Breaking Barriers - Issue 86, Summer 2010

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Theme: The Americans with Disabilities Act

With the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, we have focused our summer issue of Breaking Barriers on this important legislation.

Next Theme: Young People and Disabilities

In the fall issue, we'll focus on young people who live with disabilities. If you are a youth or young adult who lives with a disability or have a young family member who lives with a disability, we want to hear about your experiences at church, school, and home. The deadline to submit articles is September 1.

Welcome to First Church, Everyone!

by Mark Stephenson, Director of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns

The expression on her father-in-law’s face one Sunday morning haunted Mary Kalmink for years afterward. The Kalminks’ daughter, Katie, made profession of faith in 1993 at First Christian Reformed Church of Detroit, and Grandpa and Grandma Kalmink came to celebrate. Mary explains, “Dad was in a wheelchair, so he had to be carried up the stairs. I will never forget the look in his eyes; he was terrified of falling and humiliated at being so helpless.”

That event, and others like it, motivated First Church to make their beautiful old facility accessible. They needed much more than a ramp. An audit done by an architect found that the church, classrooms, and attached school had twelve different levels.

After a great deal of work planning, soliciting bids, voting, pledging, and fulfilling pledges, construction began. It stretched out much longer than anticipated—nearly two years. But it was worth it.

The congregation undertook this work because faithful members of the congregation could not come to worship or fellowship events. They could not enter or move about the building, nor could they use the bathrooms. That all changed with the renovation. People who had not come to First Church in years worshiped there again.

The new accessibility helped others too. Shortly after the elevator was operational, several younger members needed it. Two of them, both choir members, broke their legs at about the same time. They would have been sorely missed in this small congregation, but an elevator ride made it possible for them to sing with the rest of the choir.

The congregation received added benefits. The former fellowship room became a new hub for ministry as the children’s annex. The space in the attached school, now used during the week as a day care/early learning center, became accessible as well. This change allowed a brand-new, much more hospitable building entrance than the old one, with new accessible bathrooms close by.

The day after members of First Church voted in favor of proceeding with the renovation, First’s former pastor, Mark 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!’” Sadly, Van’t Hof did not get to see the beautiful finished product because he passed away suddenly in 2008, but his prediction came true. First dedicated their newly accessible facility to God in May. Now they can indeed say to everyone, including people who use wheelchairs and walkers, “Welcome to First Church!”

A View from the Wheelchair

by Rich Dixon, author of Relentless Grace

Editor's note: Rich Dixon frequently speaks in churches, and graciously agreed to share several of his experiences with Breaking Barriers. He uses a wheelchair and has a service dog, Monte.

Dogs not welcome

The greeter at the church door looked friendly enough. He even smiled as Monte and I approached.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” he replied. “Welcome.”

His voice said, “Welcome,” but the situation felt a little odd somehow. He was sort of standing in front of the door.

He frowned. “Uh, sir, we don’t allow dogs in the church.”

This sort of thing doesn’t happen often. Most people know about service dogs. They understand that they’re not pets, that they’re allowed by law into any public building.

Frankly, I usually encounter the opposite problem—folks can’t resist Monte’s wagging tail, floppy ears, and friendly manner. Even though he wears a special vest embroidered with “Please don’t pet me,” he usually manages to get petted or scratched.

But occasionally somebody doesn’t understand, and when it happens it catches me off guard. I’m never quite sure how to respond.

This time I was rescued before I had to make a decision. “Hey, Rich.”

I turned and saw a tall man approaching. He reached out to shake hands.

“I’m Pastor Michael. We spoke on the phone.” He crouched. “And this must be Monte.”

I chuckled as Monte sniffed his hand and eagerly welcomed a scratch behind the ears, happy to help another dog lover violate service dog protocol.

He stood and greeted the man at the door. “Hey, Glenn. This is Rich. He’s going to speak to us today.”

We shook hands, and the greeter/guard apparently decided to defer to the pastor. He stepped aside and opened the door, but he didn’t look all that pleased.

Pastor Michael invited me to speak to his congregation about wandering in darkness following my injury. He wanted me to share my encounter with Jesus in the depths of depression and the story of God’s faithfulness I wrote about in Relentless Grace. We’d also planned a presentation to a Sunday school class about Monte and how service dogs help those with special needs.

Ironic, isn’t it? I was a guest, invited specifically to talk about my experience with disability and my journey with Jesus to the edge of the abyss. And the man at the door, the first person a visitor would encounter, might have prevented me from entering.

I’m sure Glenn wasn’t a bad guy. I’m sure he meant well, cared about his church, wanted to keep the building clean or maintain proper decorum, and thought he was doing the right thing. I’m sure he didn’t mean any offense.

But that morning he was the face of Jesus. I wondered how many people like me, people who don’t feel like they fit anyway, just stayed home because well-meaning guys like Glenn want to keep the church safe and orderly.

The tale of the scarey ramp

This church had obviously made a real effort to retrofit an old building, make it more accessible. The volunteer who showed me around was quite proud of the work they’d done. He pointed out a number of changes they’d made.

Bathrooms, grab bars, automatic doors—everything was right where it belonged. I felt genuinely welcomed. The effort that went into all of these changes conveyed a real sense that they wanted to make me feel at home.

Then we came to the ramp, the one leading to the speaker’s platform. I understand the problems involved with installing ramps in an existing building. They can be obtrusive, even downright ugly. They take a lot of space. I get that.

But this ramp—I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. It was much too steep. No way an average wheelchair user could climb that kind of slope. It looked almost like they’d replaced a short flight of stairs with a ramp in the same space.

And, to make matters worse, the floor at the bottom and top, as well as the ramp itself, were covered with thick, luxurious carpeting. It was beautiful, and it swallowed my wheelchair wheels like quicksand. I didn’t need to worry about climbing the ramp, because I couldn’t even reach it.

We made it work. A volunteer helped me when it was time to speak and it all worked out. But I wondered why they worked so hard to make the building inviting and then stuck in such an impractical ramp. What about a future member who wanted to join the choir, maybe even a pastor in a chair? What’s the price of excluding that person, preventing the use of his God-given gifts?

Will everyone be listening to an iPod while I speak?

The small chapel had a really warm, intimate feeling. Speaking here was going to be a great experience. I felt honored that the chaplain invited me.

They’re helping the nursing home residents to their seats, and I notice something odd. Nearly every person is wearing headphones. I’m about to speak to an audience, and most of them seem to be listening to their own private music. Seems kind of rude.

Then I realize … the wireless headphones are part of the sound system. How cool that all of these folks can enjoy the piano music and singing, and even hear my words. I go there each month, and I’ll confess that it’s still a bit strange to address a group of elderly people wearing headphones. But how amazing that such a simple, unobtrusive accommodation allows these people to continue a life-long tradition of corporate worship.

The secret elevator

The lady who welcomed me to this church was excited about the brand new addition that finally made their building accessible. That seemed a little strange, since the entry was a small landing leading to stairs either up or down. But she was so proud …

She showed me the new elevator—around a corner, secluded behind a locked, unmarked door in a short, narrow hallway. She squeezed past me, fumbled for the key, and opened the door. Then she pulled back the heavy gate, and in we went.

I looked for controls, but all I saw was a keypad. She reached in her pocket and produced a scrap of paper. “The elevator code,” she confided. “We don’t want kids messing with it.”

Good idea, I thought to myself. You see that a lot in public buildings—locked elevators workable only by those who don’t need them. But she really was proud, so I contained my sarcasm.

At the top floor, I waited for the pastor. At least two families climbed the stairs with kids, baby carriers, and the other gear that goes with babies. A more sarcastic visitor might have wondered whether they’d appreciate an elevator.

We enjoyed a great worship service followed by coffee and chatting in the foyer. As people began to drift toward the parking lot, I decided I was ready to leave. My guide was nowhere to be seen, so I asked the pastor if he could help me with the elevator.

He didn’t have a key, and he didn’t know the code.

Eventually someone located a key, and I think they needed a secret handshake or someone with top-secret clearance to pry loose the code. But I managed to escape.

I know they meant well, but I already struggle to operate independently whenever possible. I don’t mind asking for help when I need it, but I avoid situations that artificially force me into a position of dependence.

Dangling helplessly in front of everyone

The sign pointed me toward the church’s class for new folks. It was advertised as a way to understand the ministry and meet the pastor, a first step toward potential membership.

I froze as I turned into the doorway. The class was just about to begin. A group of about thirty people was already seated … on a raised platform. The only access was a flight of about five steps.

“Come on in, Rich. I’m glad you came.” Now everyone stared at me as the pastor jumped down and strode toward me. “How can we help you?”

A couple of men rushed to help. “Here, let us help. We’ll just carry you up the stairs.”

I didn’t want to tell them that carrying a wheelchair isn’t as easy as it seems. It wasn’t the time to explain that I’d been dropped in a similar situation. With everyone watching, I didn’t feel like sharing the helpless feeling of being carried by strangers.

So they grabbed me and hoisted me onto the platform.

I don’t remember much that happened in that class. I could only think about the end of the session, dreading the moment when others would have to lift me again so I could get as far away as possible from that horrible feeling of imposed helplessness.

One of the times I ate humble pie

He saw me glaring at him.

As he walked slowly and deliberately to his car in the handicapped-reserved space beside mine, I did everything possible to silently display my contempt. He obviously didn’t need that spot. I wanted to make sure he knew that I knew and that I disapproved.

I’m not sure why I felt the need to be the parking space police that morning. I was having a particularly hard time getting my chair situated beside my car, and I guess I wanted to vent my frustration on someone else.

I thought to myself that I wasn’t demonstrating much Christian charity, but he had no right to abuse that cherished spot. Even in a church parking lot, you just have to let people know when they’re doing wrong.

He watched me as he opened his car door, and I intensified my defiant stare. I wanted to make sure he experienced the full weight of his guilt. I probably made a bigger-than-necessary show of fussing with my chair just to make sure he got the point.

He was almost ready to sit, and then he changed course. He turned and slowly walked around the car and stood in front of me. He reached down and pulled up his right pants leg, revealing the artificial limb that explained his slow, measured pace.

He didn’t speak. He simply returned to his car, climbed in, and backed away.

I rested my head on my steering wheel in shame. How could I, of all people, be so judgmental? How could I so easily forget that so many special needs are invisible? How could I subject that man to the indignity of displaying his disability to satisfy my self-righteousness?

How could I forget so quickly that we’re all broken and disabled by God’s standards, ignoring the 2x4 in my own eye while condemning a non-existent speck in someone else’s?

I said a thank-you for the pointed truth of my own weakness and the grace that gives me another chance.

ADA Brings Positive Changes

by Mark Stephenson, Director of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns

Marcia Van’t Land of Chino, California, remembers when the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, but her church didn’t change a lot because it was already mostly accessible. In her wheelchair, she could get in and out of the building, and move about freely because it is all on one level. She was very pleased when the bathroom was remodeled with an accessible stall.

That was not true of most CRC churches. Church buildings and ministries were the only organizations exempted from the provisions of the ADA.

The CRC Synod of 1993 decided that the provisions of the ADA should apply to churches as well; therefore, it adopted a resolution to “heartily recommend full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act . . . in all portions of the CRC located in the U.S. and Canada.”

This decision built on a previous decision by the Synod of 1985 which called churches to remove architectural, communication, and attitudinal barriers so that all people, and especially people with disabilities, could use their gifts fully in the life of God’s family.

These two decisions along with hundreds of choices made by individual congregations have brought greater freedom and accessibility to Christian Reformed people.

“Church buildings have changed over the years,’ says Dianna Wassink, of Redeemer CRC in Sarnia, Ontario. “People have developed an awareness of what a building should be.”

Synodical pronouncements can help raise awareness, but churches change when they meet people who live with disabilities. “If even one person in the church uses a wheelchair, other people see how hard it is for him to be involved,” Wassink observes.

Van’t Land also noted that the most significant changes in attitudes resulted because people with disabilities have been able to be out in the open, instead of isolated from contact with others by barriers to participation.

“Things have gotten so much better with ramps and accessible parking and bathrooms,” she says. “The number of people with disabilities out in public has really increased since the ADA was passed. Now things are better for us. With new and remodeled buildings being accessible, we’re going to come.”

More CRC Church Buildings Comply with ADA

by Mark Stephenson, Director of Christian Reformed 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.

In 1993, the CRC synod went on record to "heartily recommend full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act . . . and its accompanying regulations in all portions of the CRC located in the US and Canada." For nearly two decades, Disability Concerns (DC) has surveyed the congregations of the CRC through the annual Yearbook survey, in part to measure churches' compliance with the provisions of the ADA.

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.

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| **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? (This article has been adapted from "Architectural Evangelism," which appeared in FYI...the site for CRC staff on June 7, 2010.)

Accessibility Resources

Full text of “Toward Full Compliance.” In 1993, the Christian Reformed Synod adopted a resolution to “heartily recommend full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act . . . in all portions of the CRC located in the U.S. and Canada.”

Accessibility Guidelines: Many websites list architectural guidelines for accessibility including the ADA Architectural Guidelines page which gives detailed information. True accessibility goes way beyond architecture. Reena, a religious organization in Ontario, developed Breaking Down Barriers, a 2009 guide for accessibility in places of worship which includes sections on organizing for accessibility, accessibility standards, and networking for accessibility.

Accessibility Audit: Congregations benefit when church leaders discuss the accessibility of their worship, programming, and facility. Christian Reformed Disability Concerns has developed a simple checklist to aid this discussion.

Discuss accessibility: When people bring their facilities up to current accessibility law (federal, state, or provincial), the spaces might meet code, but not necessarily be accessible. What has your experience been?

Samples government accessibility law web pages:

• U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act

• Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005

Letter Correcting Our Historical Error

Rev. Terry DeYoung had a great article in Breaking Barriers, and the idea that the CRC and RCA are going it together in this ministry is wonderful. In fact, it is a reach across another barrier--denominational divide.

However, please let me say humorously, this article also broke the barrier of historical truth. Pillar Church was not one of the first seceding churches. Rev. Van Raalte never was in the Christian Reformed Church, and his ministry lasted from 1847-1867. I checked with several sources. I think you will find that Pillar left the RCA in the 1880's over the Masonic Order issue.

The four original congregations are Graafschap, Noordeloos, Bates Street (First CRC Grand Rapids) and Polkton. We at Graafschap like to claim we are the first, and the only church that gave reasons for separation. Noordeloos passed the motion to secede soon after Graafschap did, but mailed notification to the RCA right away, whereas Graafschap hand-delivered its decision at the next RCA classis meeting. Polkton is a township near Coopersville. This church faded away shortly after seceding.

Humbly submitted,

Cal Hoogstra

It’s Not Only about Building Access

by Steve Yon, Pastor of High Bridge (New Jersey) Reformed Church

Years ago High Bridge Reformed Church recognized the need for handicap access to the building. We were holding a church dinner when one of our elderly members who uses a wheelchair needed assistance to enter. A number of men immediately volunteered to help. Unfortunately, as the men were attempting to carry their brother into the church, one man lost his footing and the wheelchair was dropped. No one was hurt but all were embarrassed. A beautiful ramp was constructed within a month. The congregation was very pleased with the project.

A few months after access to the church was improved, a new family started attending. Their teenage daughter lives with cerebral palsy and uses a motorized wheelchair. The family always sat at the back of the sanctuary, but one Sunday she wheeled to the front to hear the sermon. Although her lack of muscle control is quite noticeable, I was just thrilled someone wanted to sit at the front of church. However, following the service two people commented that her presence was very distracting and perhaps I could speak to her mother about keeping the young lady at the back of the sanctuary.

It was clear to me at that point there was a need for more changes than just accessibility to our church building.

I attended General Synod when the RCA finally agreed to address the issues surrounding people with disabilities. Inclusion of people with disabilities and education of our congregations are key components that must be incorporated into our efforts; it’s not just about access.

The ADA and Living the Kingdom

by John Schmidt, pastor of Second Reformed Church, Zeeland, Michigan

Second Reformed Church of Zeeland, Michigan, is a typical “second” church. Established in 1904 by members of the First Reformed Church, Second Church wanted to do things in English rather than Dutch. A hundred years later, we still do things in English, but we also do things in Spanish, too. We try to help people “live the kingdom” by providing opportunities to worship God, grow in faith, care for one another, and serve our community and world.

Like many congregations, our building has served as one of our best resources for doing ministry, but it has also presented challenges. With passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, we became acutely aware of our building’s “disabilities.” Some people, for example, found it difficult to get up steps with their wheelchairs or to use washrooms.

So, twenty years ago, wanting to do some things about access, we:

• built new entrances to our building that were more accessible,

• replaced steps with ramps,

• created pew “cut-outs” in our sanctuary so that people in wheelchairs could sit with their families at worship services,

• installed a “T-coil” or “induction loop” so that folks with hearing aids could hear more clearly what was being said and sung,

• built an elevator so that folks can get to classes and activities on the upper and lower floors of our building.

In the process of addressing these “access” issues, we learned something: it’s really not about compliance at all; it’s all about community. There are all kinds of people who need and want access to worship experiences, educational classes, support groups, and service projects.

Across the street from Second Church is Parkview Home, an adult care facility that’s “home” to nine residents. One Sunday, Parkview residents came for worship; now they come every Sunday. Their presence is teaching us that it’s not just about access, but it’s more about the importance of relationship and advocacy.

These Parkview friends are now part of our congregation, and their pictures are included in our pictorial directory. As in any new friendship, we have become aware of one another’s needs.

When we realized our friends needed meaningful activity and a place to work, we got to know Kandu Industries, a collaborative offering people with disabilities meaningful employment. Many of our Parkview friends now work at Kandu, using their skills and abilities to make picture frames and IV bags.

To get to work, our Parkview friends needed transportation. So, in cooperation with our regional Disability Network, we formed another collaborative called Faith in Motion, advocating for expansion of public transportation in the greater Holland-Zeeland community. Now, each morning and afternoon the MAX bus takes our friends (plus many others) to and from work, and places such as the doctor, the grocery store, the beach, and other community activities. Public transportation has become one of those “infrastructure things” that makes for a more inclusive community.

Access led us into relationships, and relationships led us into advocacy.

This past year we took another step in our developmental journey. Each year, the Nominations Committee is charged with the responsibility of helping our congregation identify potential new elders and deacons. The committee polls the congregation for elder and deacon nominees.

One name emerged over and over again in recent years. On Sunday mornings at worship services and on Wednesday nights at “Holy Chow,” John has gone out of his way to welcome people, to make sure that folks are having a good time, and to remind the pastor that “so-and-so” needs a pastoral call. Yet, in past years his name was passed over because some thought that with his disability John wasn’t qualified or able to do the job. Not this year. John was nominated, elected, ordained, and installed as a deacon at Second Church.

Yes, some adjustments and accommodations are being made. But isn’t that what we do in all relationships, focusing on gifts and abilities we can offer to one another rather than dwelling on disabilities?

What began 20 years ago with passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act has moved Second Church from compliance to community, from access to advocacy. In a new way, our attention is refocused on people’s gifts and abilities, and helping people do what we set out 100 years ago to do — simply to “live the kingdom.”

They Who Have Ears to Hear, Let Them Hear

by David G. Myers, Hope College social psychologist in Holland, Michigan

The largest group of physically challenged parishioners is also the least visible—the approximately 17 percent (36 million) of American adults who report hearing loss. In Canada, more than half of those older than 65 are predicted to experience hearing loss.

Unlike those challenged by mobility or vision loss, those of us who have difficulty hearing typically suffer in silence, unnoticed. In the United States, about 1 in 4—some 8.4 million—are helped by hearing aids, and another 200,000 have cochlear implants.

Mindful of this invisible minority, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 mandated “a permanently installed assistive listening system” in “assembly areas” (auditoriums, theaters, etc.) that have PA systems or fixed seating for “at least 50 persons.”

There is an exception. As the U.S. Access Board explains, “The ADA does not cover private clubs and entities that are operated and controlled by religious organizations.” Churches are off the hook.

Nevertheless, wanting their people to hear the Word of God, many churches offer assistive listening. Typically this is an FM or infrared system that requires people to seek out and wear a conspicuous receiver/headset unit. Most such units sit unused.

British and Nordic churches offer a more user-friendly system that transmits a magnetic signal directly to hearing aids and cochlear implants with a “telecoil” receiver. I first experienced this “hearing loop” technology at Scotland’s Iona Abbey. As the spoken word reached my ears, after reverberating off the 800-year-old stone walls, it was indecipherable. My wife, noticing a hearing assistance sign on the wall, nudged me to activate the telecoils in my new hearing aids. Suddenly, in an unforgettably magical moment, the worship leader’s words were crystal clear, as if spoken from the center of my head! With no fuss or embarrassment, my hearing aids were serving as wireless loudspeakers, delivering sound customized for my needs! Hearing loops are also now in all London taxis, at 18,000 British post offices, at countless ticket windows, pharmacy counters, and at most cathedrals and churches with PA systems.

Returning home, I installed a hearing loop in my TV room (enabling my TV to broadcast sound through my hearing aids). Then I launched an initiative to bring this technology to my own Holland-Zeeland, Michigan. Here, as in ensuing community initiatives from Wisconsin to Arizona, churches have led the way. Most worship places in Holland-Zeeland and Grand Rapids now broadcast sound directly to people with telecoils (that’s now all new cochlear implants and 60 percent of hearing aids, with a receiver/headset serving any others, though few seek them out).

Happily, this hearing-aid compatible assistive listening is now spreading across the landscape. Major new installations include all gate areas of Grand Rapids Airport and (soon) New York City’s subway information booths. Moreover, the Hearing Loss Association of America and the American Academy of Audiology have just launched a joint initiative to promote hearing loops throughout the USA. A national service organization will be promoting installations through its 540 local clubs. And media, including Scientific American, the Chicago Tribune, the AARP, and NPR’s “Science Friday,” have all recently featured this effort to double hearing aid functionality.

By helping its worshipers hear the Word, churches are pointing the way to a more accessible future for people with hearing loss. Such cultural leadership is a rare and wonderful example of the church at its best.

(Myers has authored A Quiet World: Living with Hearing Loss, Yale University Press. For more information see www.hearingloop.org.)