

Mark Wallace, Executive Director of Organizational Culture and International Partnerships

Christian Horizons hosted another virtual family camp in February. It was a fun time of hanging out online, complete with 'snowball fights' (throwing crumpled up paper at our webcams), singing campfire and worship songs, and enjoying each other's company.

It was supposed to be the third family camp of the winter. We were planning two in person camps, but made the difficult decision to cancel when Omicron hit. This was hard for families that had been looking forward to the support, encouragement, and excitement of actually "going to" camp.

For others though, in person camps are not the right fit. Virtual camp has been a great opportunity to reach new people. Because online camps are so easy to join, people could participate from their own homes. We had several housemates who are supported by Christian Horizons in Saskatchewan take part and laugh along with us.

There was also a man who uses Christian Horizons services in Toronto who joined from his home. He has a long history with camp dating back to the early camp days of Christian Horizons but had not been able to be a part of one of our camps for many years. He played the shaker on video along with the music. His smile welcomed others in the group as he communicated with us without using words.

The new ways people were able to participate reminded us that, even when in-person camps start up again, it will be best if we can still offer a virtual camps option for people who benefit from these.

Virtual family camp made me think about all the new ways we've learned to connect during the pandemic. I remembered Harold, who was in our Onward video from this past year. Harold can now contact his family independently, starting up FaceTime with relatives without needing staff support.

Even my ways of interacting with my mom have changed during the pandemic. We talk more often and, instead of just calling on the phone, we video chat. These are things we want to hold onto even after the pandemic is over.

"Inclusion" means *we will make room for you if you show up*. Belonging, though goes further. Belonging means we don't feel like we're whole if you're not here. When you're not here, we miss you and we're going to reach out and go looking for you. Virtual family camp has enabled us to experience belonging with people who hadn't known it in that way before.

Jasmine Duckworth, who works in the Ottawa community, recently wrote a post for the Disability and Faith Forum reflecting on her relationship with her church. Jasmine faced some physical barriers that were hard to overcome when the church was meeting in person. Those barriers

disappeared when they went online. This is reason to celebrate! The church has gone a step further though, and made changes so that when they started meeting again in person, the physical barriers were removed. Jasmine experiences belonging in a new way now.

I think there are a couple of things we can do as advocates, supporters, or networkers with and for those who experience disabilities:

1. First, let's hold onto the lessons we've learned during COVID. Let's think of ways we can continue to connect, ways that we might not have known before. How can we make communities accessible by offering a virtual option even when in-person options resume.
2. Second, when we start gathering together in person again we need to ask "who is missing?" It can be easy to just be thankful for whoever shows up and forget people who are now unable to join. Instead, let's work to address barriers so our communities can be *whole*. It's good to miss people who we got to know online, and to figure out how to stay connected even as things change again.

This is my encouragement for all of us. How can we help people to stay connected virtually when that's the best option, even after the pandemic? And how can we help people who have connected virtually experience fewer barriers to being present in person? Virtual family camp helped me experience "belonging" in a new way. Now comes the exciting challenge of how to best use our imaginations to carry these experiences of belonging into the future.

Making the Connection

- What is a new connection that I have made during the pandemic that I want to keep up once it's over?
- What physical space am I looking forward to being in and how can I make that space accessible to others?
- Take a moment to read Jasmine's Disability and Faith post: <https://disabilityandfaith.org/every-body-belongs-in-the-body/> If you find these kinds of topics interesting, you can sign up to receive email updates of new posts!