

Open Doors, Open Hearts

Access Sunday at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church

In a perfect blend of activities concerning both the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC)* and the Presbyterian Health Network (PHN),* Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church (BHPC), Bethesda, Maryland celebrated Access Sunday on September 18, 2005. The theme of the day was “Open Doors, Open Hearts” where the emphasis was on celebrating the abilities of all God’s children and especially those who are disabled in some way.

The session of Bradley Hills established an Accessibility Task Force in May of 2004. The charge was to determine ways that BHPC might change to become more accessible to persons with disabilities. As an Accessible Congregation of the National Organization on Disability, BHPC has already made some progress in enlightening the congregation about this issue. Specifically, the task force was asked to:

- Perform an audit of barriers to accessibility, both structural and attitudinal
- Identify structural improvements that might be made to the facility, as well as the costs and relative benefits of those improvements
- Recommend a timeline to the session for accomplishing suggested improvements

The task force members thought their job would only take a few months. However, as more and more in-depth information came to light, an extension of time was requested. To complete the study, task force members began assisting the property manager in obtaining bids and seeing that improvements were made. Physical improvements ranged from simple ones like putting cups and a trash can next to drinking fountains and purchasing arm chairs for placement at designated locations throughout the building, to more complex ones such as installing lever type door handles around the building, installing hand rails, making temporary handicapped parking signs for use on Sunday mornings, and installing automatic door openers at the two entrances where ramps are in place. Task force members investigated a variety of small elevators/lifts and hope that one will be installed within the next year. In addition to large-print bulletins being available every Sunday, directories and inserts for the church bulletins are now available in large-type.

The task force felt that impacting the attitudes of church members was one of the most important functions this group could hope to accomplish. It had long been the dream of the Parish Nurse, Joanie Friend, to have a Sunday where the entire educational process of the church would be focused on accessibility. On Access Sunday, both children and adult education hours were devoted to educational videos and discussion depicting better ways to communicate with persons who are disabled. The film, “The Ten Commandments of Communicating with Persons with Disabilities,” was used in the education hour for adults and youth, followed by a discussion. An MTV-style film, “Kid Ability,” geared to younger children was shown to grades K – 5. We were fortunate to have Rev. Sue Montgomery, one of the disability consultants** of the Presbyterian Church USA, as our guest preacher for the day. She preached to our congregation from her wheelchair and gave us many things to think about! Although the members of the task force had known about the existence of a manual wheelchair lift before this, none of them knew where it was stored or had seen it used! Now they are all familiar with its ease of operation and the congregation has had the experience of seeing this device used during worship. Among the worship materials distributed by the PDC in the 2005 Access Sunday Packet was the Fred Rogers song, “It’s You I Like.” The song was used during the children’s sermon and the recording was played as the congregation exited the sanctuary.

Display boards with educational material and “hands on” exhibits of helping devices were available during the entire morning. The fellowship hour was moved to the location of the exhibits so that members and visitors could experience the “hands-on” materials on display. These materials covered an array of information about the services that are available in the local community.

Many people had never heard of “universal design” (as most of the task force members had not before they began this process) and, since that is a principle that the task force would like for the church to follow, it was a very important display. Universal design is the development of products and environments to be usable to as many people as possible, regardless of ability, age or situation. One of the most popular features on the display boards was a series of cartoons that task force members had collected which used humor to make a point! Our county Special Needs Library loaned a tape recorder used for specially recorded “Books on Tape” that is available to all individuals with disabilities through the Library of Congress. A reader for the visually impaired had been donated to the church and it was available for demonstration and loan. Some inexpensive devices such as a talking calculator and a template for signing documents were purchased by the church and were available to try.

The task force had been planning to use simulation exercises*** with slings, wheelchairs, crutches, etc. After consulting with Sue Montgomery, the attitudes of all members of the task force were altered when she shared that simulation exercises oftentimes produce undesirable results and are not recommended for use. Persons with disabilities have found that simulation exercises, although popular, are not an effective way to develop understanding. What generally happens is that people come away with more pity than understanding! Simulation exercises focus on what a person cannot do and lose sight of what a person can do--just in a different way. A wonderful example of accomplishing a task in a different way was demonstrated when Sue, an avid cyclist, displayed her hand cycle. All along the way, Sue gave invaluable advice and support to the task force.

At the direction of session, the task force will continue to function until December 31, 2006. The recommendation is for a permanent committee to address and assist with these issues. The session has agreed that future physical improvements to Bradley Hills' facilities or grounds will be made with consideration of the impact of those improvements upon individuals with special needs. \$5000 is expected to be placed in the 2006 ATF budget to be used for the development of a plan to redesign another exterior entrance to the building that will be accessible.

The members of the Task Force and members of the church have learned a tremendous amount during this process about additional physical and attitudinal changes that need to be made at Bradley Hills to make our household an accessible place open to **all** in the family of God.

*Joanie Friend, Parish Nurse at Bradley Hills
Parish Nurse Regional Coordinator, Presbyterian Health Network (PHN)*

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** PDC and PHN are two networks of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA), a ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA.*

***See **Disability Consultant Flyer** included in these materials.*

****If the reader would like additional information regarding the use of simulation exercises, a resource written by Kathie Snow entitled **Similarity Awareness** is available on the web in the *Presbyterians for Disability Concerns 2005 Access Sunday Packet* at www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc.*