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Thousands of years ago, a Hebrew prophet relayed these words as a message from God to His people:

“Build up, build up, prepare the road!
Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.” (*Isaiah 57:14, NIV*)

Today, it reminds me that we still need a barrier-free society so that people can experience belonging in community. Isaiah’s reference to “the road” suggests that accessibility is not as much a one-time event or action so much as a *journey* – this is good news! There will be many opportunities to demonstrate how we value all people on this journey toward a world where everybody belongs.

I am a Canadian who lives with a physical disability. Like many people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities and use Christian Horizons services, I am at high risk of contracting COVID-19 and not recovering. Because of this, I have been self-isolating and staying at home as much as possible since March 2020. When my community went from *yellow* to *orange*, to *green*, to *grey* and back again, I continued to stay home, knowing that my mortality rate would be high if I ventured out and was exposed to the virus. Moreover, I would be putting the lives of the people assisting me with essential tasks at risk. Yet, as we near the end of this pandemic, I am thankful for the increased empathy between people with and without disabilities resulting from this crisis.

Pre-pandemic, each week I would spend hours either on the phone scheduling or waiting on accessible transit services, hoping and praying that I would get where I needed to go in time. Such fear is relatively common to Canadians who require accessible transportation, yet I would feel frustrated like I was the only one with a lack of spontaneity and somehow my friends and coworkers had to find a way to accommodate me.

Pre-pandemic, I faced many barriers to contributing to in-person community. Don’t get me wrong - I do miss joining with coworkers in the office, sharing food in the lunchroom, or travelling to schools, faith communities, conferences, and community groups to share about the impact of Christian Horizons! While virtual platforms are not necessarily barrier-free, if I want to meet with somebody or a group of people now, I do not worry about how I will get there. I can join the office, visit a faith community, conference, or classroom virtually anywhere. What is more, stipulations like “essential trips only,” masks,

and lineups have helped everybody understand the challenges posed by a lack of spontaneity. I attribute these unexpected advancements on the road to a barrier-free society to God's power to transform our *mourning* into *dancing* and our *sorrows* into *joy*.

In our work with Christian Horizons, we model for a watching world what it means to *value people* and *foster belonging*, along with our other core values. We must collaborate with community leaders to continue removing barriers long after the pandemic is over. We help others to know that even when the pandemic is over, for some people who experience disability the practice of self-isolation and physical distancing will not necessarily end. To help keep people from becoming overwhelmed by all of the work that remains to be done, we will come alongside them and remind one another that accessibility represents a *journey*, not a single *event*. Further, we can suggest that since everyone's needs are different, flexibility and versatility are key: As a society, we can maintain as many options as possible, striving to serve both in-person and online.

I'm grateful that many restrictions are starting to lift as vaccines help slow the virus's spread. I hope and I pray, though, that this message from thousands of years ago continues to spread quickly: *Remove the barriers!*

Making the Connection

- What are some of the barriers or obstacles that you have seen come down during the pandemic? Do you think that there is now increased understanding about the needs of people with disabilities or not?
- Think of this road to a barrier-free society. How can we, as Christian Horizons, or you more specifically, help "spread the word" about the need to remove obstacles and barriers to communities where everybody belongs?