

Keith Dow, *Manager of Organizational and Spiritual Life*

Sandy suggested we meet at A&W, one of her favourite fast-food options, and luckily one of mine too. She uses Christian Horizons' services, and we were planning a collaborative session for an upcoming conference. I wanted to meet Sandy in person to hear her story. She is actively involved and contributes to her church, but it hasn't always been this way. I appreciated her honesty as she shared difficult stories of exclusion from churches in the past. "It was like basically being shoved on the back burner like I didn't really exist." Many people I know are surprised when they hear just how blatant the rejection is that people with disabilities can face in spaces that preach love and kindness.

Thankfully, things have changed for Sandy. While it worked well for some people, it wasn't easy for her to stay connected when her current church was online-only through lockdowns. Now that things have opened up, Sandy is actively involved there three days a week. "Since coming back... it has been great. It has been good to sing together," she says. I'm impressed by her faithfulness and commitment to her community. She's part of a weekly bible study and a "secret sisters" group where they pray for one another and give gifts through the year. Transportation can be a hurdle for many people, but different people from Sandy's church come to pick her up each week to bring her to services. Sandy's faith is important to her, but she also recognizes how meaningful church can be for relationships – a place to support one another. The messages at her church are practical, down-to-earth and relatable; she loves this.

Sandy is now a part of a community where she feels welcome. She encourages people who work with Christian Horizons to help faith communities to become more accessible, welcoming, and understanding of everyone who comes through their doors.

Like Sandy, I have had both difficult experiences and good ones in faith communities. After moving to Ottawa to begin studies at the Dominican University College, I wouldn't have survived long if not for church potlucks and meals for the college and careers group! The social support was a lifeline for me and I'm pretty sure my diet of microwaved hot dogs and processed cheese slices would have been disastrous on its own.

As we support people, it's important to hear what role their community plays in their life. For many people, faith communities (whether being a part of a church, mosque, synagogue or some other tradition) can be a valuable source of encouragement, spiritual inspiration, friendship, and enjoyment. Religious communities make a positive impact in their geographical area, the "halo project" by a Canadian Think-tank [shows](#). Their social-

good activities and charitable work give congregants outlets for meaningful contribution, along with the value that comes from being a volunteer or lay leader for the faith community itself. The "[Putting Faith to Work](#)" project by the Collaborative on Faith and Disability demonstrates that faith communities can also be a great link to work opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

It can be intimidating or awkward to find out more about someone's religious tradition and what it means to them. Similarly, it can be hard to figure out transportation when people are a part of diverse faith communities across a wide geographic area. It takes courage and an open mind to support people in religious settings that we're unfamiliar with or might personally disagree with. That's why Jasmine Duckworth and I are joining Bill Gaventa in a webinar on February 15th about how to navigate these questions and tensions to support people in their faith journey. Rather than simply bringing someone to a particular church, synagogue, or mosque because "they've always gone there," coming out of the pandemic provides an excellent opportunity to assist people to find a spiritual community that really works well *for them*. For people who haven't enjoyed their religious involvement, this might mean exploring non-religious activities and opportunities to engage with. For many churches and other faith communities, it may mean following up on Sandy's encouragement to help these places – many which may proclaim "all are welcome!" on a sign out front – to grow in accessibility so that their welcoming beliefs become a reality.

Making the Connection

- Supporting people's spiritual beliefs and community involvement – whatever their religious tradition – has been important to Christian Horizons from the beginning. Brainstorm: What are some reasons why people might want to be part of a religious community?
- If you work in a support location, when is the last time you've read the "faith and culture" section of personal plans? When is the last time that these have been updated or revised based on the person's desires? We're all growing and changing – plans need to change too.
- If you are interested in joining the webinar on February 15th or watching the recording, be sure to learn more at www.aiddreligion.org