefit from her unique gifts as she joyfully beats out her praise to the Lord.”

## **Music Ministry without Barriers**

by Cassandra Lokker, First Reformed Church, Baldwin, Wisconsin

Baptized as an infant, and at 15 a confessing member, I have always loved First Reformed Church. I often shared special music and sang in the choir during high school, and soon developed a passion for composing and singing praise and worship music.

My church family was supportive throughout. Many knew of my visual impairment, yet my parents and others believed that one day I would serve the Lord through music.

I put music on the back burner during college to major in English and writing. I tried my hand at writing novels and sought employment as a newspaper reporter or magazine editor, but it seemed that most organizations were uncomfortable hiring someone with a visual impairment.

Eventually I enrolled in a master's degree program in ministry leadership. After completing my thesis on contemporary worship music within the church in 2011, pastor Tim Sluiter of First Reformed in Baldwin approached me about part-time employment as the church's music and worship director. I accepted, and my first day of work at church was my first day of work anywhere. I had never officially been employed until then, and entering my office for the first time, my eyes welled up with tears.

Despite my visual impairment, the congregation has welcomed and encouraged me, seeing the worship leader and not the disabled musician. This congregation has changed me and how I view inclusion in the workforce for people with disabilities.

Encouraged to serve to the best of my ability, I have led the congregation in praise and worship and even shared the Word through preaching. Although my visual impairment sometimes presents obstacles for me, the church helps me to serve without barriers.



# God Not Always in Obvious Places

by Suzie Giroux, Trinity CRC, Abbotsford, British Columbia

Every day, as a sign language interpreter, I am a facilitator of communication. At Trinity CRC I'm the conduit of communication between the pastor and the Deaf members of the congregation, but it took me ten years to figure out that my interpreting was also a conduit between me and God. The interpreting I provide has an obvious impact on our Deaf members. What wasn't as obvious was the impact the interpreting had on me.

Twenty years ago, my first interpreting job was in a high school; I did not know at the time that I was interpreting for a boy who was a member of Trinity. Later, I was asked and accepted the assignment to interpret the service at Trinity. It seemed that time and again I was interpreting something that addressed a struggle in my own life. For ten years, I declined invitations to attend the Alpha sessions, or I'd try to make a quick exit after the service so as not to be approached!

Interpreting at Trinity CRC was just a job, and I frequently pushed the thought of accepting Jesus out of my head and heart. Then tragedy struck in the loss of a friend's life, and I had nowhere to turn. My circle of friends, some also suffering from the loss and some too uncomfortable to approach me in my grief, seemed to disappear. I found comfort, peace, and Jesus in the members of Trinity CRC.

Everything happens in God's time and that brought me, broken-hearted and lost, to accept Jesus into my heart on December 19, 2010, and to make public profession of faith on June 5, 2011. Since then I have participated in the Leadership Development

Network of the CRC, traveled to Israel, joined a mission trip with Trinity's youth, and taken classes toward a degree in leadership. God has brought me to where I am today as a part-time leader with the youth at Trinity.

I am continuing my studies and am far from understanding the gift that I have so undeservedly been given. The services we provide in building bridges and breaking barriers has the obvious impact on those we serve, and it has touched the heart of this servant.

## **Starting a Disability Ministry at Elmhurst**

by Beth Rinsema, director of care, Elmhurst CRC,  
Elmhurst, Illinois

"We can do more than this," said Kendra Aulich, 40, a faithful participant in the church choir and a member of our Disability Team. Kendra was referring to our disability ministry that for four years had provided childcare during worship services for one family who had a child with disabilities. Kendra had a strong desire to develop a more active ministry. She lived with partial left-side paralysis and learning challenges since birth. Out of her experience and passion, the disability ministry adopted a new verse, a new mission statement, and a new name, taking our inspiration from Isaiah 35:3-6: LEAP — "Living Expectantly, Always Praying!"

After seeking advice from CRC Disability Concerns, Elim Christian School, Joni and Friends, other local churches, and most importantly from the families with children with special needs, we began to take small steps.



Our team listened to the stories of several families in our church who have children with disabilities. We heard about painful struggles, lost dreams, amazing love, and deep faith. Then, taking a step of faith, these parents began sharing their stories during our adult education classes on Sunday mornings. They shared their knowledge of disabilities, and they shared their hearts—how they had been helped and hurt by the church.

After hearing from parents, we decided against a programmatic approach. Instead, at the advice of one of our team members who is also the mother of a child with special needs, we are seeking to understand before seeking to provide. Our first goal is to win the trust of these families.

We aren't sure where God will lead this ministry, but in the words of our new name, we are living expectantly, always praying. We expect that God will bless us. We expect to learn a lot. We expect that God will add people to our ministry who have passion and expertise. We expect that our congregation will embrace these families. And we will bathe all of these expectations in prayer.

## **New Church a Special Journey with Extraordinary People**

by Mark Mast, copastor of Odyssey (RCA), Poughkeepsie, New York

A few years ago, a church plant geared towards New York City commuters from Poughkeepsie took a drastic change and became a church with people with disabilities. Odyssey, “A Special Journey with Extraordinary People,” started as a monthly service with four friends in attendance; it has become a

community of 150 people that worships weekly and is beginning to wrestle with what a church community looks like, acts like, and ministers like when the vast majority of its members are adults from some 35 group homes. We are committed to being a community WITH people who have disabilities.

From the beginning, our goal was to create a worship space that primarily met the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; people without disabilities would be a secondary focus. We are a community where people with special needs—along with those whose needs are not so obvious—work together in leading worship and Bible studies, providing pastoral care, etc. We never “dumb down,” but instead find concrete ways to bring the words of Christ alive and apply them to our various life situations.

Advocacy is a growing aspect of who we are, as we try to understand advocacy in light of John 14. Through the Advocate—the Holy Spirit—we strive to be advocates of Christ in each other’s personal lives, understanding that we are created in God’s image to love God, ourselves, and others. We recognize the frequent misunderstanding and occasional cruel treatment toward people with disabilities by established churches. Though they are sometimes considered outcasts in the world, Odyssey is committed to standing by our brothers and sisters in Christ in their struggles, whether related to church, neighborhood, employment, housing, or other life circumstances.

As a ministry of Hopewell Reformed Church ([odyssey.hrcrca.org](http://odyssey.hrcrca.org)) in Hopewell Junction, New York, we are uncertain where God is bringing Odyssey. With no full-time ministers and a budget that is smaller than many youth programs, we know

God wants to use Odyssey to touch not only the lives of people with special needs, but also all of us who find ourselves in need of the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We want to be a church community that happens to have a lot of us with “special needs.”

## **Giving Thanks**

by Mark Stephenson, CRC Director of Disability Concerns

Thanksgiving celebrations are just around the corner in Canada and the U.S. This year, I am giving thanks for many blessings related to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CRC Disability Concerns.

**Commitments:** The CRC set the priority for the inclusion of people with disabilities in church life through various synodical commitments. In particular, Synod 1985 pledged that we would pay “special attention to the needs and gifts of people with physical, sensory, mental, and emotional impairments.” Synod 1993 called Christian Reformed churches in the U.S. and Canada to work “toward full compliance with all of the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act.”

**Volunteers, partnerships:** Though CRC Disability Concerns has a full-time director and two part-time assistants, the lion’s share of work is performed by volunteers. Regional advocates serve 37 Christian Reformed classes, and church advocates assist 615 congregations. Churches and individuals have partnered with our ministry by giving financial support. Our most significant partnership beyond the CRC began three years ago when we entered into a formal working agreement with the Disability Concerns ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

**Accessible buildings, changing attitudes:** As the infographic on the back cover of the July *Banner* (also on our website) illustrates, churches have welcomed, included, and engaged people with disabilities in many ways. For example, more than 80 percent of CRCs have made their entrances accessible and more than half offer transportation for people with disabilities.

**God's blessings:** Every success in ministry happens by the grace of God alone. Join me in praising God for what he has been doing in the CRC and in the Reformed Church in America through the Disability Concerns ministries. Pray that we will continue to break barriers of architecture, communication, and attitude so that churches will increasingly become holy communities where everybody belongs and everybody serves.

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