

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

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

God's Plan in Every Breath I Take

Joel Vander Molen, member of Second CRC, Pella, Iowa

In Jeremiah 29, God tells the prophet "I know the plans I have for you." This is true for all of us today and can be seen when looking at our lives. In 1985, when I was three years old, I was not very concerned about the future. However, after a car accident that year, God's plans for my future started to become more evident.

That accident left me with quadriplegia, needing a ventilator to breathe and a wheelchair to get around. Thankfully, through gifts of human ingenuity, God had already provided reliable technology for many others like me.

As I progressed through school, technology started to become more useful in the form of computers and communication. Shortly after graduating from high school, a need arose

in my church (Second CRC in Pella, Iowa) to work on a very basic website that my friend, our pastor's son, had developed.

Because God had led me to be interested in technology and allowed me to catch on to new things quickly, I volunteered for the job. Through college, I gained experience by working on other websites, and I completed my degree in Information Technology.

While seeking employment, I continued work on websites. Though I searched for months, I was not able to find outside employment and returned home to live with my parents. God's plan emerged in this as well.

One of the clients needed website additions that required the design skills of another company. A few months after moving home, that business



Joel Vander Molen serves the Lord through his company, VMT, which does web design and consultation.

started partnering with my newly formed business, VMT. Today, I have been blessed to work with organizations

in several states. Some are businesses, while others are churches and organizations that work to spread God's Word.

Technology facilitates worship through speaker systems, hearing assistance, video, etc. For people like me, it allows for work, communication, and getting out to enjoy God's creation. New technology also allows for more natural breathing than when I was first injured.

I am grateful for the means God has used to work out his plans in my life.

► theme

Spring: From simple accommodations to advanced electronic devices, technology can make worship and church life more accessible to people who live with disabilities. We have devoted this issue of *Breaking Barriers* to **technology**.

Summer: Much of church business happens in meetings of teams, committees, councils, consistories, classes, and synods. In our summer issue (available online only) we will explore **meeting accessibility**. How has your church made its meetings more accessible to people with disabilities? Please send us a note by **June 10, 2011**.

Fall: Our theme in the fall issue will be **parenting**. When parents find out that their child has a disability, most grieve the child they thought they would have as they come to love the child God has brought to them. Are you a parent who has raised or is raising a child who has a disability? Please tell us a story about a joy, triumph, or challenge you and your child have faced. Send articles to us by **August 15, 2011**, and limit article length to 500 words or less.

By Enabling Hearing, Churches Lead

David G. Myers, member of Hope Church (RCA), Holland, Michigan; author of *A Quiet World: Living with Hearing Loss*; and recipient of 2011 President's Award from the American Academy of Audiology

Imagine yourself as a person with significant hearing loss. At worship, or perhaps in a movie theater, you struggle to carve meaning out of the spoken word. Given two assistive listening options, which would you prefer:

- 1) To make the effort to locate, check out, wear, and return a special headset that likely is incompatible with your hearing aids or cochlear implant, and that delivers the same sound to everyone?
- 2) To inconspicuously push a button that transforms your hearing aids into wireless loudspeakers that broadcast sound customized for your own hearing needs?

Option 1 is the prevalent assistive listening technology in the USA. Option 2, assistive listening that is directly hearing aid compatible, is the common option in worship facilities in the UK and Scandinavia...and in west Michigan, where most churches in Holland/Zeeland and Grand Rapids now offer this user-friendly “hearing loop” assistance. Moreover, it has spread to many other

Michigan venues, including school auditoriums, the Grand Rapids Airport, and even the 12,200 fixed seats of Michigan State University’s basketball arena.

Happily, the momentum is spreading. In Wisconsin, some five dozen facilities have responded affirmatively to an audiologist-led campaign (www.loopwisconsin.com). There, too, churches are leading the culture in making sound more conveniently accessible.

One Wisconsin parishioner recalls, “The first Sunday the loop system was activated in my church was one of the most memorable days of my life. For the very first time I was able to hear every word, and it was as if the pastor was speaking directly into my ear. As I looked around the congregation, other people who wear hearing aids had looks of wonder on their faces, and I knew they were experiencing the same thing. Some of us had tears streaming down our cheeks.”

Similarly, in Arizona, New Mexico, Silicon Valley (California), Rochester (New York), Chicago, and New York City, thanks to grassroots initiatives, people are hearing the word with refreshing clarity. In fact, the response has been so wonderful that the Hearing Loss Association of America and the American Academy of Audiology have launched a “Get in the Hearing Loop” national campaign, which culminates June 18-20 with a national conference in Washington, D.C.



David Myers finds that church members with hearing loss enthusiastically endorse hearing-loop systems.

Sometimes, the church seems to follow the culture. In supporting people with hearing loss, the church is leading the culture. (For more information—including sound demonstrations, lists of looped facilities, and vendors—see www.hearingloop.org.)

Get Tech Users Involved in Decisions

Mark Stephenson

Several years ago, I received an email message from someone whose church was planning to make its building more accessible. The congregation needed to decide where to put the elevator: in the rear of the building requiring users to enter through the front of the sanctuary, or in the front of the building requiring greater expense for installation. The author of the email found unacceptable the idea of forcing elevator users to enter the sanctuary in the front when everyone else entered from the back.

Cheaper alternatives to accessibility problems can look appealing, but they may do more harm than good.

Many accessibility problems can be solved via simple and inexpensive changes, but not all. Some require money, sometimes significant money. Before churches invest in accessibility improvements of any kind, they should consult with people with disabilities for whom the changes are made.

Location of an elevator and pew cutouts, installation of a hearing loop, purchase of hearing assistive devices or Braille embossers, captioning of worship services, construction of bathrooms, design of hallways and coat racks—these often are accomplished best with input from people who live with disabilities.

For these and other reasons, church and kingdom are best served when people with disabilities are involved in ministry and leadership in the congregation.

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Visual Accommodations Range from Simple to Complex

Mark Stephenson

About eight out of every 100 people in North America are blind or have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. Many congregations use technology to accommodate people with visual impairments into their life and ministry.

Simple and inexpensive accommodations include:

- Making available large print bulletins, song books, and Bibles
- Optimizing projected text for readability (see www.crcna.org/disability for details)
- Putting newsletters and other church communications online or emailing text so that people who use screen readers can access them.

These accommodations will be enough for most people who have vision loss, but not all. Orland Park (Illinois) CRC purchased a Braille embosser several years ago and now publishes its bulletin, song lyrics, and sermon outline each week in Braille for members who need it. Although the initial cost for the embosser and software topped \$3,500, half was paid for through a grant from the



Katie Hennessy says the translation software for the Braille embosser at Orland Park CRC “was fairly simple to learn.”

Christian Fund for the Disabled, sponsored by Joni and Friends (www.joniandfriends.org).

Katie Hennessy, who operates the embosser each week, said that it came with Braille translation software that “was fairly simple to learn. I open the Word document that needs to be embossed, the software translates it, and then I send it to the embosser.”

One of the users of the Braille documents, Joe Kuster, appreciates this accommodation. “Before we had the embosser, I couldn’t sing along with the

songs or read the bulletin. Now I can participate more fully in the worship service.”

Worship leaders may need to find alternative ways to lead as well.

The Rev. Tom Vos, pastor of Wellsburg (Iowa) CRC, has experienced progressive vision loss. When his vision loss became so severe that he could not read large print, he began using a special computer called a Braille note taker. The note taker produces one line of Braille at a time using metal nubs, and it allows the user to hear text with a computer-generated voice.

When Vos leads worship, he listens to his Scripture passage for the day through an ear bud and then speaks it to the congregation. He preaches his sermons the same way by listening to his prepared manuscript.

Bible study and sermon preparation remained a chal-

lenge for Vos because he could not read the commentaries and other reference works—until he and his son founded Optasia Ministry (www.optasiaministry.org). By providing free biblical study tools and other Christian ministry resources in a digital form that can be read by screen reading computer software, Optasia gives persons with visual disabilities access to materials that are not usable for them in print form.

In these and other ways, technology provides possibilities to include people with visual impairments in church life, allowing them to serve well in leadership roles.

▶ alternative formats

Do you know someone who needs *Breaking Barriers* in an alternative format? Issues are also available:

- online in HTML and PDF formats, including a large-print edition
- on cassette tape.

Let us know how we may help you.

▶ editor's note

Classrooms Use Portable Loops

How would it be to serve on your church's board of elders but lack the ability to hear a young person who comes to make profession of faith? One of the cherished responsibilities of the office could become one of the most frustrating, perhaps prompting a gifted elder to decline the church's call to serve.



Thanks to the installation of portable hearing loops in several of Rosewood Reformed Church's education rooms, Clare Boss's hearing loss has not forced him to make such a decision.

"Some people don't talk very loud, or someone might turn their head while talking, but I can still hear them," Boss says of his experience in church meetings and study groups. "I can even hear if someone's scratching their fingernails on the table."

When the Jenison, Michigan, church installed an induction loop system in its sanctuary in 2003, it proved helpful for several members who wore hearing aids. "We even had a few people join church because of the loop system," says Yvonne Williams, Rosewood's disability advocate. "As time went on, we found that we needed additional loops for Bible study classes, consistory meetings, and a child's Sunday school class."

Through trial and error, Rosewood has learned it can string inexpensive loop wire to ceiling tiles in multiple rooms throughout the church, and then move either of its two amplifiers and microphones as needed. With an amplifier for a typical classroom costing \$200-230 and an omni-directional microphone costing \$180, the accommodations are manageable.

"Adding portable loops to our educational center has been a real blessing to our members who use hearing aids or cochlear implants," Williams says. "We can include those with hearing losses more fully into activities and worship."

—Terry DeYoung

▶ memorial gifts

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New iPhone a 'Most Wonderful Device'

Louise Shumaker, member of Calvary Reformed Church and director of disability services at Hope College, Holland, Michigan

As a college student in the 1980s who was blind, using a tape recorder in class and listening to books on tape was the extent of technology available to assist me. I acquired my first computer in 1988 as I began a master's degree, and the only added benefit it offered me was a screen-reader option. With the computer reading



Louise Shumaker loves the accessibility functions on her iPhone.

words as well as each letter typed, writing papers and taking tests became easier and offered me much more control.

With the Internet in the 1990s and advances in screen-reading technology, creating documents for work and communicating by email opened a whole new world of possibilities for me. Unfortunately, the advances in research and development of affordable devices using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology have not kept pace, mostly due to a lack of demand and diminished purchasing power among people with disabilities. (In the United States, for example, 45 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed—among women who are blind, it's 85 percent—and the majority who do have jobs are self-employed.)

Perhaps a change is coming. Recently I acquired an iPhone 4, and I am finding it to be the most wonderful device I have experienced in the thirty-three years that I have been blind. For the first time ever, I did not have to pay more for the functions that assist

me most. (The smart phone I retired had a screen reader that cost an additional \$100, and it did not work nearly as well as my new phone). Voice Over technology works better on my iPhone than on my laptop or the desktop computer in my office. The screen reader does not require keystrokes to move to any other part of the phone. I am not limited to how many levels of the phone I can go to, and it does not talk over anything I may be telling the phone to do.

I am able to explore the iPhone on my own and discover new applications that assist me. If I need to look up something, the electronic manual is bookmarked for easy access. I also am aware of iPhone applications that are useful for other disabilities, including people with mobility impairments and others who are deaf and use sign language.

Even though I have tried not to make this an advertisement for the iPhone, the reality is that I am loving every minute of this new experience.