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A few years ago, I regularly spent Friday afternoons with my nephew, Andrew, in Hamilton. Near his home is a beautiful street full of historic buildings that have been transformed into restaurants and boutiques. 'Historic' is often synonymous with 'inaccessible,' and few of these buildings have been modified to meet modern accessibility standards. This can present barriers for Andrew, who uses a manual wheelchair.

Several businesses have portable wooden ramps out front. Travelling with Andrew, these are like welcome mats saying, "come on in!" Otherwise, most places have stairs that keep us from entering. One of the stores does not have a ramp to help us get over the raised threshold, but they were quick to hold the door open as we navigated the bump to get inside. They didn't have "the welcome sign" but made us feel welcome, regardless.

Both kinds of "welcome" are important – removing physical barriers and having a welcoming attitude. When welcomed, we feel *valued as people*. This is key to Christian Horizons' core value of valuing others. It's like saying, "I value you. I'm glad that are here."

In June, Christian Horizons partnered with Tyndale University College and Emmanuel Bible College to provide a virtual course on accessibility and churches.<sup>1</sup> The online environment was more accessible and also gave us the opportunity to connect with people from far away. One of our Christian Horizons Global partners joined from Kenya. Meshack had some great examples of how to say "Welcome." He has worked hard to remove barriers and to make the facilities at his church and school in Nairobi welcoming and physically accessible. His congregation has noted how the new washrooms are better for everyone. Seniors, for example, find them much easier to use now.

These renovations have made it possible to welcome children with mobility needs to the school, and they have reached out specifically to invite children on the autism spectrum to attend. One of the biggest "signs" of welcome (no pun intended!) is that they have started to teach sign language in every grade. I was delighted when I visited the school just before the pandemic: Each class greeted me with both audible words and sign together!

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<sup>1</sup> For further reflections on accessibility coming out of COVID see last month's reflection. You can learn more about the Tyndale course at [www.tyndale.ca/seminary/summer/courses/ched-past-spir-0670](http://www.tyndale.ca/seminary/summer/courses/ched-past-spir-0670)

Meshack tells us, “Though we do not have any children currently who are deaf, we want to be prepared.” They have been inspired by a church nearby that started offering sign language interpretation for their services even though they did not have anyone attending who was deaf. Word spread about this “welcome,” and many people who use sign language now participate in the church!

I love these intentional and forward-thinking examples of welcome. Accessibility and having supports in place sometimes need to precede those who need them. Along with a welcoming attitude, Andrew and I would have loved to have those little wooden ramp “welcome mats” in place for when we arrived.

Whether as an organization or as individuals, we should always value people by removing *physical* and *attitudinal* barriers so that people who experience disabilities fully belong and participate in our communities. On a personal level, this means taking the time to listen to people, get to know them, and anticipate any barriers that they may encounter. On a societal level, we advocate for safe and welcoming environments for everybody – in particular, the people who use Christian Horizons’ services. These are all ways to communicate “I value you. I am glad that you are here.”

### Making the Connection

- What is a time you have encountered a barrier (either on your own or supporting someone else)? Were you able to overcome it?
- What is a time when you felt truly welcome? What contributed to that?