

BUILDING COMMUNITIES *of Belonging*

The Ongoing Story of Christian Horizons

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Chapter 2 **ANSWERING GOD'S CALL – THE FOUNDING OF CHRISTIAN HORIZONS**

“If God does have such a ministry in mind, now is the time to be getting actively involved in promoting it. In just a few years Steven will be ready for it. And even more, many children from Christian homes are already in need.Let us pray that the Lord will guide in this matter.”

Letter by Jim Reese to Adrienne Reese, November 13, 1964



THE EARLY VISION FOR THE MINISTRY TAKES SHAPE

The same day that Jim and Adrienne came to terms with the exceptional needs of their newborn son, Jim returned to his ministry, testifying of what God was doing in their lives. As he continued to travel across Canada and the United States in his ministerial role, Jim began to talk about how God had touched him and Adrienne through their son, Steven.

Inevitably, people came up to Jim and shared their stories about their own sons and daughters who had exceptional needs. A common concern expressed by parents was worry about what would happen to their children once they were no longer able to look after them. As he listened to parents expressing their desire for their children to eventually live in a distinctively Christian residential environment, Jim began to realize that God wanted him and Adrienne to establish a ministry focused on providing Christian services to those with exceptional needs and their families.

While looking into the possibility of establishing such a ministry more seriously, Jim became aware of an organization known as the *Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded* (CAMR) and its Ontario branch, the *Ontario Association for the Mentally Retarded* (OAMR). An early expression of the community living movement that would ultimately transform society's approach to people with

a developmental disability, the OAMR had established a home for people with exceptional needs.

As the vision for Christian Horizons began to form, Jim shared the OAMR's goal and mandate to mobilize society to move from exclusion towards inclusion of people with a developmental disability. At the same time, however, he realized that the OAMR did not satisfy the vision he had for an organization with a distinctly Christian emphasis. He also felt strongly that there needed to be more input from within the Christian community as to how residential homes for people with a developmental disability could incorporate the Christian message. That way people supported could experience the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and learn more about Him. These realizations provided the impetus for Jim to take the next steps towards the establishment of Christian Horizons.

Through his evangelistic work across Canada and the United States, Jim had met many members of the Christian faith community, including those who would be instrumental in the founding of Christian Horizons. Among them were Dr. Roy Howarth and his wife, Verna, whom Jim first met at a conference hosted by the Christian Businessmen's Association of Canada. At the time, the Howarths had told Jim about their daughter Jennifer's developmental disability. Although that meeting took place prior to the birth of Jim's son, Steven, the two families had

instantly connected when Jim had shared about his younger brother John. After Steven was born, Jim reconnected with Roy, whose personal experience gave him a special sensitivity to Jim and Adrienne's evolving vision.

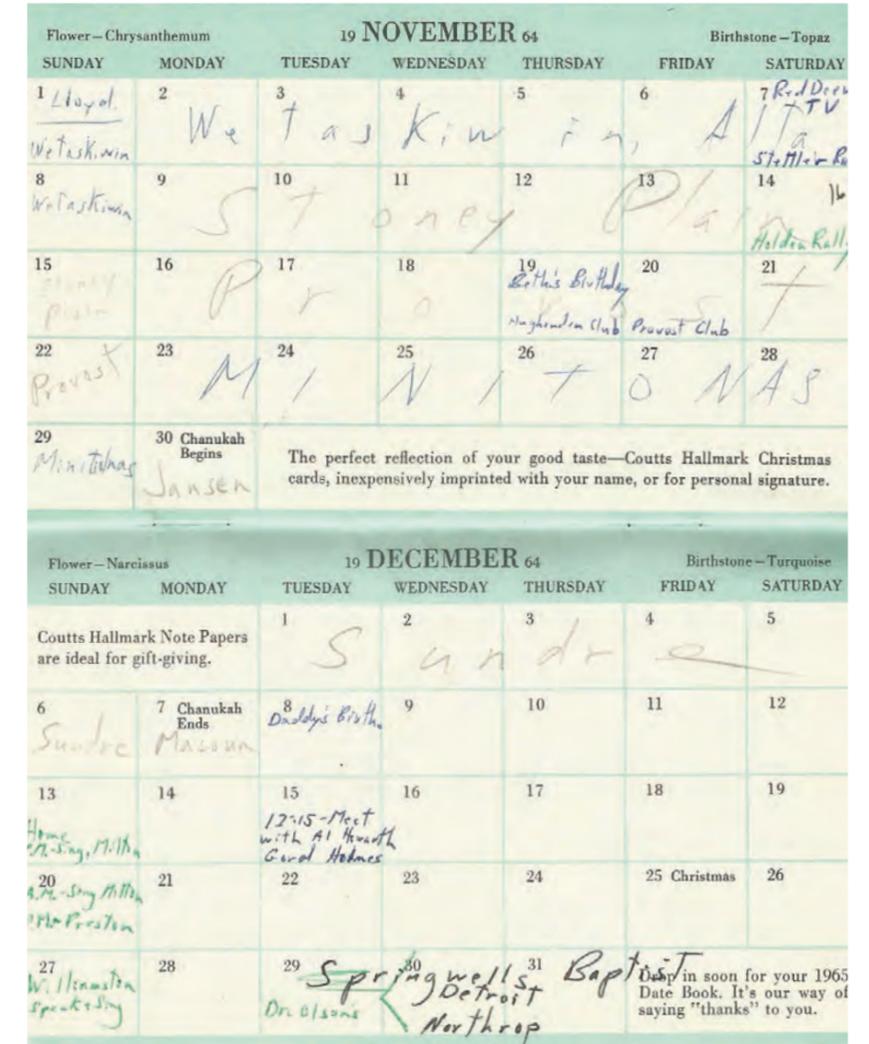
As Jim and Roy got to know each other better, a friendship developed. Jim told Roy about his growing conviction that God was calling him and Adrienne to establish a fellowship for people with exceptional needs and their families. Roy told Jim about his brother, Alan, in Toronto who was very active in the OAMR and whose daughter, Shelley, also had exceptional needs. Jim contacted Alan and they arranged to meet for lunch together with Alan's friend, Gordon Holmes, on December 15, 1964. Alongside Jim and Adrienne, Roy, Alan and Gordon would all play an integral role in the founding of Christian Horizons.

THE FOUNDING MEETING OF THE ONTARIO CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Out of many conversations, correspondence and meetings between Jim, Roy, Alan and Gordon throughout the fall of 1964 and the first half of 1965, came the founding of the *Ontario Christian Association for Exceptional Children* (OCAEC), later renamed Christian Horizons. On June 10, 1965, pastors from across southwestern Ontario and parents of children with exceptional needs gathered at the Founders Hall of The People's Church in Toronto for what marked the birth of the ministry. At the meeting, Alan Howarth, Gordon Holmes and Jim Reese laid out their shared vision for a broadly based non-denominational Christian ministry, albeit with a distinctly evangelical character. The founding members then moved on to form a Board of several outstanding people from various denominations and fields of expertise.

THE FOUNDING BOARD AND ADVISORY COUNCIL OF CHRISTIAN HORIZONS

Members of the first Board of Christian Horizons were Gordon Bolender (a Kitchener school principal), Dr. Paul Roberts (a medical doctor who had founded a hospital as a missionary in Ecuador and was practicing at Sunnybrook



THE RISE OF THE COMMUNITY LIVING MOVEMENT

The 1960s witnessed a gradual shift towards community living for people with exceptional needs which provides the contextual background for homes such as Shepherd's Home in the United States and the OAMR's home in Ontario. As the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services elaborates, "[by] the 1960s, attitudes towards people with a developmental disability were starting to change. The 'Community Living movement' was spreading across North America."¹ The Community Living movement had its roots in many communities and was started mainly by families, like the Reeses, who were looking for an alternative to their loved ones having to live in a government-operated institution. Many of these member-driven organizations originally shared an implicit or explicit Christian ethos, but that was not always sustained in the following decades. Many of the families that would establish ties with Christian Horizons over time were at least at some point involved in their local Community Living movement. The underlying premise of the evolving movement was that with the right services and supports in the community, people like Steven Reese could live in and be contributing members of their local community just like everyone else.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. <http://www.mcscs.gov.on.ca/en/dshistory/community/index.aspx> (accessed February 12, 2015).



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Although still used as a clinical descriptor, the term 'retarded' is no longer considered appropriate. Nevertheless, this was a recognized term at the time Christian Horizons was founded. A term that was originally neutral in meaning, the word 'retarded' is derived from the Latin verb 'retardare', meaning "to make slow, delay, keep back, or hinder." When the word was first applied in relation to developmental disabilities in the late 1800s, it was used to replace terms such as 'idiot', 'moron', and 'imbecile', which had been commonplace throughout the 19th century, yet had become increasingly perceived as derogatory. By the 1960s, the same thing had happened to the term 'retarded'.

Hospital in Toronto), Alan Howarth (the owner of a printing business in Toronto and vice-president of Christian Horizons), Gordon Holmes (a businessman in Mississauga and secretary of Christian Horizons), Violet Turner (a homemaker from Toronto and treasurer of Christian Horizons), and Jim Reese as president.

The first advisory council of Christian Horizons consisted of Dr. Stewart Boehmer (the president of what was then Ontario Bible College), Dr. Harry Faught (the founding president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada), Dr. Roy Howarth (a pediatrician), Dr. E. Sidney Kerr (pastor of Temple Baptist Church), Dr. William Newell (head of the Christian Missionary Alliance Churches), Dr. Nelles Silverthorne (research pediatrician at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto), Dr. Paul Smith (pastor of The People's Church) and Reverend Vincent Trimmer (Baptist minister).

CHOOSING A NAME FOR THE MINISTRY

Initially, Jim had proposed that the name of the ministry should be *The Ontario Christian Association for the Mentally Retarded*, modeled after the *Ontario Association for the Mentally Retarded* (OAMR). Although in the early 1960s this name would have stirred very little controversy, founding Board member Alan Howarth felt strongly that the term 'retarded' was inappropriate and suggested that it should be replaced with the word 'exceptional'. The Board followed his direction, further taking into account that the ministry would serve not just people with mental disabilities, but also those experiencing physical

and emotional challenges. Thus, Christian Horizons started out as the Ontario Christian Association for Exceptional Children (OCAEC). In choosing the term 'exceptional' over 'retarded', the founders of Christian Horizons were at the cusp of the evolving thinking and change of how society sees people who have developmental disabilities. As well, the Board was setting the stage for Christian Horizons to not only serve people with a specific disability but for the ministry to be broad in scope, reaching out to people with various exceptional needs.

CHRISTIAN HORIZONS LAUNCHES ITS CAMP MINISTRY

From the earliest days, those involved in Christian Horizons considered it a priority for the ministry to establish residential homes. However, the logistical challenges during the start-up years were prohibitive. Christian Horizons didn't have the funds, the expertise nor the employees to run a residential home program. In view of these limitations, providing residential care to people with exceptional needs could only be a long-term goal. This did not mean, however, that the ministry could not meet the practical needs of people with exceptional needs in other meaningful ways in the interim.

Driven by the desire to positively impact the lives of children with developmental disabilities and their families, Jim and the Board turned their attention to a more immediate solution – launching a camping program specifically designed for campers with exceptional needs in the summer of 1967. The notion of a camp