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R.H. “Bear” Berends, a Pioneer in Inclusive Education, Announces Plans to Retire

GRAND RAPIDS, MICH (November 2014) – R.H. “Bear” Berends has announced his plans to retire after 34 years of leading the inclusive education movement in West Michigan Christian schools and across the nation. He will leave his post as Executive Director of CLC Network (Christian Learning Center) on August 31, 2015.

“Bear’s legacy is really incredible,” said Bob Van Wieren, former principal of Byron Center Christian and the current CLC Network board president. “He was instrumental in helping West Michigan Christian schools understand the importance of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom. His leadership has helped create outstanding inclusive faith communities across the country that truly reflect the Kingdom of God.”

Berends has led CLC Network since 1981. The organization was the first to pioneer an inclusive education model in West Michigan at Zeeland Christian School, and then replicate the model at many area Christian schools. CLC Network is now an advocacy and consulting organization that has serviced more than 2,000 congregations and more than 100 schools throughout the United States and Canada.

“We’ve come so far in the last 30 years,” said Berends. “And I know that our next generation of leadership is going to multiply and expand those efforts. Our staff and our board are passionate about encouraging every Christian school in every state to serve students with disabilities and to see students with disabilities as equal, integral members of their community.”

Many of the schools Berends has worked with, including Zeeland Christian School, are grateful for his work and the communities he helped create:

“When we began including students with significant needs 25 years ago, it turned the peer structure on its head, and in a good way,” explained Bill Van Dyk, principal at Zeeland Christian. “Today, the students have to think about who has special needs. Many parents have said that their kids are becoming better people thanks to the inclusion program.”

“Our kids better understand disabilities because of inclusion,” continued Scott Schermer, an inclusive education teacher at Jenison Christian School. “They are more willing to approach someone with a disability and aren’t afraid of them; often more so than their parents.”

“Classes with inclusive education students often get along better,” said Trish King, principal of Sussex Christian School in New Jersey. “Students who have learning differences have changed this school for the future.”

Berends will continue to serve in an advisory position at CLC Network through 2016. The search for his successor has already begun. A new Executive Director will be announced in the spring.

“As a board, we are excited to move into a new season of growth. We plan to replicate our work in West Michigan with Christian schools across the country.” said Thomas Hoeksema Sr., PhD, CLC Network’s board secretary. “We are grateful to Bear for helping set the precedent for this season, and we’re confident our next director will continue to fulfill our mission in schools and churches throughout the country.”

About R.H. ‘Bear’ Berends:

R.H. ‘Bear’ Berends received his secondary education teaching certificate in social studies and humanities from Calvin College and his masters teaching certificate in cognitive impairment from Michigan State University. He served the Grand Rapids Public Schools for eight years before becoming the Executive Director of CLC Network.

About CLC Network:

CLC Network is a national non-profit committed to promoting the development of people with a variety of abilities and disabilities to live as active, integrated members of their communities. The organization partners with families and organizations to more fully understand individuals with disabilities and to build support systems that enable their inclusion in all aspects of life. For more information on CLC Network or a list of available resources, visit www.clcnetwork.org.

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