

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

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

To See God More Clearly

Rev. Bob James, pastor of First Reformed Church in Waupun, Wisconsin, and author of *Can You Really Trust God?* (www.createspace.com/3485687)

I'm legally blind or visually impaired. You wouldn't know it when you see me walking down the street, working around my house, or helping out at church. Hopefully, you wouldn't know it when I preach and teach the gospel.

However, you would see that I don't see well if you asked me to read a book or queried me about something or someone more than 15 feet away.

I see at a 20-200 level—legal blindness. I am 59 years old. This condition called Cone-Rod Dystrophy came into my life eight years ago when I began my seminary studies. The cone cells in my retina are gone. I have minimal central vision. I can read text only if it is 18-point font or larger. The more light exposure on my eyes, the less I see.



Using a wireless remote, Bob James pages through sermon notes on a pulpit-mounted computer monitor. (Photo by Mary Schoenfeld)

How did I get through seminary not reading text? How do I prepare a sermon and deliver it? How do I minister to a church of over 300 people? The answer is in 2 Cor. 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

God quickly showed his sufficiency to me in my walk

through seminary. People I had just met offered me rides to class, audiotapes of the Bible, and a permanent front-row seat in class! God showed up in the form of a 17-year-old homeschooled young man named Eric, who recorded my text assignments on tape. I would take them home and listen to the readings while taking notes on my computer.

God showed up in today's technology. I write this on a computer screen with a black background and colored font to reduce the light glare on my eyes. For the past five years, I have printed my sermon notes in 28 to 36 point font. Recently, the church has installed a PC monitor on the pulpit. Now

Worship Words Made More Accessible

Grace Brouwer, member of Escondido United Reformed Church

Simple adaptations can make a big difference. For different reasons, Adriaan, a man from our church, and our son John could not participate in congregational singing or responsive readings during worship services. All that has changed!

Because Adriaan has macular degeneration, he could not read the words in our *Psalter Hymnal* or words that are projected on the screen. John, who has Down syndrome, wasn't able to read the words in the hymnal either because, like many with Down syndrome, he is a sight reader. To read, he needs bigger words (at least 22-point font) that are not hyphenated. "Glo - ry," for John, looks *much* different from "Glory." Our church has a copy of our entire hymnal enlarged to 150 percent, but this did not help Adriaan or John.

For John, I began typing the words to the hymns from our hymnal (under the church's CCLI number to avoid violating copyright laws). I asked Adriaan what size font *he* could read and learned that 36-point font works best.

▶ theme

Winter: About ten percent of the population in North America lives with **visual impairments**. The articles in this issue help readers understand what it is like to live with a visual impairment and how the church can become more inclusive toward people living with impaired vision or blindness.

Spring: Our next issue will focus on **technology**. If you or your congregation have used some form of technology to make your church more accessible, we would love to hear about it. Please send us your story by March 15, 2011.

continued on page 2

continued on page 2

Worship Words Made More Accessible

(continued from page 1)

I sent a few songs to Adriaan via email with a promise that, when things got calmer around my home, I would send more. Adriaan thought this was a great idea and decided to help us as well as helping himself! Adriaan now has the entire hymnal in 36-point font. John has it in 24 point. Besides paper copies, these files are stored electronically on the church computer for easy reprinting.

To help us prepare for worship, each week the church

sends an email listing the songs. We can then bring the appropriate pages. Beth, who is blind, also receives this list and brings her hymnal pages in Braille. Our family, Adriaan, and Beth receive responsive readings too. We print them out according to our needs. Adriaan, John, and Beth can participate in all of worship.

With one accommodation, two specific needs are met, and many extra blessings are given and received!



John Brouwer loves to participate in worship. Football too!

To See God More Clearly

(continued from page 1)

I load my sermon to that PC, and I page through my notes with a wireless remote.

God is sufficient, too, in the amazing increase of digital books. I have a number of digital books on my PC to read and reference, including the Bibles and commentaries on Biblesoft's PC Study Bible, which gives me access to a wealth of writings.

Recently, the church purchased an iPad for me. I can now carry my Bible with me on the iPad and set the font to read as I minister in homes and hospitals.

God has always showed up in a caring, loving church

family. They painted a crosswalk between the parsonage and the church. People eagerly offer rides. Signs on the street caution drivers to watch for me.

I like it, too, when people come up and tell me their name. Sometimes I have difficulty seeing faces, and it helps when people say, "Hi, Pastor Bob, (so-and-so) here."

Yes, my impaired vision is a frustration because I can't do everything I want. But God has been more than sufficient in caring for me, and in giving me tools to do what he wants me to do for him.

Progress and Barriers Toward Accessible, Inclusive Worship

Rev. John Jay Frank, Ph.D., Certified Rehabilitation Counselor

The Christian Reformed Church agreed to provide access to people with disabilities in 1985. Many churches have removed barriers to participation by people with disabilities. My own congregation has electronic entrances, accessible bathrooms, an elevator, a few large print hymnals, a Braille Bible, and individuals who help with transportation.

Many changes in communication and media have happened since 1985. Today, churches have Internet sites, software, and projectors for projection of lyrics, Scripture, and other parts of worship. Computers produce an array of paper handouts such as newsletters, orders of worship, sermon outlines, and class outlines. Although there are standards for using computers and the Internet in a way that allows for the inclusion of people with low vision or low reading ability, these standards may not be well known.

Barriers to accessible communication in churches include:

- Ignorance of how to create accessibility and reluctance to ask for help
- Lack of openness to suggestions, giving the impression that sharing suggestions is criticism and complaining
- A presumption that "nobody here needs that" (see Jn. 9:41)
- A mistaken idea that accessibility inhibits creativity
- Misuse of words such as "large print" or "full-screen," suggesting that accessibility is being considered and the issue resolved when it is not. For example, the only true large print (18-point font), single-volume Bible is available only in the King James Version
- Creating access in ways that imply that those who use it are old or weak. Few people want to use such uninviting material
- Creating access that is hard to use, such as making pages so large and different from the original that they make orientation and sharing difficult
- Lack of discussion about universal design
- Lack of input from people with visual impairments in decision-making
- Attitudes that place responsibility for understanding on the person with a disability.

Despite barriers like these, accessible communication is getting better. Even though implementation may begin slowly and imperfectly, we know that God cares about people with disabilities and so does his body. We will get there, by his grace, with any new thing that comes along. An extensive list of guidelines for using computers for an inclusive worship service and education program can be found on the CRC Disability Concerns website (www.crcna.org/disability) under Resources for Worship.

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Adjusting to Blindness Offers Challenges, Growth

John Kerkdyk, deacon at Christ Community Church (RCA) in Welland, Ontario

Life was very hard for my wife Mary Ann and I after she became blind in both eyes. Her blindness happened within a 24-hour period in 1994, when she was 46 years old. It was caused, not by diabetes, but by a lack of blood flow to the eyes.

One year later, the stress of trying to cope with such a sudden change resulted in a breakup between us that lasted for six months. She was trying to cope in her way, and I didn't quite understand her needs. One lesson I learned from her was that everything had to be put back *exactly* where it was prior to being used. A change as small as ten inches could result in her not being able to find the item she was seeking.

We tried to understand why this happened to her and to us. Acceptance did not come easily. I wondered if it was the consequence of sinful choices I had made. In fact, this crisis

became a turning point in my life, and I knew I needed to turn back to God. It felt like God's final warning to me.

Once we accepted that our life was in God's hands, not ours, the daily journey became easier. We asked God to lead us day by day, and he did.

When a person goes blind, reliance on other faculties is heightened. Mary Ann's sense of hearing, sense of smell, and memory all improved. A person who is blind relies on memory in order to find things and to accomplish most tasks.

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind is a great

help, even for a person with partial sight. It offers programs and devices for almost everything, and it provides instruction for how to use them. Items such as talking watches, audio-phone ID, computer programs, and audio books all contribute to a better life.

Mary Ann died on November 9, 2010, at the age of 63. Her sight was not the only loss that she suffered. I can testify that God's grace is amazing, because in spite of the challenges and losses we encountered along the way, her faith and my faith became stronger.

An OASIS of Support in Chicagoland

Kim Kuster, co-director with her husband Joe, of OASIS for the Visually Impaired

OASIS for the Visually Impaired is a Christian nonprofit organization that provides support group services, daily living skills training workshops, information referral, and education pertaining to vision loss for adults coping with severe sight loss, their loved ones, and the surrounding community. Also, OASIS is a Christian ministry and outreach mission that shares the love of Christ with individuals in greater Orland Park, Illinois, who do not know Jesus Christ.

Often God uses the trials we face in our lives, including our disabilities, to provide comfort to others that flows from the comfort we have received from our Lord (2 Cor. 1:4). My husband Joe and I had experienced several "desert experiences" through sudden deaths in our family, job difficulties, health issues, and an unexpected relocation to Orland Park.

After receiving encouragement from the assistant pastor at our church, we felt called to begin a support group. With four people at the first meeting in 1996, OASIS began as a support group for adults with visually impairments at our church, Orland Park Christian Reformed Church in Illinois.

We called our support group OASIS after hearing our pastor's sermon series, "The Desert Experiences of our Lives." Often when people experience sight loss they feel as though they are alone in the desert; our support group is an OASIS where they find other people who understand what they are going through.

Through the years, OASIS has grown to three different support groups. The group that started in 1996 is still going strong. Another group, First Steps, provides support sessions and daily living skills workshops to adults who have recently become visually impaired and have not yet received rehabilitation services. Our newest group, VisAbles, provides support group sessions to career-aged adults who are coping with unemploy-



Kim Kuster (left) makes sure that OASIS meetings include loving fellowship.

ment, job loss, or work-related problems due to vision loss. We presently serve 75 members in these three support groups.

OASIS could not exist without the love and support of our congregation. Joe and I were blessed with a church that encouraged us to use our gifts to serve others who are coping with sight loss. For 15 years Orland Park has provided a meeting room. Many members of the congregation have given their time and talents as volunteers who bake treats for our meetings, serve refreshments, and drive OASIS members to our meetings.

These volunteers also share the love of Christ through a kind word, a hug, or a smile to support group members as they struggle with sight loss. We consider all of us to be missionaries because 95 percent of our members come from the surrounding community. We praise our Lord Jesus Christ for calling us to serve him at OASIS for the Visually Impaired.

My Plan and God's Plan

Rev. Tom Vos, pastor of First CRC, Wellsburg, Iowa

It was not what I had envisioned for my life, but the Lord has his ways of turning my attention to his intention. When I began college as an engineering student, he turned my heart to parish ministry. We served in Luctor, Kansas, and then moved to Wellsburg, Iowa. My ideas about my role in ministry began to change when a genetic eye disease narrowed my field of vision to the point that I could no longer drive safely. Members of First CRC quickly volunteered as drivers. Along with my family, church members have logged many miles to help me do my pastoral calling.

As the disease progressed, (a strange word for a disease) I experienced greater difficulty navigating and reading. In 2000, I began using a white cane and screen reader soft-

ware on my computer, which I gradually relied on more. By the summer of 2007, I quit trying to use enlarged printed text and switched to a "voice over" method on my computer that enables me to read Scripture aloud while listening to it with an earphone. Through these transitions, my council and congregation have been supportive, encouraging, and helpful as they learn how to assist me. Although my limited vision has an impact on my work as a pastor, the Lord has prepared people and tools for me to continue in this calling. I have also been privileged to serve as stated clerk in our classis and to share in the work of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns.

As I realized that the time was coming that I would no longer be able to read printed

text, I began scanning books and files to convert them into documents I could read on my computer. Along the way, my son David, who has a master's degree in computer science, developed a unique form of the Bible that works very well with the computer technology that persons with visual impairments use. To share these resources with other blind persons, we formed Optasia Ministry (www.optasiaministry.org) so that we can provide these resources for free to anyone who is blind. One of those who has received the Optasia Library stated that we have "the best theological library in the world for blind persons." By the end of 2010, we have responded to over 650 requests. With more



Pastor Tom Vos (right) and son David created Optasia to provide theological resources to pastors who are blind.

than 15 million blind persons in the U.S. alone, we trust the Lord has further opportunities for Optasia. This was not my plan for my life, but what I thought would ruin my plans has opened up opportunities from God for service about which I could never have dreamed.

It Hurts But God Will Heal

Rev. James Vanderlaan, retired director of CRC Disability Concerns

I am blind. This means I have a disability, which is any physical or mental impairment too severe to be corrected or restored.

What does God think about disabilities? I can't say much, but I can say something about what God thinks because God has put clear statements in the Bible.

What God thinks. God will restore lost and missing powers. He says in Isaiah 35: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy." This restoration began when Jesus revealed himself as Christ by healing the sick and restoring some people who have disabilities.

God also reveals himself through people who live with disabilities. When Paul pleaded with God three times to take away the thorn in his flesh, God answered no with this explanation: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). In this passage and in others, God says that the supreme and final responsibility for disabilities rests with him. He decided from eternity to create me and to love me just as I am, with my disability—and to create and *love you just as you are*. Therefore, we may be sure disabilities are not unmitigated evils. They, too, will lead to the greater glory of God and the greater good of God's children.

What we should think. We should think about disabilities in the same way that God does. Paul prayed three times to be

relieved of his disability. These three times were crisis points in Paul's life. I believe firmly that his prayers were whole periods of hard wrestling with God.

Because I was born with my disability, I had no problem with it during childhood. However, with teen years, cars, and dates, this started to change. I bought and sold cars, but I couldn't drive them. So I bought a speedboat and learned to water ski. I could offer boating to my friends in return for double dating with them in their cars.

Some girls would date me; others seemed embarrassed. Perhaps they worried about others' opinions: "Is she such a wallflower that she couldn't get something better?" There are two burdens to disability: one is the physical or mental limitation, and the other is the social cost paid for being different.

I assumed that once the major decisions of young adulthood, like marriage and vocation, were made, my disability would be less burdensome. I married a wonderful woman and eventually entered my vocation, the ministry; yet, my disability has become more irksome, not less.

It wasn't easy for Paul to reach the point where he could say, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." Because of God's grace, a glad acceptance of disability is possible, and I am there some of the time. If the Lord wants to reveal his works in our lives, we'll try to be ready and waiting. (Abridged by permission from an article previously published in *The Banner*.)