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**Mutuality, Interdependence, and Belonging in the Body of Christ:
A Case Study in Denominational Collaboration in Disability Concerns**

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Abstract

The rights of people with disabilities, responsibilities of church members, and relationships among people with and without disabilities in a church form the foundation for healthy ministry. In 1982, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) mandated a denominational ministry to assist its churches in following a path from rights to responsibilities to relationships. In 2009, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) sought to create a disability ministry of its own that, from its formation, would engage with CRC Disability Concerns. Through a formal partnership between the CRC and RCA, a core philosophy of mutuality and interdependence has emerged in this shared Disability Concerns ministry that has deepened a sense of belonging to one another and to God. Churches living by these principles of mutual hospitality value everyone's participation and are propelled outward, toward ministries marked by missional impact and community engagement.

1. Introduction: A Path from Stranger to Close Friend

Although all churches have people with disabilities in their midst and in their neighborhoods, many people with disabilities feel like strangers within these communities. Just as the Bible calls God's people to welcome the stranger, so it calls churches to be communities in which everybody belongs and everybody serves.

Persons with disabilities often do not "fit" into the normal patterns of social life. They are often marginalized, excluded, made to feel inferior and unwelcome. In this respect as well, they are often treated as "strangers" in the midst of the church. Throughout Scripture, there is a powerful mandate to welcome such strangers. This is a challenge, not to persons with disabilities, but to the church that often struggles to recognize and welcome them as full members of the body of Christ. (*Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities*, Abridged Version, RCA 2008, downloaded January 19, 2019, <https://www.rca.org/resources/spirituality-hospitality-and-disability>)

The mandate falls to the church to engage people with disabilities, not on the people with disabilities to find their own ways to get into the building, participate in the programs, and fit into the church culture.

One way to describe full engagement of people with disabilities in church life is through the language of rights, responsibilities, and relationships. The aim of the basic level of rights of people with disabilities is eliminating discrimination and removing barriers that keep people from participating. Breaking barriers to participation can include, for example, building accessible restrooms, making a way for a person in a wheelchair to get to all parts of the building (without having to be carried up or down steps), providing large-print bulletins and church newsletters, and adding a hearing loop to the sanctuary.

Even more important, people have the right to be treated with respect and given the same or equivalent choices available to everyone else. Congregations that seek to follow the Bible's call with regard to welcoming all people understand that they have responsibilities toward people with disabilities. God calls his people to extend hospitality and welcome to all people. They must acknowledge the rights of people with disabilities among them and in their neighborhoods and seek to break the barriers that hinder their full participation in the life of the community. A focus on rights and responsibilities does not necessarily foster love, which is the heart of true community. When a community moves toward relationships, then friendships, mutual accountability, and mutual vulnerability begin to mark community life (see Thomas Reynolds, 2008, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*). Each person can contribute to the life of the community and receive care from the community. Each person, regardless of ability, is encouraged to discover their spiritual gifts, develop them, and use them for the flourishing of the community. One inclusion consultant describes community as "where you are known, noticed, and missed" (Cara Milne, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/128636757>).

This movement—from rights to responsibilities to relationships that bring people from separation into true community—is a way to characterize the purpose of the CRC and RCA collaboration in disability ministry. Denominational and congregational ministries must follow this three-fold journey to be effective in their work.

2. Origins of the Disability Concerns Collaboration

The ministry of Disability Concerns in the Christian Reformed denomination has no distinct start date, but arose organically out of the churches, beginning with a focus in the late 1970s on creating housing opportunities for people with severe intellectual disabilities. Over time, as the various bodies assigned to this task went about their work, their purview broadened to encompass ministry with people with any and all disabilities.

When Pine Rest Christian Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, decided to phase out institutional care for children with intellectual disability, a number of Christian Reformed families asked the highest governing assembly of the denomination (called *synod*) "to study the need of institutional Christian care for covenant members of the CRC who are...profoundly retarded," to investigate availability of such care in the U.S. and Canada, and "to recommend appropriate action" (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 61, 62). The next year, the CRC Synod reappointed that committee to study "how the churches could be effectively involved in meeting the needs of persons with retardation and their families" (*Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 627). In 1982, that

committee hired an administrator who assisted regional gatherings of churches to identify extant housing options for people with intellectual disabilities and to create them where needed. They also began publication of a newsletter (*Christian Companions*) to connect individuals in the CRC who were interested in ministry with and housing for people with intellectual disabilities. Though it shifted in focus, that Disability Concerns newsletter continues today as *Breaking Barriers*.

CRC Synod 1980, again in response to requests from CRC families, authorized “the Education Department to provide both curriculum materials and training services to help local congregations develop and maintain special church education programs for mentally impaired persons” (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 37). Thus began Friendship Ministries, a separate ministry from Disability Concerns (and from the CRC), but a close partner. Since its inception, a member of the CRC denominational staff has served on the Friendship Ministries board.

In 1985, the CRC Synod broadened its circle of concern from people with intellectual disabilities to people with any and all disabilities by adopting a Resolution on Disabilities, which pledges the CRC to be “the caring community according to I Corinthians 12, paying special attention to the needs and gifts of people with physical, sensory, mental, and emotional impairments,” to make public these needs and gifts, and to break barriers of attitude, communication, and the built environment (*Acts of Synod 1985*, p. 702). Since 1986, the ministry has had a full-time director and other staff and has been called Disability Concerns.

Historic civil rights legislation became law in the United States in 1990 with the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but churches are mostly exempt from compliance. Recognizing the importance of the legislation for the church, CRC Synod 1993 heartily recommended “full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act PL101-336 and its accompanying regulations in all portions of the CRC located in the U.S. and Canada” (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 539). Keeping its eye on the local church, synod argued that these provisions will provide “some incentive and guidance needed by many local CR churches which remain inaccessible to persons with disabilities” and will strengthen “the church’s outreach efforts to those who have traditionally been excluded or made to feel excluded from organized religion” (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 539). As far as we know, the CRC is the first denomination to embrace the ADA in such a wide-reaching way.

The Reformed Church in America made its first official statement regarding people with disabilities in 1975, and since then various commissions within the RCA and a number of General Synods (the RCA’s annual, highest assembly) continued discussion periodically around ministry to people with disabilities and their significant contribution to the life of the church. A more enduring effort began with a grassroots initiative in 2004 that proposed creation of a permanent Commission on Disabilities. The General Synod instead established a Disabilities Task Force that worked for nearly four years to raise awareness and make recommendations to the church. Two of the Disabilities Task Force’s ultimate accomplishments were the General Synod’s adoption of a theological document in 2008 (*Spirituality & Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities*) and the creation of a two-thirds time staff

position in 2009 that would work cooperatively in a partnership with the established Disability Concerns ministry of the CRC. The governing boards of the RCA and CRC entered into a working agreement that committed to helping the RCA to establish its own identity in Disability Concerns while also collaborating with the CRC on resources, trainings, conferences, etc., to improve efficiencies—all while moving toward the long-term goal of a single disability ministry to serve both denominations. Of course, funding for the new RCA staff position was a concern. Greater Palisades Classis (representing more than 30 RCA churches in northern New Jersey) offered \$25,000 in start-up funds, provided the General Synod Council (the RCA's governing board) would match them.

The four-year process to get to this agreement in 2008 proved challenging. Although there never was opposition in principle to the RCA's stated desire to support the full inclusion of people with disabilities, how to do so was problematic. The Disabilities Task Force realized that a staff position was needed to champion a sustained, ongoing effort to have any hope of succeeding, but the key issue was funding. RCA general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson had been clear for several years that he would not agree simply to pass on the costs for any new staff positions or new program costs to RCA membership as an unfunded mandate. As the RCA's governing board, the GSC told the Disabilities Task Force that if it wanted to create a position, it would also need to figure out how to fund it. Eventually that led to conversations with the CRC.

Fortunately, through various explorations that had been broadly ecumenical in nature, Granberg-Michaelson and his CRC counterpart, executive director Peter Borgdorff, enjoyed a successful working relationship. Among other ventures, they served together on the board of directors for Sojourners; and, each played an instrumental role in merging two global Reformed bodies—the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (in which the RCA held membership) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (in which the CRC held membership)—to establish the World Communion of Reformed Churches. A friendship and trust had developed, leading also to conversations about how the RCA and CRC might work collaboratively beyond those wider ecumenical settings. Both leaders strongly encouraged those who reported to them to find ways for the RCA and CRC to work together in a variety of ministry areas. However, given the strong cultures and accountability structures within each denomination, cooperative working relationships—let alone the prospect of ministry partnerships—proved challenging. The lukewarm record of success in prior attempts at collaboration between the RCA and CRC in other ministry areas raised concerns, and the pushback Granberg-Michaelson was receiving from RCA voices about a possible disability venture with the CRC was particularly frustrating.

Given the CRC's long and effective history with its Disability Concerns ministry, Borgdorff initially suggested that the RCA provide financial support for the CRC to work directly with RCA churches. The essence of Borgdorff's proposal could be summarized as, "You sign on with us, give us money, and we'll do the work." The RCA Disabilities Task Force had two major concerns about such an arrangement: identity and governance.

- **Identity:** Would a disability ministry ever take root in RCA if there was no RCA champion, instead leaving it entirely to CRC Disability Concerns to work with RCA congregations? The task force believed most RCA churches would ignore the offer.
- **Governance:** Recent attempts to partner with the CRC in other ministry areas had proved to be difficult for RCA staff, who often felt the CRC held most of the power and leveraged that power to its own benefit. The Disabilities Task Force was insistent on creating an equitable accountability structure between the RCA and CRC.

Granberg-Michaelson and Borgdorff deeply wanted a partnership in disability ministry to work. Frustrated by the pushback from RCA voices, Granberg-Michaelson instructed a handful of RCA staff and the Disabilities Task Force, in essence, to “figure it out.” RCA representatives found conversations with CRC Disability Concerns director Mark Stephenson to be a breath of fresh air—a CRC staff member who was extremely open and receptive to hammering out an agreement that worked for both denominations and that, most importantly, benefited people with disabilities.

In the end, a separate task force composed of CRC and RCA members created an agreement in which the two ministries would have separate staff who would work together in all areas of Disability Concerns ministry except governance and budget. Thanks to the influence of Disabilities Task Force member Judith Broeker, an RCA pastor serving a congregation consisting primarily of people with disabilities within Greater Palisades Classis, Greater Palisades agreed with Broeker to offer \$25,000 in matching funds if the General Synod Council (to whom Granberg-Michaelson was accountable) would create a staff position in Disability Concerns. Initially, the position was conceived to be half-time, but after reconsideration early in 2009, it was revised to be a two-thirds time position. In August 2009, the Rev. Terry DeYoung was hired as the RCA’s first coordinator for Disability Concerns, a position that became full time in 2013. (See Appendix 2 for the CRC-RCA working agreement that was approved in 2008.)

3. The Disability Concerns Collaboration Today

With North American roots dating back to 1628 in New York City, the RCA is the continent’s oldest Protestant denomination with a continuous ministry. The CRC established itself as a separate denomination when it left the RCA in 1857 over issues that no longer seem relevant to most of today’s RCA and CRC members—given that their theology, ecclesiology, and polity are virtually identical. Both denominations are bi-national. Although the RCA has significantly more churches in New York and New Jersey, and the CRC has significantly more churches throughout Canada, the churches of the RCA and CRC largely occupy the same regions of the United States and Canada, and the combined membership of both denominations totals roughly 400,000 people and 2,000 congregations. Over time, longstanding labels, animosities, fears, and desires for remaining separate have diminished considerably. Relationships, conversations, and collaboration have deepened. Denominational efficiencies have been realized and, in a few instances over the past 10 years, shared ministries have demonstrated that they can thrive. None, however, has exceeded the relational and programmatic depth and expansion of the

Disability Concerns partnership. Critical to its success has been the strongly relational, mutual, interdependent nature of disability advocates locally, regionally, and denominationally.

As full-time paid staff, Mark Stephenson (CRC) and Terry DeYoung (RCA) have enjoyed a seamless, harmonious, complementary relationship since launch of the partnership when DeYoung was hired in 2009. Both came to their respective Disability Concerns staff positions as ordained ministers with experience as pastors in congregational settings, and both have personal experience with disability—Stephenson as father of a daughter with severe, multiple disabilities who as an adult now lives in a group home, and DeYoung who lives with a bone condition since birth that affects the movement of all his joints and is visible to anyone who sees him.

Although the theology and polity of the CRC and RCA are similar, these similarities do not necessarily lead to smooth working relationships. Collaboration between ministries can falter for a variety of reasons, including differing goals, culture, and philosophy, and this has proved true in various attempts for RCA and CRC ministries that tried to collaborate. In recent years, the two denominations have found common ground for shared ministry in several areas, including shared medical insurance, disaster response, and disability ministry. The two denominations articulated a sweeping principle for collaboration when the CRC Synod and RCA General Synod met in a combined session in Pella, Iowa, in 2014. The so-called Pella Accord states that the denominations will “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”

In the working agreement that the governing boards of both denominations endorsed in 2008 creating the shared ministry of RCA and CRC Disability Concerns, several potential challenges were overcome:

- **Disagreements about governance, budget, ministry purpose, and the process for setting priorities.** The working agreement provided ministry direction and boundaries for the shared work. Several years after the working agreement was adopted, the Disability Concerns advisory teams from both denominations were melded into one bi-denominational team, who are likewise directed and bounded by the working agreement. As one of members of the combined advisory team commented recently, “Collaboration follows clarity.”
- **Staffing imbalance.** If one of the ministries had a much larger budget and staff than the other, shared work would be more difficult. Budget and staff for both ministries are similar. Because there are just three full-time-equivalent staff to serve about 2,000 CRC and RCA congregations, both ministries must rely on volunteers to accomplish their work.
- **Support from superiors.** If those who supervise the Disability Concerns staff did not support collaboration, then shared work would be difficult. As it is, supervisors have been supportive, guided by the Pella Accord. In addition, these supervisors have allowed

enough freedom for developing specific initiatives that each ministry has the freedom to follow their own denomination's priorities while also meshing with the priorities of the other denomination.

- **Competition.** The ministries can function symbiotically, sharing volunteers rather than competing for them. Similarly, the two ministries do not compete for donors because funding streams are separate.

In addition to outlining specifics related to staffing, budget, lines of accountability, and working as peers, the 2008 working agreement between the governing boards of CRC and RCA spelled out several goals:

This agreement is not seen as an end, but a beginning, with the intention of eventually creating one integrated disability ministry that will serve both denominations.

While respecting the unique needs and resources of each denomination, the disability ministries of both denominations can be more effective by sharing knowledge, support, and resources; by building a broader network of relationships; and by allowing disability ministry to be yet another step in the increasingly fruitful shared ministries between our two denominations. Furthermore, the extensive experience of the CRC in disability ministry will benefit the RCA as they grow their own fledgling ministry—a gift the CRC is honored to give.

Together in purpose, the disability ministries of the CRC and the RCA will, individually and in partnership, help CRC and RCA churches to become hospitable, inclusive, and healthy communities....

Those objectives and more have been realized in 10 years of collaborative ministry. Some of the more obvious joint areas of ministry include:

- Publication of two editions of the *Inclusion Handbook*, with a third edition in the works that may add a third partner organization;
- Publication of the quarterly newsletter *Breaking Barriers* (winner of several awards from the Associated Church Press);
- Parallel denominationally specific websites with limited content that link to a separate but shared website that hosts all CRC-RCA disability resources, as well as a blog with posts from members of both denominations;
- Service to churches through a shared CRC/RCA Mental Health Task Force;
- Denominational and regional training events and learning communities to equip disability advocates and church leaders;

- Sharing of volunteers in various regions;
- Presentation of similar recommendations to their respective annual assemblies, including a synod accessibility recommendation in 2011 and a recommendation approved by the CRC and RCA synods in 2014 to encourage churches to include and engage children and youth who have disabilities as an important part of congregational ministry and denominational youth ministry programs.

Recruiting, equipping, supporting, and replacing volunteer disability advocates remains the biggest challenge for both ministries. At the core of this work is helping these volunteers embrace an identity that is new to many of them: catalysts for change. Disability volunteers may think of themselves as caring individuals. They may be passionate about engaging with (fellow) members of the congregation and community who have disabilities. But most do not consider themselves to be leaders of a movement that is changing church cultures, in the words of the working agreement, “to end the isolation and disconnectedness of persons with disabilities and their families; to nurture the spiritual lives of people with disabilities so that they become professing and active members of their churches; and to encourage the gifts of people with disabilities so that they can serve God fully in their churches.” Many advocates feel isolated themselves. Therefore, CRC and RCA volunteer disability advocates in various regions of the United States and Canada join together quarterly for support and planning, including regional events. In some regions, volunteers and churches from faith traditions beyond the CRC and RCA participate in shared events and programming. Explicitly or implicitly, all the resources, events, and one-on-one interactions are guided by these three principles outlined in the working agreement: ending isolation, nurturing spiritual lives, and encouraging gifts of people who have disabilities.

The success of all these initiatives is fueled by mutual desires to overcome denominational boundaries and support one another in an unfolding, interdependent story that is relationally driven and is larger than themselves. Disability Concerns paid staff have assumed various configurations in 10 years, but time and resources are shared freely, particularly in planning joint gatherings and creating new resources. In the early years of DeYoung’s tenure, only two-thirds of his time was devoted to Disability Concerns (this changed to full time with Disability Concerns in fall 2013). Further, the RCA did not provide specific support staff during DeYoung’s initial years; since then support staff have been available for one to two days a week. CRC staffing for Disability Concerns included Stephenson (full time), a one-quarter-time support person in the CRC’s Grand Rapids, Michigan, office, and a half-time support person in the CRC’s Burlington, Ontario, office. However, in recent years, CRC staffing has fluctuated considerably, sometimes providing no support staff in either Ontario or Michigan, and an individual working out of her home in Indiana for a few hours a week contacting Christian Reformed churches. Throughout various staffing configurations, Disability Concerns staff have freely provided support to the partner denomination.

DeYoung has undergone three major surgeries while serving RCA Disability Concerns, and in each instance Stephenson provided additional coverage to the RCA. Likewise, when Stephenson

was granted a three-month study leave by the CRC in 2018, RCA Disability Concerns supported CRC volunteers and staff and responded to numerous consultation requests from CRC churches.

None of these potential scenarios was spelled out in the 2008 working agreement, but the harmonious, interdependent nature of the working relationship has made such mutual support a natural response to various needs of the partner denomination.

At another level, CRC Disability Concerns (like other congregational service ministries in the CRC) is required in its denominational accountability structure to have an advisory committee that not only advises Stephenson but also has direct access and accountability to the CRC governing board (called the Council of Delegates) and to the CRC Synod. DeYoung served as an ex-officio member of that advisory committee from the time he was hired by the RCA. Eventually, DeYoung established an unofficial advisory group of RCA members that, among other things, met with the CRC Advisory Committee once a year. In 2016, at the direction of RCA general secretary Tom DeVries, RCA Disability Concerns established a more formal group—called a Guiding Coalition—to work collaboratively with the CRC Disability Concerns Advisory Committee as a single body that advises both ministries. According to its current purpose statement:

The CRC Advisory Committee/RCA Guiding Coalition (AC GC) will champion within the RCA and CRC an emphasis on accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves, so that all CRC and RCA churches, agencies, institutions, and assemblies welcome and value people with disabilities and seek to engage their gifts for ministry. Toward this end, the AC GC will support and advise the RCA and CRC DC staff about the direction and priorities of the ministries. As a subcommittee of the CRC Council of Delegates (COD), CRC Advisory Committee members have access to the council by way of specific recommendations affecting the work of CRC Disability Concerns.

This group of about 15 individuals meets four times a year—three times via video conference and once in person. It structures the agenda sequentially around four primary areas: visionary leadership, relationship experiences, programmatic emphases, and accountable management. Vision, then relationships, have primary focus, with program and management of the program secondary. This group reviews and provides input into the strategic plans for the ministries, exploring ways both ministries can work more effectively—together as denominations and with RCA/CRC constituents—and providing feedback to DC staff as requested. Members are recruited from each denomination who have expertise, awareness, and/or lived experience with a disability. Value is placed on diversity of gender, region, ethnicity, professional experience, age, and ability in order to bring diverse experiences and perspectives to the group's work.

4. Key Themes and Values of the Disability Concerns Collaboration

Beyond the shared Reformed, covenantal theology and roots of the RCA and CRC, and the practical work that's planned and executed by Disability Concerns staff and volunteers, these

relationships have provided fruitful soil for conversations about biblical interpretation and theology required for healthy ministry that engages people with and without disabilities. Informed also by the emerging field of disability theology, these conversations have brought us to several themes and values that are foundational to our collaboration.

a) A Biblical Model

In working with churches, equipping volunteers, and producing resources, CRC and RCA Disability Concerns seek to have its work rise out of a biblically inspired “kingdom model” of disability, in contrast to both the medical model and the social model of disability. While the medical model is useful for planning treatments, developing medications, crafting educational strategies, and creating assistive devices that may be helpful to people with various disabilities, the medical model can promote an image of people with disabilities as passive objects in need of help and intervention, and can absolve society’s participation and role in disabling individuals through environmental, communication, and attitudinal barriers.

The social model of disability provides a helpful addition to the medical model by embracing people with disabilities as subjects who have rights and can participate in society on an equal basis with others when barriers to their participation are broken down. In addition, the social model brings critique to a society that engages in personal and systemic ableism. However, the social model of disability assumes that people with disabilities possess the ability to act on their own behalf, illustrated by the disability rights mantra, *Nothing about us without us!*

A kingdom model of disability emphasizes participation in the people of God and in the work of God. Whereas the medical model embraces advances in medical science, adaptive technologies and devices, and medications that can help individuals in their participation in the work of God; and whereas the social model recognizes that societal response to disability can enhance or impede a person’s participation in society and in church and condemns every form of ableism that diminishes individuals living with disability, the kingdom model is based on these five Scriptural principles (numbers 1, 3, 4, and 5 are derived from the [National Council of Churches Committee on Disabilities Equal Access Guide](#)):

1. All people are created in the image of God; therefore, each person has intrinsic value not based on what one can do but on who one is.
“Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image...” (Genesis 1:26).
2. Jesus’ body, the church, has many parts but is ONE; therefore, each member (person) of Christ’s body is essential for a healthy church.
“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ....those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 22).
3. All believers are called by God; therefore, each believer has a mission given by God to fulfill on earth.

“For we are what God has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:10).

4. All believers have spiritual gifts; therefore, each believer receives from God the gifts needed to accomplish this mission.
“Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit...” (1 Corinthians 12:4).
5. All believers are invited to participate in God’s work; therefore, every member of Christ’s body fulfills an essential and unique function in the body.
“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The kingdom model welcomes and celebrates the participation of each person in community, both as a valued member of the body of Christ who belongs in community and as a valued contributor to community life who serves within the community. In contrast to the medical model that focuses on the individual, the kingdom model embraces both individual and community. In contrast to the social model that highlights rights and self-advocacy, the kingdom model emphasizes mutuality and relationships characterized by vulnerability among members of the community and with members of the surrounding neighborhood.

b) Giving and Receiving

Hospitality, mutuality, and interdependence are common in faith-based disability conversations and practices, and they surely have been important to the success of the CRC-RCA partnership as the two denominations join to create space in the body of Christ where everybody belongs and everybody serves. Mutuality and interdependence prove essential in creating more hospitable and welcoming churches. When the world is separated into categories such as “able-bodied” and “disabled,” those who consider themselves among the able-bodied are more likely to obscure themselves from their deep dependency on others. This is true in the world and in the church.

What does it look like when churches welcome and engage people with disabilities? For many with disabilities, contentment and wholeness are experienced when they find their place in a community or congregation marked by acceptance, mutual caring, and love. As articulated in the RCA theological statement (*Spirituality & Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities*), what the church *offers* to people with disabilities is far less important than what the church *receives from* people with disabilities when they are fully welcomed as co-laborers in living out and understanding the complexities of embodying the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. Both *wholeness* and *disability* acquire their full meaning only within the shared contexts of communities of persons.

Miriam Spies, an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada, serves as a CRC Disability Concerns staff member. She also serves on the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee and was present during a June 2018 meeting that welcomed Pope Francis. After

making his remarks to the WCC gathering and offering his blessing, the pope asked to meet with Spies and two others sitting next to her—all people with disabilities.

“My cynical mind thought I was being used as a photo-op with the ‘vulnerable/marginal,’” wrote Spies, who lives with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. “Yet Pope Francis held out his hand with a warm smile, and, after hearing from me, he said, ‘Pray for me.’” The request from Pope Francis stood in stark contrast to typical meetings with church leaders and others who often say to her with a tone of pity, “I’ll pray for you,” suggesting that she must need healing. Spies is bothered by that common reaction because, for the most part, “I love my life with cerebral palsy, and changing that would change who I am” (quotations from “The moment the Pope asked me to pray for him,” https://www.ucobserver.org/columns/2018/06/moment_pope_asked_me_to_pray_for_him/).

The pope’s request of Spies stands in sharp contrast to a common way that many interact with her, a reaction that arises out of pity and makes Spies an “other.” Many other people with visible disabilities experience the same. The RCA document, *Spirituality and Hospitality*, relies on the Matthew 25:31-46 motif of “welcoming the stranger” to describe the human tendency to view people with disabilities as strangers—even alien—to more able-bodied people. In this view, people with disabilities often confront and challenge an able-bodied church with feelings of discomfort or loss, which fuels a sometimes-unconscious desire to keep people with disabilities at arm’s length, or as second-class citizens.

The natural human tendency is to try to make such strangeness more manageable. One way this happens is by objectifying and categorizing people with disabilities. Far too often, the person becomes defined by their disability: “Jack is blind.” “Maggie has Down syndrome.” “Mike is mentally ill.” “Susan is a paraplegic.” These labels then acquire a kind of defining power that shapes the way others interact with them. What seems most obvious (the disability) to more able-bodied people who may not know the person well becomes the only thing to be noted about a person. In so doing, the church can lose sight of the manifold unique ways in which each person is gifted and called by God to his or her unique place in the body of Christ.

The unsettling challenge of Matthew 25 developed in the RCA document equates this view of people with disabilities as strangers the church is seeking to make more manageable. By dividing the world into the “able-bodied” and the “disabled,” those who see themselves as “able-bodied” may be tempted to reassure themselves of their “normalcy,” and obscure from themselves their deep dependency upon others in society as a whole—and more importantly, within the body of Christ.

Insofar as persons with disabilities are strangers in the midst of the church (that is, insofar as they embody what may seem alien to their more able-bodied neighbors), they also represent—as all strangers do—the presence of Jesus in the midst of the church. The more the church grows in its capacity to welcome such persons who are strangers, the more deeply the church will welcome and serve Jesus. In the end, welcoming whatever it is that may threaten us about other humans becomes an exercise in welcoming the One who seeks to transform us.

Christine D. Pohl, writing about hospitality and trust, highlights the importance of identity when welcoming the stranger and the tension that arises when the stranger becomes participant in the community:

In my hospitality research, one thing I noticed was that communities that are best at welcoming people are communities that know who they are. They have a defined identity. They have something to offer. There's a space for welcome. There's a space and identity to welcome people into, and it's a place that people want to be welcomed into. But if you welcome a number of people substantially different from the community, it's not just the people who are welcomed that are changed but also the community. That's a permanent tension.

You see it in the biblical text in discussions about covenant. We worship a God who calls us to love the stranger and to live in a way that's faithful to God's claim on our lives. Well, every stranger is not going to exactly line up with that, so negotiating that tension is extremely challenging for communities, and yet it's necessary. For a community to be sustained, it needs practices like promising and truthfulness, which essentially make up trust, without which you can't do anything together. But nurturing those practices in a large setting, even in a communal setting that's fraying, is challenging, because it means you have to slowly reweave it. You have to prove yourself trustworthy by keeping promises, by telling the truth, by living truthfully, by living hospitably.

We build trust by being true to our word, by holding on to one another, by staying at the table long enough to understand the differences (February 16, 2019, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/christine-d-pohl-hospitality-trust-and-reweaving-fabric-community>).

As the stranger becomes part of the community, that person ceases to be "stranger," and the community changes through her participation. Through the lens of CRC/RCA Disability Concerns, the two denominations have grown closer to wholeness by not seeing the sister denomination as "strange" or "other." Instead, each is growing by gaining a deeper understanding of its relative strengths and, by comparison, its shortcomings.

c) Focus on Belonging

Just as the two Disability Concerns ministries have discovered beautiful gifts within the partner denomination's ministry and context, each has served as a complement to the other. Confessionally speaking, the Heidelberg Catechism is cherished and foundational to each denomination's theology, identity, and spiritual formation. The Heidelberg's opening question asks, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The answer begins, "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...." In many respects, an extension of that identity in Christ is that the RCA and CRC also belong to each other.

In a similar way that the RCA and CRC find shared identity through a shared confession, so also the two denominations are discovering a deeper shared identity in a common mission of engaging people with disabilities in ministry. The CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries share a tagline: “Everybody belongs, everybody serves.” Although the tagline speaks to barriers of communication and built environment, it is intended to speak most directly to barriers of attitude. Whether in the CRC or the RCA, the work is the same.

People can comprehend barriers of built environment most readily—a person who uses a wheelchair cannot get into a building that has steps unless they are carried in. Barriers of communication also can be understood readily—a person who needs a hearing loop to hear what is happening will not be able to participate in a worship service. People may resist the cost to reducing these barriers, or they may argue that breaking these barriers is unnecessary because only a minority of people will need the accommodations. Even though they may resist changing their buildings or communications, most people will understand that various features of a built environment and of communications can include or exclude people with disabilities.

People have a more challenging time understanding attitudinal barriers, because understanding these barriers requires empathy for the experiences of people who live with disabilities. Even if one does not live with a disability, one will understand how stairs and the lack of a hearing loop will be barriers for people with physical and hearing impairments. But if one does not live with a disability, listen to the stories of people who live with disabilities, or develop friendships with people with disabilities, it will be difficult to comprehend attitudinal barriers.

As organizations focused on helping churches in their ministry with people who have disabilities, CRC and RCA Disability Concerns present a negative challenge and a positive challenge to congregations. Negatively, by declaring that everybody belongs and everybody serves, the tagline implies that many people with disabilities do not feel a sense of belonging in church communities, nor have they been invited to serve by using their skills and gifts in service within that community. Positively, the tagline challenges congregations to ask themselves what belonging means and whether those dimensions of belonging stretch out to the people with disabilities among them. Likewise, the tagline challenges congregations to see that each person with a disability comes with skills, abilities, and gifts that he or she can share with the community, but the community must be willing to allow them to engage in the community in that way.

5. Key Learnings and Observations

RCA and CRC Disability Concerns are discovering and helping their respective denominations discover that ministry can be accomplished together. Embracing a vision for all people, whether or not they live with disabilities, calls for dramatic culture change within congregations.

- a) Go Farther Together

The everyday experience of people with disabilities is marked by figuring out how to fit in to a culture that largely assumes all people are able to function independently. However, the lived experience of people with disabilities is often shaped by alliances (or lack thereof) with a range of people, including relationships that may be disability-specific (e.g. caregivers, personal assistants, interpreters, service providers) and non-disability-specific (e.g., co-workers, neighbors, friends). These relationships grow and deepen over time—as do movements that effect lasting change and transformation within and between denominations. Negotiation and a willingness to compromise are essential. When investing in a long-term process of building relationships, characteristics such as trust, consistency, accountability, and recognition are important. As an African saying goes, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

b) Embrace Slow Love

Relationships based on mutuality, grounded in God’s love, take time—an approach consistent with a theme of John Swinton’s book (2016), *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship*. We live in a world with a 24-hour news cycle that’s always on the go, where being busy is considered a badge of honor. Just keeping up with friends who post daily on social media feeds is exhausting. We feel like our lives are a race against the clock, where time is a commodity that we need to maximize by doing as much as we possibly can.

The focus on always *doing* spills over into how people in the church think about what it means to be disciples of Jesus. For some, discipleship becomes primarily what *we* do instead what the *Holy Spirit* wants to do in us when we allow time and space for the Spirit’s work. The reality is, the busier we are, the less hospitable we become—to God’s Spirit and to others. With our growing to-do lists, we don’t have time for others, or for the Other, which results in feelings of guilt and anxiety. Our emphasis on speed and time can prevent us from noticing the needs of others.

People with disabilities are one casualty of such a fast pace in life, especially those whose impairments require approaching time differently. Consider Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, when the priest and Levite don’t have time to be a neighbor to the person who has been robbed, beaten, and left to die on the side of the road. But a Samaritan—a suspicious outsider to Jesus’ audience—goes to great lengths to show tangible concern, taking time to help and offering both personal and financial hospitality.

Nearly 40 years ago, in *Three Mile an Hour God*, Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama noted that the average speed at which a human being walks is 3 miles per hour. Jesus did much of his ministry while walking—traveling from place to place—and he seldom seemed to be in a rush. But how many people today seem to carry on their lives at a much brisker pace—for example, walking 6 miles per hour—in hopes that somehow they can keep up with the busyness of life? If that is the case, are we following Jesus, or is Jesus trying to keep up with us?

As Swinton says, “The reality is, when time is love, speed equals less of it. The love of God is inexorably slow.” As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The fruit of the Spirit does not grow in us by rushing around. In fact, none of the fruit listed in Galatians implies hurry.

Or, as Jesus says in Matthew 11, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” It is not that Jesus acts gently; Jesus is gentle. God’s time not only contains gentleness; it is gentle. When we slow down and pay attention, we enter God’s time, and we encounter one another differently. The care we show to one another is done best when we live in God’s time and follow God’s pace.

Aspects of time, pace, patience, and gentleness apply to all relationships, but they’re particularly obvious among people with disabilities. As CRC and RCA Disability Concerns have worked together these past 10 years and collaborated in projects and theoretical work with other individuals and organizations engaged in disability, theology, and ministry, we have learned that the very nature of our work lends itself to collaboration. The approach to slow love; a readiness to adjust expectations; the work of advocating against ableism and breaking barriers to participation of people with disabilities in faith communities; the outside-the-box thinking required by people with disabilities and those who support them in order to participate; the humility, flexibility, and empathy required to engage in accommodation—all these factors contribute to a fertile ecology among various religious organizations dedicated to disability and ministry that results in a hospitable, collaborative culture.

c) Missional Impact and Community Engagement

Working together, our mission is to help the faith communities of both denominations become “accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves.” Just as churches grow in health when members with and without disabilities engage in ministry together, so organizations that engage in disability ministry improve their effectiveness when they work together. In preparation for writing this paper we solicited comments from a number of people engaged in disability ministry on a local or national level.

In a private email response to the authors of this paper, author and professor Jeff McNair wrote that among the multiple benefits of collaboration in disability ministry is “the potential for churches to provide community integration to people with disabilities. Obviously, there are the benefits of understanding a biblical perspective on life and the incredible work of Jesus, but particularly to secular and a broad swath of religious groups, the church has the potential to invite people to friendship. Friendship then leads to advocacy. Through advocacy people benefit from social networks and the benefits of having a social network. This is still largely an unrealized potential, but hopefully we will continue to grow in ministry maturity as the Christian church; and as the culture within the church changes, this potential for truly loving one’s neighbor will become a reality.” In addition, “ministry to persons with intellectual disabilities brought these very different theological perspectives together over work with folks with disabilities. The perspective of the adults with intellectual disabilities who were being

served was so beautiful. They just wanted to go to a place where they were loved, and they shamed the denominational leadership with the love they demonstrated across denominations. It wasn't like they were in any way seeking to provide leadership in interdenominational cooperation, but just the way they lived led to a level of cooperation."

d) Principles of Accommodation and Best Practices for Collaboration

Ministry with, for, and by people with disabilities lends itself to shared ministry and collaboration in ways that become almost second nature when compared to other areas of ministry, including interfaith contexts.

- Those involved in engaging others in such a ministry—people with and without disabilities—grow accustomed to making accommodations in everyday life and in community and church contexts. Accommodating other faith traditions happens organically out of life practices.
- People with disabilities become predisposed to overcoming exclusion out of a desire for community and belonging. Responses of openness to receiving from others are learned and then embraced more naturally without suspicion or pre-conditions.
- Experience teaches the benefit of welcoming others who are different, both by those seeking to belong and needing accommodations and by those individuals and existing groups who are making the accommodations. When the benefits of welcome and sharing power have been experienced already, a greater openness to repeating the accommodation has a multiplying effect.

Beyond the benefits of those who are predisposed or have learned the benefits of inclusion from experience, CRC and RCA Disability Concerns have discovered several principles and practices that have enhanced our shared work and may support other groups exploring collaboration in ministry apart from people with disabilities:

- Decide in advance the broad structure, governance, budget, accountability, and ministry purpose for working together. A commitment from and support of senior leadership is an essential foundation. A written framework, negotiated and agreed to by both parties, can still leave room for growth and long-term purpose. Clarity leads to greater collaboration.
- Work toward a common vision for ministry that does not force conformity and includes areas that are greater than either party can accomplish on its own.
- Staff should approach one another with a "want to" attitude in collaboration. A passion for collaboration that does not consider giving up or surrendering to be an option will be crucial to figuring it out together when a problem arises or the future seems uncertain.

- Although collaboration may be simpler if one or both ministries are starting from scratch, shared commitment to the vision and humble openness to learn from one another will provide a firmer foundation for shared work. Resist anything that feels like competition. Approach one another with flexibility, focus on building relationships with each other, and seek to share wisdom in finding ways to collaborate.
- Don't rush a mutual understanding or approach, but take time to understand one another and work toward a symbiotic relationship that leverages the strengths of each partner. Meet regularly for planning purposes and invite one another into spaces of shared ministry. Relational harmony and mutual admiration surely are assets, but they're only one aspect of successful collaboration.
- In developing volunteer networks to support the collaboration, focus on building relationships that communicate an intention to journeying with them for the long term. In time, influence will follow, allowing leaders to move from "why" to the "how" of ministry as volunteers commit to deeper engagement.

6. Summary and Opportunities for Further Study

A kingdom model of disability honors the rights of persons with disabilities in a church community, calls on the members of that church to turn from their ableism and work intentionally to engage all members of the community in the full life of the community, and calls on everyone to engage in mutually vulnerable relationships so that all grow together in their love for God and engagement in God's mission. Through a formal partnership between the CRC and RCA Disability Concerns ministries, a core philosophy of mutuality and interdependence has emerged that has deepened a sense of belonging to one another and to God. The shared mission of these two ministries models and provides a lively means to engage the churches of their two denominations in embracing ministry with all people, whether or not they live with disabilities.

In a private email to the authors, Paul Leichty, former director of ADN (originally Anabaptist Disability Network) and founder of the Congregational Accessibility Network, describes the benefits of partnership in disability ministry in describing the now-defunct Committee on Disabilities (COD) of the National Council of Churches. "Twenty years ago, the benefits of networking with other denominations, particularly through COD, were numerous. It seemed important to share the resources being developed so that as denominational ministries for disabilities advocacy were shrinking or even going out of existence, the resources that remained were available to any congregation that needed them. COD was also important as a mutual support system for ongoing advocacy within each of our denominations."

The COD focused on denominational connection and denominational collaboration. Although the influence and budgets of the denominations comprising the National Council of Churches has declined, collaboration among various disability ministries has increased dramatically. In a private email message to the authors of this paper, the Rev. William Gaventa, who has been

active in disability ministry for nearly 50 years, reports that he is aware of multiple partnerships in disability ministry. Besides the close partnership between the CRC and RCA, Gaventa says that various parachurch organizations such as Joni and Friends, Hope Haven, Young Life Capernaum, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, CLC Network, and Christian Horizons engage in a variety of connections with each other and with churches of different denominations. A variety of faith networks engage in public policy in the United States through the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Collaboration. Gaventa also reports that the four major Jewish denominations have collaborated extensively in the past few years on national projects such as the Jewish Disability Awareness month, on resources, and on training in seminaries. Some of that has been encouraged and supported through the Ruderman Family Foundation in Boston. Interdenominational and interfaith collaboration also happens through the Religion and Spirituality division of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The Collaborative on Faith and Disability has begun a variety of collaborative projects and also a volunteer membership organization of organizations, institutions, and individuals. The Summer Institute on Theology and Disability provides a forum for theological reflection on the intersection of faith and disability that draws attendees each year from many Christian and other faith traditions.

Over the last 10 years, the resources available to churches have multiplied. Although this paper has focused on the cooperation between two Reformed denominations, a fruitful area for study would be to examine these collaborations among denominations and organizations from various faith traditions. What is the connection between the multiplication of resources for faith communities and the increased collaboration among disability ministries? Is the increase of collaboration and increase of resources coincidence, or has there been some causation?

In a private email to the authors, Steve Nyenhuis, who leads a church-based ministry with people intellectual disabilities in Anaheim, California, urged us to shift our focus from how collaboration benefits denominations and faith-based organizations, to how people with disabilities have benefited as a result of collaborations such as ours. Nyenhuis makes an excellent point, one that the authors of this paper affirm. Although those invested in the collaboration of CRC and RCA Disability Concerns are grateful for the success of the partnership, the impact on churches that have become more focused on the missional implications of God's loving embrace of all people—with and without disabilities—is where the attention belongs.

Appendices

Appendix 1

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON A DISABILITIES MINISTRY INITIATIVE FOR THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

The 2004 General Synod, in response to overtures from the Classes of Chicago, Greater Palisades, and Illiana requesting the establishment of a denominational commission on disabilities, took the following action:

To instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a special three-year task force on disabilities to assess Reformed Church in America policies and practices related to ministry to and with disabled persons and their families; and further,

to offer advice and direction to the General Synod regarding ministry to and with disabled persons and their families; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the General Synod Council, to prepare changes in the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, that will establish a commission on disabilities that will equip congregations to embrace, include, and value all persons with disabilities, together with their families, for report to the 2005 General Synod (*MGS 2004*, R-89, p. 324).

In February 2007, the Task Force on Disabilities, as part of its mandate from General Synod, offered to the General Synod and the General Synod Council a lengthy report on “People with Disabilities, their Families, and the Church.” That report, after surveying the continuing, and growing, need before the church connected to ministry with and for persons with disabilities and their families—and the few resources and support the RCA has been able to offer over the years—came to this conclusion, as expressed in its single recommendation:

To create a new denominational position (part-time, preferably half-time) focused on ministry with, for, and to persons with disabilities, their families and their congregations; and further,

to establish this position prior to the June 2008 termination of the current task force; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to develop an ongoing funding plan for this position, including acceptance of the offer of the Classis of Greater Palisades to provide \$25,000 in matching funds for this position over a two-year period and with the understanding that the person hired for this position would be expected to seek a portion of the ongoing funding to continue this position.

The General Synod Council, in reviewing this report in March 2007, took the following action, reflected in its minutes:

Disabilities Task Force: The GSC reviewed the report from the GSC Task Force on Disabilities. The task force is scheduled to complete its work in 2008. The GSC appreciates the level of committed work and invested time that this task force demonstrated. The GSC directed the moderator to develop a draft Ends Policy regarding disabilities. Upon recommendation of its moderator, the GSC voted: “To direct the general secretary to investigate possible partnerships with one or more other denominations to support program initiatives for, by, and with persons with disabilities.”

The general secretary directed staff—specifically, Jeffrey Japinga, who had worked with and supported the task force since its inception, and Kirsty DePree, coordinator for discipleship—to initiate conversations with other denominations, and specifically, with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), in light of its twenty-five-year-old ministry in this area and the ongoing working relationships that continue to be developed with the CRC. GSC staff held a series of meetings with staff of the CRC’s Office of Disability Concerns, exploring a variety of means and possible partnerships that would allow for significant ministry within the RCA and for RCA congregations. Staff also continued to seek and receive input from the task force during the course of these conversations.

At its March 2008 meeting, the GSC asked that staff initiate a ministry with and for persons with disabilities in keeping with its ends policy on discipleship and affirmed the strategy of partnership with the CRC.

To carry out the plan as stated, the RCA will require intentional effort and commitment, beginning with a champion to establish this ministry—a visible, one-of-its-own person to be the face of the program and to wave the flag on its behalf and on behalf of persons with disabilities and their families, both with RCA congregations and with our own staff. Starting such an effort from scratch, however, would fail to exercise appropriate stewardship both of the financial resources currently available in the RCA and the excellent work in this area already being done by sister denominations from which we can benefit.

The ministry plan, beginning in FY2009, requires the establishment of an RCA ministry to, with, and for persons with disabilities and their families led by a new, part-time staff person, and the concurrent establishment of a working partnership with the Office of Disability Concerns of the CRC.

While identifying more specific goals, objectives, and measurable data for this new initiative would be part of the work of the new office, there are three areas in which the RCA would benefit from the outset through a partnership with the CRC:

- *Resources.* Resources for congregations are absolutely urgent in this ministry, offering both the guidance and skills often necessary for congregational confidence and action. Resource development and communication will be essential to success. These resources, however, are not and need not be denominationally specific (even if they are now in current forms). For example, most of the content of the CRC’s Office of Disability Concerns newsletter could be used in a newsletter directed to the RCA, and indeed, it would be relatively simple for the two offices to develop a joint newsletter. Curriculum material is also able to be widely used and shared, along with the basic knowledge of people and programs.
- *Training.* Research clearly shows that a congregation with one or more persons who have received specific training in disability ministry will significantly increase the

probability that this ministry will be both effective and long-term. Here again, reinvention of the wheel isn't necessary, and cooperation could produce economies of scale. The RCA's new staff person, both initially and in an ongoing way, could be trained by the CRC's experienced staff person, and the possibility of joint training for congregational volunteers and advocates for this ministry could benefit the congregations of both denominations.

- *Office space.* There is significant merit in housing a part-time RCA staff person in disability ministries primarily at the CRC office, alongside CRC disability staff, rather than at the RCA offices. It would foster cooperation, build synergy between the two programs, allow for shared administrative support, and decrease the sense of isolation. (From all accounts, work with and for persons with disabilities is unique to the point of being lonely work, even when a staff person is surrounded by colleagues in other ministries.) If the RCA staff person were to be housed in CRC office space, the CRC would be compensated by the RCA at regular rates for space and staff support.

Why not simply one ministry for both churches? Beginning this work with a unique and denominationally dedicated RCA staff person would avoid the structural and governance issues that would arise in immediately attempting to form a single, common ministry that would serve both denominations. Since the Christian Reformed Church already has a fully functioning, fully funded, denominationally-named and specific ministry, with an in-place governing board, there were key questions about 1) how a single, common ministry would be governed without exacting a significant sense of loss within the CRC of identity—giving up denominational references in its name, for example, and 2) how to navigate partnership issues where one participant (the RCA) would be coming on board clearly as a junior partner, both financially and in experience. In a model where the respective ministry offices remained independent structurally, the CRC could retain its current name, structure, and practice. The RCA could similarly establish its own identity, passion, and energy for this ministry, while holding clear lines of accountability. Once the RCA has a clearer sense of its own identity and ability in this ministry work, both denominations would be in a stronger position to talk about the possibility of a single, common structure for ministry.

The RCA staff person would be accountable to the RCA structure alone, likely to Kirsty DePree, the coordinator for discipleship. However, particular areas of cooperation between the RCA and CRC would be specified (see the “working agreement” section for the proposed partnership agreement), and the staff persons in each denomination expected and held accountable for making this partnership work.

The annual estimated budget of this plan/strategy would be approximately \$50,000, whether the structure was a mixed independent-partner agreement (as is being proposed) or a full partnership. Since the General Synod clearly asked the task force to look at possible work in disability ministry, and the GSC supported this direction at its March 2008 meeting, in response to a report from the task force, the General Synod Council will ask the General Synod to support this work through an annual assessment. The amount of that assessment is being reduced by

\$12,500 per year for two years, through the generous offer of a two-year, matching-fund grant from the Classis of Greater Palisades. The proposed assessment amount will be voted on by the General Synod separately, when it considers all assessments.

As the RCA takes its first steps toward the vision for disability ministry set out by its task force, it will benefit most from a combination of uniquely held responsibility and some cooperative work with the CRC. The RCA should capitalize on both the momentum created from the task force and on the CRC's willingness to share its experience and wisdom.

Appendix 2

A WORKING AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA AND THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA IN A MINISTRY TO, WITH, AND FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Introduction

Since 1982, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has supported a ministry with and for people with disabilities to assist the denomination and its member churches "to include all of God's people in their life and ministry so that all members know that they belong and can use their gifts fully." In 2007 the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), through its staff, initiated conversation with the CRC about a possible partnership in disability ministry. At that time, the RCA had no formal structure for ministry with or for persons with disabilities, but recognized a growing demand for such a ministry and recognized the expertise already at work in the CRC.

Fruitful conversations followed. At their core, these conversations revealed a ministry where key opportunities and essential actions were common across denominational lines. More importantly, it showed clearly that cooperative efforts could yield benefits for both denominations and especially for the congregations of our denominations committed to ministry with and for persons with disabilities. Thus, our two denominations enter into this partnership agreement in hopes of sharing, where appropriate and most beneficial, aspects of our ministry of inclusion of people with disabilities, while holding separate those particular areas where unique identity has benefit. This agreement is not seen as an end, but a beginning, with the intention of eventually creating one integrated disability ministry that will serve both denominations.

While respecting the unique needs and resources of each denomination, the disability ministries of both denominations can be more effective by sharing knowledge, support, and resources; by building a broader network of relationships; and by allowing disability ministry to be yet another step in the increasingly fruitful shared ministries between our two denominations. Furthermore, the extensive experience of the CRC in disability ministry will benefit the RCA as they grow their own fledgling ministry—a gift the CRC is honored to give.

Ministry Purpose

Together in purpose, the disability ministries of the CRC and the RCA will, individually and in partnership, help CRC and RCA churches to become hospitable, inclusive, and healthy communities that intentionally seek:

- To end the isolation and disconnectedness of persons with disabilities and their families;
- To nurture the spiritual lives of people with disabilities so that they become professing and active members of their churches; and
- To encourage the gifts of people with disabilities so that they can serve God fully in their churches.

Structure, Governance, and Budget

Each ministry will have its own unique name. Christian Reformed Disability Concerns will retain the identity, in name and in practice, that it has built over the past twenty-five years. The RCA will seek to build a new identity. The structure, governance, and budget of the RCA disability ministry and CRC disability ministry will remain separate. The staff and volunteers of each ministry will be accountable to the structures established within their respective denominations. Budgets, donations, and other income would be separate. Costs for shared aspects of ministry would be divided between the CRC and RCA ministries as appropriate.

Staff and Programming

The leaders of the CRC and RCA disability ministries would have a peer relationship, meeting together as often as necessary in order to benefit from and facilitate shared ministry. For the first three years of this partnership, the RCA staff person will lease office space adjacent to the director of CRC Disability Concerns in the CRC denominational building. Programming priorities within the respective denominations will be established separately by the leaders of disability ministry for each denomination. However, this partnership agreement also assumes and expects cooperative work in the following areas: newsletter, website, training/conferences, and web and print resources for use by congregations. Costs for shared aspects of ministry would be divided between the CRC and RCA ministries as appropriate. Furthermore, both parties commit themselves to early communication of any concerns related to the actions of the other party or to the partnership agreement itself, and to search for solutions that affirm the ministry and personnel of each denomination.

Review

This ministry agreement will be reviewed yearly. Both parties agree to consult the other concerning any strategic changes they are considering that might have impact on the ministry of the other party or on the partnership agreement. If adjustments to the agreement are needed, proposed changes will be brought to the CRC Board of Trustees and the RCA General Synod Council. A major review will take place after year three, with the goal that the ministries will share more deeply in ministry as we continue this relationship.

Appendix 3

RCA DISABILITIES SUMMARY OF GENERAL SYNOD ACTIONS/REPORTS 2004–2011*

2004 highlights

With overtures from three classes (Chicago, Greater Palisades, Illiana), General Synod approves creation of a three-year Task Force on Disabilities and instructs Commission on Church Order to prepare changes to *Book of Church Order* that will establish Commission on Disabilities.

2005 highlights

- GSC establishes Task Force on Disabilities (Louise Shumaker, Emily Blauw, Judith Broeker, Marti Bultman, Randy Smit, David Van Ningen, Jeff Japinga).
- General Synod votes not to establish a Commission on Disabilities.

2006 highlights

- General Synod instructs GSC, in consultation with Task Force on Disabilities, to identify resources to assist churches in becoming handicapped accessible.
- Task Force on Disabilities continues to enhance RCA website resources for congregations.

2007 highlights

- GSC receives report from Task Force on Disabilities that calls for creating a part-time staff position for disability ministry and accepting a two-year \$25,000 matching grant from Greater Palisades Classis to assist with funding new staff position.
- GSC affirms Task Force on Disabilities recommendation to investigate possible partnerships with one or more other denominations for disability ministry and begins development of “ends policy” regarding disabilities.

2008 highlights

- GSC approves recommendation to create half-time staff position for disability ministry, combining special assessment with Greater Palisades Classis start-up grant.
- General Synod approves Commission on Theology paper, “[Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities.](#)”
- General Synod approves special assessment for disability ministry (23 cents per confessing member), to be used with \$25,000 start-up grant from Greater Palisades Classis.

2009 highlights

- General Synod receives report on delay in hiring staff person due to concerns about insufficient funding to ensure success of new position.
- Former task force member Marti Bultman—serving as RCA’s volunteer liaison with CRC Office of Disability Concerns on interim basis—makes disability report to General Synod.

Terry DeYoung is hired at two-thirds time to serve as RCA coordinator for Disability Concerns.

2010 highlights

- With completion of \$25,000 start-up grant from Greater Palisades Classis, General Synod approves assessment to cover full costs of disability ministry (60 cents per confessing member). In future years, disabilities assessment becomes regular part of GSC budget.
- First report is given to General Synod since hiring Terry DeYoung to staff RCA Office of Disability Concerns at two-thirds time.

2011 highlights

- GSC adopts policy to provide reasonable accommodations for all General Synod meetings and encourages other denominational bodies to do the same; CRC Synod adopts identical policy.
- GSC report to General Synod adds disabilities “ends, sub-ends, and goals” (Carver Policy Governance language used by GSC), matching format followed by all GSC ministries.

* *Minutes of the General Synod, RCA (2004–2011)*