

# BreakingBarriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves

## The Instinctive Language of Belonging

by Thomas Boogaart

Western Theological Seminary, Holland MI

*(Editor's note: At Friendship House, six young adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities live in community with seminarians as roommates, growing in independent-living skills, holding down jobs, and participating meaningfully in the larger community. According to director Melissa Conner, friend residents report great gains in social skills and self-esteem, while seminarians report a newfound depth of theological insight coupled with a greater ability to serve the pastoral needs of congregations and agencies.)*

The current academic year represents the first time a friend resident, Amanda Kragt, is fully participating in a seminary class, Hebrew.

At Western Seminary, Hebrew is taught interactively with plastic swords and spears, stuffed animals (both clean and unclean), dolls, sticks, stones, playhouses, various foods, etc. Students see, touch, taste, and smell words. They also hear the words. We give them commands in

Hebrew, and the students respond by following the command.

Amanda is enthusiastic about learning and loves languages. With our interactive approach, I thought that we could accommodate her. What I did not realize at the time was how much she would

contribute to everyone's learning, how the classroom would become a place where the societal barriers between people of various abilities would temporarily break down.



Amanda Kragt (far right) is enthusiastic about learning and loves languages.

In class one day I was giving commands. Without thinking much about it, I said to the students in Hebrew, "Stand on your chair," and as soon as I said it I realized that Amanda,

who is a little unsteady on her feet, might fall. Before I could do anything, the students on her left and on her right took her hand, helped her stand on her chair, and then later helped her down.

I was deeply moved by this simple gesture. Neither the students nor Amanda thought much of it. They did it naturally, instinctively. To me this was a sacramental moment, a foreshadowing of the community that Jesus has called us to be—a community in which the barriers dividing people and the resulting prejudices have broken down.

My experience with Amanda in the classroom has me thinking more broadly about barriers in theological education. Who do we allow in? What are the criteria? What constitutes a rich learning environment? Amanda's presence and that of the Friendship House are challenging all of us to reflect more deeply on what it means to be the community Jesus desires us to be.

### Themes

**Spring 2015—A Friendship group's impact.** In this issue, people describe how their church involved adults from a Friendship group (or similar ministry with people who have intellectual disabilities) in the broader life of their congregation.

**Summer 2015—College students with disabilities.** How are CRC and RCA college students with disabilities being engaged to grow in their faith and discipleship? **By April 10,** please send us a note describing your experience.

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# Relationships Blossom in Friendship

**T**hank you to the many people who responded to *Breaking Barriers'* request for stories about the ways people in their Friendship groups are involved in their churches. Clara DeRonde summed it up well: "Friendship is not a ministry to people who have disabilities. Rather, it is a ministry with them. Together we learn about the Bible so we can know about and feel God's love, and we grow in care, compassion, and what it means to be members of God's family. We care for each other. We laugh together. We cry together. We pray together. We sing together. Some who cannot use words speak with their incredible hugs and beautiful gestures. Yes, God has richly blessed us all through the relationships that have blossomed through the Friendship groups."

Here are some highlights of the blessings God is pouring out through these relationships.

- If you ask anyone in our church to make a list of the good things happening at the Racine CRC I can say with confidence that Friendship would be on everyone's list. Coffee Break, Men's Life, and Friendship Group Bible studies all meet on Thursday night, and they begin by sharing a meal together, laughing, joking, and interacting wonderfully. Several who have been introduced to the church after being invited to Friendship group by a friend have since become members and now participate in worship every Sunday. One young man started Friendship group a year ago in September, joined the church in January, and was ushering by spring. This past December, Friendship group led a Christmas service for the second time—reading Scripture, leading in singing and prayer, and presenting special music. It was one of the most lively and animated services our church has experienced. The service was filled with spontaneous applause and lots of "Amen's"!

—Pamela Vallejos, Racine CRC, Racine WI

- People from most of the churches in Orange City IA participate in the Friendship group there. First



Friendship groups join together to lead a combined worship service in Willmar MN.

Reformed Church in Orange City is a longtime supporter of Friendship and several friends volunteer at church functions such as washing dishes, serving as greeters, assembling bulletins, and attending adult Sunday school. One friend participated on a church mission trip to Nebraska. Some of the friends from the Orange City group participate at First Reformed in Maurice by providing leadership in adult Sunday School classes—reading discussion questions and inviting people to pray—and participating in worship and other congregational celebrations.

—Dan DeVries, First Reformed Church, Maurice IA

- Two Friendship groups meet at Willmar CRC on different nights. Some of the caregivers who assist the friends in their homes attend Friendship group, which means they also can hear God's Word, participate, and interact—and in some cases have become Friendship group mentors. Some who started at Friendship group now call Willmar CRC their church. Each fall churches in the Willmar area have a

combined worship for Disability Awareness Sunday during which the friends serve as the praise team. Friendship is a ministry to help people come to know and love God.

—Clara DeRonde, Willmar CRC, Willmar MN

- South Grandville CRC now has 16 professing members who got involved first in Friendship. Several more friends attend Sunday worship regularly. They know that South Grandville is their church and are fully incorporated into worship and the social aspects of the church. These friends are not directed to sit in one special place but choose to worship in all areas of the sanctuary. Two of them function as greeters, and another serves as a Children's Worship volunteer. Each year our Friendship group hosts our church's Wednesday night supper; they serve and clean up willingly.

—Molli Brunsting, South Grandville CRC, Grandville MI



- Friends participate in worship each Advent by lighting the candles. We began this tradition several years ago when the Advent planning committee happened to be meeting on the same night as the Friendship group. Hearing their joyful songs led us to ask members of Friendship to be our candle lighters on the Advent Sundays. It has become so important for our friends that we could never imagine not having them fill this vital liturgical act.

—Mark Verbruggen, First CRC, Sioux Center IA



Friends participate in worship each Advent by lighting the candles.

- Besides regular gatherings of God's Friends Forever (GFF), a ministry involving people with and without intellectual disabilities, we have Valentine's Day dinner/dances. About 130 friends, caregivers, family, and congregational members attended our last event. Afterwards, congregation members who are not part of GFF told me how much participation meant to them. "I can't remember a time when I've witnessed such pure joy!" "This is what the church is meant to be. There is such an unconditional acceptance of each other,

and such a deep desire to help each other." "Thank you for inviting me to be a part of something so beautiful." Through our friends at GFF, God reminds us that those often considered by the world to be last shall be first in his kingdom.

—Don Poest, Brunswick Reformed Church, Brunswick OH

- Some of the friends from the Friendship group that meets at Faith Reformed Church call Faith Reformed their church. They attend worship and other event such as soup suppers and choir programs. Even more friends worship at the

Lighthouse, Faith's second campus ministry. Andy Boender, one of the mentors, says, "At Sunday morning adult Sunday school class, two of the ladies who always take part in the Friendship group are excited to see me and ask if I am going to be at Friendship tomorrow." At the Lighthouse friends participate by singing, attending adult Sunday school classes, and volunteering at vacation Bible school.

—Danielle Bandstra, Faith Reformed Church, Rock Valley IA ■

## A Journey toward Full Inclusion

by Carol Honderd

Plymouth Heights CRC, Grand Rapids MI

Since beginning over 20 years ago, our Friendship class has progressed from a Tuesday night Bible study to a vehicle promoting full inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in our church family.

At the beginning, most of the friends came from group homes and had little or no exposure to church, worship, or discussions about God. Appropriate behavior during prayer and Bible study was new to many and had to be modeled by mentors. During this journey the friends learned how to worship and sensed God's love and the respect and kindness of the mentors. Several friends were baptized and others professed their faith publicly and became full members of the church.

Our pastor was instrumental too in creating an

environment for full inclusion to occur. The first step was to move the annual Friendship worship service from Sunday afternoon to Sunday morning. With each passing year the friends took on larger roles during that service. Over time, the number of friends attending regular Sunday services has grown steadily. Our pastor made it clear that he values all worshipers regardless of their ability, disability, or intellectual capacity. This attitude has been embraced by the congregation, and the friends have responded well.

Now, on Sunday mornings we have at least 20 friends attending the worship service. They are scattered throughout the congregation sitting with mentors or with others who have befriended them. It is beautiful to see the welcoming attitudes and blessings obvious within the entire church family as together we have learned to see beyond outward appearances and respect each person as a child of God. ■



## Editor's Note

### *The Words of Friendship*

In this issue readers tell us how their churches have integrated adults from a Friendship group into their congregations. Here's a brief Friendship lexicon:



**Friendship Group, Club, Bible Study, Class:** Groups name

themselves differently, but their purpose is the same: to share God's love with people who have intellectual disabilities and to enable them to become an active part of God's family. Most gatherings follow this pattern: group singing, prayer, Bible lesson, one-on-one discussion of the Bible lesson, craft time, and snacks. Relationships form the heart of Friendship meetings. In the words of Kathy Schreurs, a Friendship group leader in Sioux Center IA, "All our friends have different learning levels and even if the lesson is hard for them to understand, they still understand that the person next to them—their mentor—cares about them."

**Friends:** members of Friendship groups who have intellectual disabilities and befriend their mentors.

**Mentors:** members of Friendship groups who come alongside friends and befriend them. Many mentors say that they got involved with Friendship to help friends, but after participating they say that they receive far more than they give.

—Mark Stephenson

# Serving and Being Served

by Tom Van Wingerden

Friendship Ministries, Grand Rapids MI

**H**aving served as the executive director of Friendship Ministries since June 2014, I have been blessed to hear many stories of how Friendship has significantly impacted individuals, families, and entire church communities. From my global vantage point, I see how God is using Friendship to bring blessings to the church through the participation of all of God's people, regardless of ability or disability, in our faith communities.

Friends with intellectual disability have been integrated into the public life of the church, such as Sunday morning greeting time, worship committees, leading Sunday liturgy, congregational prayer, serving as deacons or elders, nursery duty, Sunday school assistance, singing in the choir, serving coffee, helping as parking attendants—the list goes on. As friends who have intellectual disability fully engage in church life, the entire congregation is enriched and blessed by each person sharing their abilities and lives with one another.

God also blesses everyone as people with and without intellectual disabilities share our lives together in meaningful fellowship that includes prayer support for one another, a genuine interest in each other's families, jobs, friends, and faith, our joys and our concerns—the things that really matter to all of us. I have been told again and again how much our friends have impacted others' lives by simple acts of walking alongside them and demonstrating powerful acceptance, grace, compassion, and joy through words and actions. These deep relationships often had the greatest impact on churches and individuals.

Through Friendship programs, communities have become keenly aware of the talents and abilities that our friends with intellectual abilities share. By discovering the gifts of all of God's people and by allowing ourselves not only to serve but to be served, we can better see each other as his image bearers, sharing our gifts with the full body of Christ. ■