

Mark Wallace, Executive Director of Organizational Culture and International Partnerships

For a week in February every school year, Woodland Christian School, in Kitchener, sets aside much of its usual class schedule to focus on a specific topic. These “Special Emphasis Weeks” focus on learning about a relevant issue and raising funds for a charity. Every four years, they focus on disability and raise funds for Christian Horizons’ global work.

They had national wheelchair basketball and volleyball players as well as a disabled artist come and lead activities with the students. They had Becca, a person who uses Christian Horizons services come and talk about her experience and how the support she has helps her achieve her goals. They had chapel services focusing on disability with members of the Christian Horizons Organizational Culture and Spiritual life department including me and Chantal who also spoke about her experience as a disabled woman and local regional counselor.

Marjorie Sutherland, faculty at Woodland shared why disability is one of the topics:

We want to be a community of Belonging! This means we look for ways to make sure that all children can belong here.

Being "inclusive" means that the building and classrooms are accessible. It also means that students have clubs and activities that are accessible to them, and that classes and learning can be adapted to include a variety of mobility needs and learning styles. But belonging goes beyond that to include the idea that we need each other, and that students with a variety of abilities are celebrated, and both lead and contribute in meaningful ways. We need them as much as they need us. To say that students belong here means that we as a community are necessarily poorer or diminished if [all] are not with us here.

For Christian Horizons working with the school helps us achieve our goals. Our Board of Directors have set “Ends” or goals for our organization. They are:

- End 1:** People experience services that reflect the Christian foundation of Christian Horizons.
- End 2:** People experience services that enhance their rights, choices, relationships, dignity and citizenship while supporting their ongoing growth and development.
- End 3:** People experience communities where everybody belongs.

I find the third end, that “People experience communities where everybody belongs” audacious. This goal of belonging goes beyond the places that we own or control. We actively work beyond our own services to promote communities where everybody can belong. Woodland School invited us to help them, what a thrill.

Students that graduate from Woodland have engaged with these ideas. They will take the lessons learned and make communities they belong to in the future more accessible so everybody can belong.

The funds they raised this year will help belonging and accessibility happen right away in Ethiopia. Woodland raised \$12,000 for Horizons Academy in Assela to build new accessible washrooms for better physical accessibility as well as privacy for students who need support in the washroom. They were also able to add showers for students who may benefit from this to fully enjoy their day at school.

I love the fact that we got to play a part in shaping what belonging looks like with a school in Canada and they in turn helped fund the same work for students in Ethiopia.

Horizons academy is a place that lives out our Ends. It is a place that is motivated by the faith focus of Christian Horizons Ethiopia that serves children of all faiths. It helps students develop their God-given gifts and it seeks to be a place where all can belong.



Bisrat, (the boy in the middle with his hand on his chin) is often the life of the party in the class. He loves to play with classmates when he is integrated into his class grade (as in the photo) or when he is in the Child Development Unit for specialized small group support.

The first week in July, Horizons Academy will have its graduation. Each year around 100 kids graduate and go onto the next chapter of their lives. Each of them will have had the experience of having folks like Bisrat (pictured above) in their classes. We trust that each one graduating from Horizons Academy or Woodland will go on to help make whatever community they find themselves in, one where everybody can belong.

Making the Connection

- What communities do you belong to? How can you work to help others (especially those with disabilities) belong?
- What is a great example you have of seeing people welcomed? What steps were taken?