

BREAKING BARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

THEME: INCLUSIVE SMALL GROUPS

In healthy small groups, people can share life, study the Bible, and discern God's guidance in their lives. This issue describes how people with and without disabilities such as hearing loss, intellectual disability, dementia, and mental illnesses have been welcomed in small group ministry.



📷 A small group from Shawnee Park CRC (Grand Rapids, MI) uses *Together* curriculum.

Still Involved—with a Dementia Diagnosis

by **Barbara Newman and Tory White**
CLC Network, Wyoming, MI

Do you remember reciting the Apostles' Creed as a statement of faith before you had any understanding of what "the communion of saints" even meant? As a habit and practice of faith formation, since childhood many have followed the pattern of Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Should a diagnosis of dementia change that lifelong habit of praying, singing, and gathering together around Scripture? When a treasured member of a congregation is diagnosed with dementia and then becomes a resident in an assisted living facility, small group relationships do not need to end.

After John was diagnosed with dementia, he, his wife Anna, and several others of various ages formed a small group. We certainly had questions about how this would work, but after the first week we were all hooked! We found that God's presence and fresh delight were just two of the gifts received by all who participated in a group at a memory care facility.

The group used Friendship Ministry's *Together* curriculum, which is rich in visuals and set up to be used by groups of persons with varied abilities. Although John struggles with conversation skills, comprehension, and has some mobility and hearing differences, this approach to studying Scripture brought God's Word and God's people together in new ways! The small group Bible study tapped into those faith formation habits each one of us had been practicing since childhood.

"Who would be willing to open in prayer?" The entire group was blessed when John volunteered and offered a prayer that could have been heard from any pulpit on a Sunday morning. Our group enjoyed singing hymns with YouTube versions. The visuals in the Bible study materials cued conversations that were totally amazing. We truly learned from one another and were blessed by one another. Each group member gave and received.

Anna treasured this time of doing what she and John had done throughout their married years—learn together around Scripture, pray for one another, and share joys and sorrows. For other group members, the presence of an individual with dementia brought depth, wisdom, and insight to the group we had not expected. People shared openly with one another. From week to week, we learned to savor *this* day and *this* hour together.

This Group Helped Me Rediscover Life

by **Tammy Brink**

Christ Memorial Reformed Church, Holland, MI

My life is a reflection of Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.”

As a teenager I attempted suicide because I couldn’t live with my health problems, including mental illness. The only area of my life where I found an escape to a place of self-worth, wholeness, and joy was athletics. However, after years of enduring time in a psychiatric hospital, heart surgery, knee surgery, and the loss of my left leg, I could no longer participate in the sports I love. I felt as if I had quit living.

In the midst of this struggle, my faith began to grow. Through prayer and reflection, I discovered that God didn’t cause my pain and struggle. I began to understand that God accepted me for who I am, and his Spirit brought me a sense of peace and hope. When I returned to Christ Memorial Church, I found the grace of acceptance and unconditional love that I thought I would never obtain.

I experienced this most from the WOW (Women of the Word) Bible study group that I joined soon after I returned. WOW was different because this small group didn’t focus solely on our interpretation of Bible passages. We shared our lives as well, and our love and trust for each other began to grow. Each woman had a life story with challenges and heartaches. I discovered that others in our group also carried the “scars of life”—disabilities that were not always visible like my prosthetic leg.

Jaclyn Geerlings was especially insightful, persistent, and loving as she broke through my bubble of defensiveness, forged by wounds that had made me resistant to any help. She motivated me to walk on my prosthetic leg without crutches. Jaclyn and other group members prayed for me, encouraged me, and surrounded me with God’s love, which allowed me to return to the sports I love.

Along with the renewal of my faith and the gifts of acceptance, love, encouragement, and motivation from my WOW group, I also rediscovered the ability to participate in wheelchair sports,



 Jaclyn Geerlings and Tammy Brink

basketball, softball, wake boarding, rock climbing, and even scuba diving. I thank God for the members of my Bible study group who accepted me, loved me, and encouraged me.

An Innovative, Inclusive Approach

The *Together* series is not your ordinary Bible study material. *Together's* innovative, electronic approach uses a wide range of teaching techniques: short video clips interspersed with discussion questions; visual and dramatic Bible passage presentations; and challenging and interactive exercises to help participants apply the lessons to their own lives.

Together is an inclusive adult Bible study that provides learners of all abilities with an important set of tools so that each participant can grow in relationship with God and with one another. You can learn more and view sample sessions at togethersmallgroups.org.





A Group without All the Answers

by **Kyle Crist**

Rejoice! Community Church (RCA), LeMars, IA

Recently we started small groups at Rejoice! Community Church for the first time in several years. My wife, Jess, and I signed up to host one in our home on Friday nights, and the direction it took certainly was different from what we had anticipated.

Throughout the year, we met with 8 to 12 people, and only two did not disclose any disabilities. Everyone else had physical or mental impairments that affect a daily walk with Christ. Mine, for example, is obvious: I primarily use a wheelchair to get around. Others struggled with anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, and schizophrenia, to name a few.

As we worked through the curriculum (*Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples*, by Francis Chan and David Platt), we quickly found that the conversations dove into more challenging topics than may have been encountered in other groups. Without the façade of perfection—even the two without disabilities agreed that we all have various struggles—group members felt comfortable sharing real struggles and real questions.

At each meeting, topics would come up, such as why God sends some people to hell, and how can we know we are saved. One member even disclosed her belief that she had survived a near-death experience because she is a vampire. We comforted a member struggling with schizophrenia who believed that she was going to die soon and was going to hell (in spite of the fruit in her life and belief in Christ as her Savior).

Jess and I did not anticipate dealing with these types of questions and life struggles. We struggled to put into action the beliefs we profess about all people belonging in the church. However, we feel that God used this small group to shape our beliefs about him and his grace in each person's weakness. We could not possibly have all the answers or create a perfectly constructed lesson, and we could not predict who would show up or what issues they had encountered that week.

We had hoped for a “normal” small group. Thankfully, God did not answer that hope the way we expected. Instead, God brought together small



 Jess and Kyle Crist

group members coming from many backgrounds, beliefs, and abilities. He helped our small group to grow in love, faith, and grace, in spite of ourselves.

Upcoming themes

Winter 2019—Disability advocacy

Are you serving formally or informally as a disability advocate in your church? Please tell us about it. What gives you joy? What have you found effective? Why did you get started with this work? Please send us a note (up to 400 words) **by October 10**.

Spring 2019—Mental health and spiritual practice

How does living with a mental illness shape our faith and spiritual practice? As people who belong to Jesus Christ—body and soul, in life and in death—where do the rhythms of mental wellness, devotional life, and personal discipleship intersect? Please send us a note (not to exceed 400 words) about your experience **by December 7**.

Email: mstephenson@crcna.org • tdeyoung@rca.org

Adding Life and Breadth to Sunday School

by Irene Kraegel

Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, MI

The tapestry of gifts within Grace Christian Reformed Church includes diverse educational levels and a variety of people with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities.

Despite this missional focus on inclusion, Grace's Sunday school hour typically has centered on reading and intellectual discussion, making it accessible only for those who are able to read and who have experience in higher education contexts. To address this concern, a more inclusive group was started last spring representing a delightful mix of cognitive abilities.

The Sunday school group enjoyed the multi-media format of the *Together* curriculum, which increased the accessibility of the content for a variety of participants. Exploration of Scripture was done through video dramas, with opportunities for reading members of the group to follow along in their Bibles or read for the rest of the group. Music, testimonies, and other short pieces were also presented through video. Discussion occurred in both small- and large-group formats. Participants reported a greater sense of engagement in the group as compared to past seasons of Sunday school, and the inclusion of a broader spectrum of gifts added life and breadth to the experience for all involved.

Moving forward, the group intends to continue using a multi-media format to explore stories within an Old Testament book of the Bible. By using an inclusive, welcoming format that includes music, video, reading, and discussion, Scripture will continue to be presented and explored in ways that are accessible for a wide range of learning styles and personalities.

A book by N.T. Wright will be chosen as an optional accompaniment for the study, allowing participants to dig deeper into biblical exegesis if they choose through the course of the Sunday school year. It is hoped that people of all reading levels, cognitive abilities, and life experiences will continue to find nourishment and a sense of belonging within the Sunday school hour.



Editor's note



Enriched by Differences

About 25 years ago, I led Joe (not his real name) through the process of making profession of faith at the church I was serving as a pastor. Years later, Joe began attending the church where my family now attends. When we see each other, we greet warmly and sometimes ask about each other's family members. When I asked Joe and others from the group home where he lives whether they wanted to do a Bible study together, they agreed eagerly.

We studied the Bible using videos and materials from the *Together* series, using a unit called "Unwrapping Your Gifts." We especially enjoyed interacting about the particular gifts each of us has, not only self-identifying our gifts but also identifying the gifts we see in each other. Joe said I have the gift of teaching, and one of his fellow residents said that he has the gift of helping.

Often church small groups gather people who are alike in many ways, including having strong social and verbal skills. The articles in this issue of *Breaking Barriers* tell stories of the delightful benefits that come to groups when participants differ from each other in significant ways. I hope you'll have the joy of participating in such a group; Joe and I certainly did.

—Mark Stephenson



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