

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

ISSUE #85 SPRING 2010 A Ministry of Christian Reformed Church  and Reformed Church in America  Disability Concerns

Theme

Our name, Breaking Barriers, takes on new meaning with this issue as Disability Concerns of the Reformed Church in America and of the Christian Reformed Church publish this newsletter together. This issue celebrates that collaboration. The summer issue will focus on churches and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and will be published online. What has your church done to become more accessible? Please send a note about it to disabilityconcerns@crcna.org or tdeyoung@rca.org.

Breaking More Barriers

Terry DeYoung, Coordinator for RCA Disability Concerns

The Reformed Church in America is just beginning to catch on—and catch up—to the Christian Reformed Church’s prophetic focus on disability concerns. After giving occasional consideration to disability issues over the past several decades, we in the RCA are grateful to be welcomed by the CRC in this promising partnership of inclusion, including the joint production of this outstanding newsletter.

From my perspective, our churches are “breaking barriers” by responding to the Holy Spirit’s activity in this way.

When the RCA reengaged its discussion about people with disabilities a few years ago, I was pleased. The decision had nothing to do with me; but, as a person born with a disability, and as an advocate for people with disabilities, I was cheering from the denominational sidelines. Then, last summer, my job of 15 years evaporated, prompting me to apply for this new part-time role as the RCA's first coordinator for disability concerns.

I live with a disability that limits movement in all of my joints and has led to a half-dozen major surgeries. My mother, who learned she was a “carrier” many years after a younger brother and I were born with our disability, often wished she could wave a magic wand and trade places with us. I appreciated her sentiment, usually responding with something like, “I know that’s how you feel, Mom.” But if she were alive today, I would say, “I know—but no thanks.”

The reason: I am not as interested in surrendering who I am as I am interested in fully becoming who I am made to be in Christ.

Mine is but one specific disability among thousands, and I am but one person among a billion worldwide who lives with a disability, yet each of us is loved by God and gifted to serve others. Is there a place for us in the church that Christ died to redeem?

Breaking barriers to inclusion—affirming that “everybody belongs, everybody serves”—is one role of this newsletter, but I also appreciate how the newsletter’s name applies to our partnership in other ways:

- The respective offices of CRC and RCA Disability Concerns can model for our two churches a partnership that overcomes the structural barriers that have kept the CRC and RCA apart for too long.
- As two churches we can model one aspect of living into the good news of Jesus’ reconciling work, described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians as breaking down the “wall of hostility” between us.
- In the vulnerability of acknowledging our own weaknesses and our mutual need for one another—individually and denominationally—we can affirm that we are stronger together.

My family’s roots are in the RCA primarily; the roots of the family I married into are in the CRC. Sixteen years ago, as ministers ordained in the RCA, my wife Cindi and I were invited to preside at the baptism of her nephew at Pillar CRC in Holland, Michigan—the church of Cindi’s baptism and the church that 150-some years ago was the first to leave the RCA to begin the CRC. Many in our family saw this invitation as a barrier-breaking step.

The same Holy Spirit who reconciles us to God and one another also calls and equips us to serve others in ministry. As this CRC-RCA partnership in disability concerns unfolds, I look forward to seeing barriers broken as congregations engage all of God’s people to follow Christ in mission.

First Reformed-Ridgewood Seeks New Kind of Inclusion

Terry DeYoung, Coordinator for RCA Disability Concerns

The “ideal church” is difficult to find, let alone create. In her sixteen years as pastor of First Reformed Church in Ridgewood, New Jersey, Rev. Judy Broeker has seen the church’s ministry of inclusion make remarkable strides, but she’s also become painfully aware of the challenges facing her congregation and others.

“When I came here, the interim pastor said, ‘You have a building, a little money, and that’s about it.’ There was a small congregation of twenty elderly people left who simply wanted things the way they used to be,” Broeker said.

Today First Reformed hosts a vibrant Sunday evening worship service that is contemporary and inclusive, with an average attendance of seventy-five. “Officially,” Broeker adds, “we have seven members on the church rolls, but we have 120–130 who attend something, whether it’s choir, Bible study, or Sunday evening worship.”

In addition, two large fellowship events—an all-church dinner and a celebration of birthdays—are monthly occurrences, and the choir’s annual Christmas cantata typically fills the sanctuary with friends and families. While such changes add up to a significant transformation, Broeker longs for a day when the church looks different.

That's because First Reformed's worshiping congregation consists primarily of people with disabilities, most coming from nine community agencies and thirty group homes.

Now in its fifteenth year, the church's Friends to Friends worship service includes praise songs, prayers, Scripture readings, a sermon, and lots of interaction.

"Ideally, this is not how I or others envision the church, and it's not really what the Lord wants us to do," Broeker said. "Shouldn't all of God's people be together? To have only one kind of people together seems wrong—whether it's Anglo, African American, people with disabilities, whatever. Churches should be more inclusive and diverse, but usually that's not first on an agenda.

"However, at this point in time, we're meeting a big need; if we were not doing this, most of those who come to our church would be sitting at home, watching TV."

First Reformed Church supports its Friends to Friends ministry financially by renting out its facility for daycare weekdays and to a Korean congregation Sunday mornings and weeknights.

Letter

December 18, 2009

Dear Workers in God's Vineyard:

My wife, Wilma, and I always enjoy Breaking Barriers. We understand a bit and feel for those with handicaps. Perhaps those feelings ran deeper after Wilma had her stroke and other complications. She had to go by ambulance to the hospital for over a week (I stayed with her every night). And then she was in a nursing home for over a month. With our son and his wife's help, we got her home. He saw to it that we got a hospital bed and mechanized recliner.

For the past two years, different families of our church have brought over a meal every week. Our church (Heritage CRC) is very handicap friendly. Every Sunday morning we have a very special niche for Wilma's transit-chair (and all the church's facilities are on one floor).

May God continue to bless you in your Christlike efforts.

Sincerely,
Vern Luchies

Oakdale Park Church Models Inclusion

Cindy Holtrop, volunteer with CRC Disability Concerns

"This is my church. I fit right in," says Dennis Stuart, a member of Oakdale Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dennis is one of four people with a cognitive impairment living in a private home together and attending

Oakdale Park. Ask him what he does at the church and, among his other helping jobs, he says, “I listen to God’s word. I pray for them.”

Pastor Bill Vanden Bosch says that Dennis has an important prayer ministry at the church. When the church elders came to visit him, they were about to close with prayer when Dennis interrupted them, saying, “We need to pray for you elders.” Pastor Vanden Bosch said, “The elders were so struck because that was the first time anyone had ever prayed for them.”

Oakdale Park Church has no separate ministry for people with disabilities because they have created a culture where members are valued for the gifts they have and the ways they can contribute to the life of the church. Dan Kuzak helps the janitor clean the church in all kinds of weather. Chuck Vanden Bosch washes windows, cooks at the church campout, and enjoys serving and helping other people. The pastor credits Isaiah Williams for having one of the strongest gifts for greeting people at Oakdale Park. People with disabilities are intentionally included in the whole life of the church. Their contributions give them a sense of belonging and purpose.

This doesn’t mean there are no barriers. One member who uses a wheelchair would like to participate in small group ministries, but these groups frequently meet in people’s homes that aren’t always barrier free. Sometimes it’s a challenge to develop friendships that go beyond Sunday worship.

“Our future as a church is determined by how we treat folks that society marginalizes,” concluded Pastor Vanden Bosch.

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Resources

Workshop: Helping People Help People
Saturday, April 24, 2010, at Community Christian Reformed Church, Kitchener, Ontario. Conference speaker: Barbara Newman, special educator and author. Cost is \$20; Christian Reformed and Reformed Church disability advocates may attend for free. For more information or to register, ask for Heather at 800-730-3490.

Website: www.rca.org/disability
Worship resources, links to other helpful websites, and an excellent theological reflection on disability from a Reformed perspective called “Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities.”

Website: www.crcna.org/disability
Resources for worship, caring, accessibility, training, consultation, and advocacy. Back issues of CRC Disability Concerns newsletter, Breaking Barriers, which features stories written by people living with disabilities.

Study Guide: A Compassionate Journey: Coming Alongside People with Disabilities or Chronic Illnesses by John Cook. This book will help church leaders and care team members learn better how to care for someone living with a long term need. Written in a format that can be used for group study. Available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, 800-333-8300.

Website: www.crcna.org/network, then click on “Disability Concerns”
Interact with others who are working to include people with disabilities in congregational life.

Poster: “30 Things You Can Do to Be Hospitable to People with Disabilities”

Download and use as a newsletter insert or poster. Available at www.rca.org/disability.

Booklet: Everybody Belongs. Everybody Serves. A Handbook for Disability Advocates

A brief, idea-packed resource for churches to get started with disability ministry. Download at www.crcna.org/disability.

Facebook Fan Page

Are you a Facebook user? Become a fan of “CRC Disability Concerns” to get updates on events, ideas, conferences, and more.

RCA and CRC Work Together in Disability Concerns Ministry

Mark Stephenson, Director of CRC Disability Concerns

In 2008, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) partnered for disability ministry. According to their working agreement, “. . . the disability ministries of both denominations can be more effective by sharing knowledge, support, and resources; by building a broader network of relationships; and by allowing disability ministry to be yet another step in the increasingly fruitful shared ministries between our two denominations.”

In the working agreement, they have purposed together to help the approximately 2000 CRC and RCA churches “become

hospitable, inclusive, and healthy communities that intentionally seek:

- To end the isolation and disconnectedness of persons with disabilities and their families;
- To nurture the spiritual lives of people with disabilities so that they become professing and active members of their churches; and
- To encourage the gifts of people with disabilities so that they can serve God fully in their churches.”

Rev. Terry DeYoung and Rev. Mark Stephenson lead these ministries. DeYoung, the first Coordinator for Disability Concerns for the RCA, began in 2009. Stephenson has served as the Director of Disability Concerns for the CRC since 2006.

Since 1982, the Christian Reformed Church has supported a ministry with and for people with disabilities to assist the denomination and its member churches “to bring about the full participation of all people with disabilities in the life of the church and the full participation of the church in the lives of people with disabilities.”

In 2007, the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America initiated conversation with the CRC about a possible partnership in disability ministry. At that time, the RCA had no formal structure for ministry with and for persons with disabilities but recognized a growing demand for such a ministry and recognized the expertise already at work in the CRC.

The two denominations adopted the working agreement not as an end, but as a beginning, with the intention of eventually creating one integrated disability ministry that will serve both denominations. At this time, the two Disability Concerns offices will work together on a newsletter, website, training, conferences, and web and print resources for use by their congregations.

Meet the Directors of RCA and CRC Disability Concerns

Rev. Terry A. DeYoung and Rev. Mark Stephenson serve as the staff leadership for Disability Concerns of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and for Disability Concerns of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Terry is the first person to serve the RCA as Coordinator for Disability Concerns. He began this part-time (two-thirds) position in fall 2009, following fifteen years as managing editor of the Church Herald, the RCA's monthly periodical that published its final issue in September 2009.

Terry was raised in the Chicago area, studied journalism at Northern Illinois University, and worked full-time as a sportswriter for five years before enrolling at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, in 1983. An ordained minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA, he served Central Park Reformed Church in Holland for six and half years before joining the Church Herald staff in 1994. Terry is married to Cindi Veldheer DeYoung, an RCA minister working as a hospital chaplain in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Mark is the third person to serve as Director of Disability Concerns for the CRC. Before beginning this call in July 2006, he served as pastor in two Western Michigan congregations.

He grew up in Holland, Michigan, and received degrees from Calvin College and Calvin Seminary. He worked as a long-term volunteer for Christian Reformed Home Missions for one year in San Francisco, and did social work in Madison Wisconsin before going to seminary. He was ordained as a minister of the Word in the CRC in 1989.

Mark and his wife, Bev, who is a special education teacher, have four living children, including Nicole, who lives with severe multiple impairments.

Volunteer Opportunities

If you would like to be helpful in Disability Concerns but aren't sure how or where to begin, contact CRC Disability Concerns (disabilityconcerns@crcna.org) or RCA Disability Concerns (disabilityconcerns@rca.org) for ideas and opportunities. We can offer suggestions for volunteering at the congregational or regional level.

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