

BUILDING OUR NETWORK
A “HOW TO” FOR REGIONAL ADVOCATES – DISABILITY CONCERNS
Hank Kuntz, Regional Advocate, Classis Toronto (Christian Reformed Church)

Introduction

The primary objective for Disability Concerns is the inclusion of those affected by disabilities in the life of the church. To achieve that we turn to one key component or characteristic of disability ministry and disability advocacy, i.e. the need for networking, the need to have a network in place. And what does this in essence entail but the establishment of a linkage between persons that reflects our faith, various interests, gifts, friendships, needs, sharing, etc., etc.!

To emphasize the complexity and number of the linkages: in Canada alone there are over 5,000 organizations engaged in disability issues! Multiply by 10 for the US. No one, and no one, is able to navigate this singly. Now take this back into a local congregation where someone newly struggles with a disability, devastated, likely, by prognosis received. The pastor, the elders, fellow church members, may not even be able to pronounce the name of whatever was found! It is into that situation, and for the many years that may follow, that we are called to be of assistance, and to the person with the special condition most of all. Yes indeed, the traditional structure of the CRC is a great asset: the pastor’s task, the work of elders and deacons, the informal support system, much to be thankful for. Yet there is so much that ought to work better, especially when we deal with situations that last decades.

I am reminded then of a statement made by Jim Kok some time ago in Grand Rapids to the effect that there “should be a rage in our hearts” when we see the needs of the folks struggling with disabilities, the things that could be done or said but are not, etc., etc. I assume that rage is there and I would submit that this is what drives us, while the best way to cope with it is to put all that adrenaline into action.

So that’s where we can do *our* job as Regional Advocates to get that network established, enlisting a Church Advocate in each congregation to be an indispensable link in the Disability Concerns network. In the phone calls made over a number of years, spanning thousands of miles, I have been touched time and again by the thankful and enthusiastic responses to my invitation to join our network. After a number of attempts to get through to somebody, all of a sudden that high: a meeting of minds, nurtured by the Christian faith and the shared experience of our fallen reality, yes, we are here with a task!

Old Man Moses

So now I am going to make some suggestions on, of all things “cold calling”. Now *there* is some kinship we all experience, Moses responding to God’s call: ”O Lord, I have never been eloquent”, and “O Lord, please send someone else to do it”.

To give you my personal note: as someone with a background in finance and managerial accounting, trying to “sell” an idea over the phone is approximately the last thing I felt able or called to do. But guess what, it is doable, because we have a product, and the product is inclusion in the church of *all* with disabling conditions, justice for sisters, brothers, sons, daughters, parents, ALL God’s creatures, no less!

You are a Regional Advocate, so even if we experience the Moses syndrome sometimes, we’d better get on with the job of finding Church Advocates, this comes with the territory.

Step by Step

In order to line up Church Advocates, CA’s for short, you should do the following.

First of all, get a copy of our current CRC YEARBOOK to have the information for your Classis or Classes right before you. Pick the first congregation to be approached (I am assuming that you do not have any personal connections there already, because they may have been the logical place to begin) and phone the clerk or the treasurer. As a rule of thumb, do NOT phone the pastor, he/she is the last resort unless he/she is your personal friend, and even then! Don't leave it up to the pastor to find someone, that's not why he was "called" and usually he is not successful anyway. To be fair, I have had a couple of good responses too!

Let me use a role-playing scenario to portray my way of getting started.

FIRST CALL

The clerk or the clerk's spouse answers the phone and you could have a conversation that might go like this:
"Good evening. I am Gail Vansomethingorotherma, I am the Regional Advocate for Disability Concerns of the Christian Reformed Church for Classis Wobegon, can you spare me a minute of your time please?"

"Sure, that's OK" (Or no, we're having supper, then ask when you might be able to call back, or no, Mom's not home, then again ask for a better time to call)

"The reason for my call is that I am trying to locate a person in your congregation who may have a special interest in disabilities. I would appreciate you giving me one or two names for me to phone so I can discuss with them the possibility of being part of a network of like-minded people in our denomination. Very often a person like that has a personal familiarity or involvement with a disability. Would you have a suggestion or two, please?"

"Well, I'm not so sure. I can't think of anybody right now".

"Yes, I can appreciate that when I just phone you out of the clear blue sky. Would it help if I suggest you think of someone who actually has a disability, or who has a child with a disability?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, I can think of Joan and Bill Vansomething, their boy has a problem, maybe I should ask them."

"Well now, that's very nice of you to suggest that, but the last thing you need right now is extra work, I'm sure. If you could just give name and phone number, I probably won't have to trouble you again. Would you happen to know what the son's condition is?"

"OK, that's fine too. I think Joey, the little boy, is mongoloid or something, their number is...., and, come to think of it, there is this lady who seems to have a warm heart for disabled grownups, she is Liz Otherma, and her number is...."

"That is just great. Thanks loads. Would it be OK if I mentioned you gave me the phone numbers, so there is no mystery about all this"?

"Sure, no problem, glad to help".

"Good talking to you, thanks again".

SECOND CALL

Phone the Vansomething number.

"Hello"

"This is Gail Vansomethingorotherma calling, may I speak with Bill or Joan Vansomething please?"

"This is Bill/Joan"

"Great, I am with the Christian Reformed Church, could you just spare me a moment, please?"

"Sure, what is it about?"

"I got your name and phone number from the clerk/treasurer/administrator of your church as a person who might share a concern for people with disabilities. I am the volunteer Regional Advocate for Disability Concerns for Classis Wobegon and would like to include your congregation in a denomination wide network of church members who act as advocates and resource persons on disability issues".

"What do you mean by that?"

"Briefly put, nearly all Classes of our denomination have a volunteer Regional Advocate who report to our full time Director Mark Stephenson. These in turn work through a local representative called Church Advocate in each church. The most basic task for this person is to make sure each member of the church gets a copy of our publication Breaking Barriers, four times per year. That person also acts as the first line resource on all matters

relating to disabilities. He or she does not have to be an expert him or herself but will know the Regional Advocate in the Classis who can be asked for information or referrals.”

“Well, I’m not so sure I’m the right person for that”.

“You’re probably the best judge of that, but I take it you have some familiarity with disability issues”.

“Why, yes, our second child, Joey, has Down’s syndrome”.

“Really? How old is he?”

“He just turned 12, etc., etc.....”

“So you have some hands on experience, a bit like me, for my sister has CP {fill in your own story} and that gives you a bit of insight into these matters”.

Have further brief exchange, and then pick up anew, for example with:

“Do you feel that we as church are sensitive and welcoming enough?”

Further conversation: if yes: ‘how do we tell this to people who struggle with these issues’, if no: ‘that is why DC is here to educate, advocate, promote inclusivity, etc.’

Once you have arrived at this stage it is important to emphasize that a local advocate belongs to a large network or support system, they are a part of something bigger, together as God’s people we do our part to have ALL his children included. By being a local representative they will:

- Connect with others through a Newsletter
- Connect through direct contact with the Regional Advocate
- Attend an occasional training conference
- Participate in an annual get-together within the Classis or a larger region
- Receive a binder or summary booklet with resource material and suggestions, including a simple job description (you’re often asked to send a job description)
- Be able to be there for others within the congregation when a disability strikes them
- Not be on their own since the support of the Regional Advocate as well as the Director is available to them

Hence our network acts as support group on an area/national/denomination wide basis, offering help and training in pastoral care!!

A recurring pattern is that after the above pictured, often far-ranging conversation, “Joan” or “Bill” gladly volunteers to become a CA. You then take name, regular and e-mail addresses, phone number and agree on the number of BBs (rule of thumb: number of families plus 10 %).

Side Steps

The above scenario is one of many. It has been my experience that roughly one or two out of ten congregations will yield a CA at the above second call stage. About four out of ten will take a bit longer. For example, the first name you were given is not available, but the second or third name may be. Often the person, when asked, will refer you to someone else who may come on board. Roughly, for these four you end up making four or five calls each, sometimes less. After this it gets a bit tougher. You may have a hard time getting a hold of a clerk/treasurer/administrator, you may have to call back a few times, but ultimately you succeed. DON’T LEAVE MESSAGES ON AN ANSWERING MACHINE; keep trying to get through to a warm body directly.

So the next two or three congregations may necessitate patience in getting a name to begin with and THEN you may have to try three or four prospects, and they are not always home (try calling folks three time zones away, whew, but that’s another wrinkle that is not insurmountable either). So now we’re talking the last couple of congregations out of, say, a group of ten. You have to hang in there: the clerk cannot give you any names; he’s going to ask the next Council meeting (‘the last one was last night, so call me five weeks from now!!!’). Often a clerk will come through with a suggested candidate after a while, but I get the heeby jeebies when they mention the word “council”, as bad as asking the pastor!

In terms of the effort required, 10 congregations may require up to 60 phone calls, say between two to ten minutes each, so you may need roughly five hours of time talking on the phone. The figure 60 should not scare you. I have actually made close to 40 short calls in the course of an evening on a few occasions. The bad part is that they are spread out over a longer period of time, in other words, it takes more than the five hours since you have to get your thoughts and stuff together repeatedly. But the good part is YOU can spread them out in terms of a few calls here and a few calls there, just make sure you keep notes.

A few more thoughts.

Yes, this is work, but that holds for any job in the Kingdom.

Further, once you get into the spirit of it, it becomes a game: how many calls can I make today, tonight (yes, at night, for if we confine our efforts to between nine and five, we will not get there), or let's see how many out of the ten or twenty congregations respond right away. By the way, calling the clerk or treasurer in the day time often results in a chat with the person's spouse who can help you right away when you explain the purpose of the call. It helps to be relaxed, like saying to the spouse: "Hey, I bet you can help me just as well if you don't mind!" Very important is to make clear that YOU will do the work, you are NOT asking whoever to start calling around to find you a CA, (in my experience that has only worked in one or two cases), since YOU are the one who can explain what is involved. Again, tell them we are not here to create work, but to make things easier and better for them, we're here to help!

Another thought: you probably have a few good friends, or fellow travelers in the matter of disabilities: how about setting aside a week during which three or four of you have a small campaign to do four or five congregations each. A little more complicated, probably, but it's a thought. This writer could be talked into helping you get started, we could have a further talk together on this topic over the phone for starters.

The Rewards

Yes, there are substantial rewards.

One: you create your very OWN support group. I really appreciate the fine response I always get from my own classis' reps. As I mentioned earlier, one will even experience a "high" when you connect with a kindred soul, sometimes many miles away!

Two: you actually do the folks agreeing to become an Advocate a favour – THEY are now connected.

Three: when you get ten congregations onto the Breaking Barriers list you expose an additional, what, one or two thousand people to real stories of God working in the hearts and lives of fellow believers, stories, not of cures, but of healing. By spending, say, 600 minutes of your time you have results some folks like salesmen can only dream of.

FOR LESS THAN 30 SECONDS PER CONGREGATION MEMBER YOU WILL EXPOSE THEM TO DISABILITY ISSUES FOUR TIMES PER YEAR. AWESOME!

Four: think of it, we are laying the groundwork for total inclusion, now and in the future, of those confronted with disabling conditions.

Five: you get to keep your well-paid position of Regional Advocate.

Last Thought

Remember, setting up a network is only the start. That is not to discourage us. Rather it is an occasion to be thankful how far we have come, as well to emphasize how we need one another. The other presentations today are an indication of that. If I can be of any help to you, let me know.