

Architectural Evangelism

By Mark Stephenson, Director of Disability Concerns

The good news of the gospel encompasses all of life, even buildings. Church buildings can invite people into fellowship with God, or they can push them away. In the CRC, our buildings are giving a greater welcome than ever before.

For more than two decades, Disability Concerns (DC) has surveyed the congregations of the CRC through the annual *Yearbook* survey. This survey is one of many ways in which DC serves as a model for other denominations of how to do disability ministry.

The chart below, taken from the survey, demonstrates the effort, time, and cost that many churches have undertaken to make their facilities accessible to people with physical impairments.

Number of churches reporting areas of accessibility by year								
	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002
Worship area	893	874	850	832	802	747	633	482
Fellowship areas	873	848	821	792	762	703	599	446
Classrooms	763	745	705	679	653	601	494	365
Restrooms	839	820	795	767	733	672	543	396
Pulpit area	337	330	273	253	249	213	115	68
Main entrance	832	795	776	752	734	681	563	421

As the chart shows, over the past eight years about twice as many churches' main entrances, and their worship, classroom, restroom, and fellowship areas have become accessible. More astounding, in 2002 only about six percent of CRCs had an accessible pulpit area; now about one-third of churches do—a five-fold increase!

Because 20 percent of the population in North America lives with a disability, churches make a good investment by making their facilities accessible. Facilities and congregations which are welcoming to people with disabilities will be better equipped for ministry to current church members and outreach to new ones.

The late Rev. Mark Van't Hof expressed this well. The day after members of First CRC of Detroit voted in favor of proceeding with an extensive renovation to make their facilities accessible, First's pastor at that time, Van't Hof, encouraged the congregation with an email message: "This is good work that we are undertaking. Pretty soon we will be able to say, even to those in wheelchairs, 'Welcome to First Church!'"

More and more CRC church buildings say, "Welcome to our church." Christians who provide accessible facilities practice "architectural evangelism" in the words of the late D. James Kennedy. How well does your church building invite people into relationship with our Lord?