

# Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

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✦ A Ministry of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns

## How Do We Include People with Disabilities?

Mark Stephenson, Director of Disability Concerns

For all who want their church to be a healthy, vibrant community where everybody belongs and everybody serves, here are some ideas.

**Start with kindness.** Few people intend to be unkind. But many people with disabilities experience unkindness. Even in church. Our daughter Nicole is non-verbal, but she knows when she is being treated kindly, and when she is ignored. Inclusion begins with recognizing the image of God in every person. Greet people with

disabilities warmly, including people who cannot respond with words. Ask the person using a walker how you might help. Greet the woman with a cognitive impairment, and use her name. Ask the mother of an autistic son what life is like; then really listen.

**Make easier changes first.** Provide large print bulletins for people with visual impairments. Distribute print copies of lyrics displayed on the overhead screen for people who cannot stand.

Begin with the simplest structural changes such as a ramp and pew cut-outs.

Acknowledge differences. Worship leaders should say: “If you are able, please stand.” Offer grape juice and gluten-free bread for those who need these alternatives at commu-



nion. Stop wearing perfume and aftershave to church so that people who have allergies can breathe freely.

**Find a gift and unleash it.** The old church growth saying was, “Find a need and fill it.” This approach patronized people in need by assuming that they had nothing to give. God gives spiritual gifts to all his children, including people with disabilities. Churches that invite everyone to share their gifts for ministry find God’s grace flowing in new and wonderful ways.

**Dig deeper.** In healthy church life, the further a congregation walks down the road of including all members, the greater the cost and the more difficult the process. Real friendship, and not just foyer fellowship, takes work—especially, say, with the developmentally delayed young woman who dominates every conversation. Listening to the mother whose son has

autism takes energy, but finding ways to help her family with the challenges they face takes long-term commitment. Visiting a young man from your church who has schizophrenia means overcoming your own fears about what to say and do.

As congregations dig to this deeper level of inclusion, Disability Concerns stands ready to help with a network of hundreds of volunteers, with various print and Internet resources, and with a variety of workshops and conferences offered across North America.

**Discover the joy.** God doesn’t make mistakes. “God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them just as he wanted them to be.” (1 Corinthians 12:18) As we fully include all whom God has brought into the congregation, our joy is made complete, and our ministry is made whole.

## ? did you know . . .

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Disability Concerns’ ministry. Our theme for this anniversary is “Recognizing the Image of God.” To celebrate, we are distributing this special issue of *Breaking Barriers* to most of our readers via *The Banner*, and we sent a worship resource pack to every Christian Reformed congregation.

In this issue of *Breaking Barriers* we ask and attempt to answer biblically some of the big questions raised by disability, sometimes drawing on wisdom from previous issues.

Many congregations receive *Breaking Barriers* in bulk for all members. If your church does not receive this resource, please contact us. We would love to add your church to our mailing list.



## How Should You Treat a Person with a Disability?

Judy Clausing, who passed away in 1994

from issue 34

I am Judy Clausing. I have brown hair, blue eyes, big feet, and visual impairment. I am not Judy Clausing, the blind woman. Unfortunately, the latter is often how people see me. I have friends who have hearing or mobility impairments, and they also report that people often refer to them in terms of their disabilities.

So how should you treat a person with a disability? Treat



them the way you treat anyone else! If you aren't sure what to do, ask the person with the disability. It is usually better to ask what they need, even if you think you already know. Each person is unique, and needs vary from person to person. Some people need a

lot of assistance, while others require no assistance at all.

Some people refuse to accept assistance even if they need it. That's their problem. Take blindness, for example. If a blind person refuses to take your arm for guidance, and subsequently falls down, that's not your fault. The person who has the disability must learn, often the hard way, to deal with the results of pride.

I frequently had to learn things that hard way. Over time I have come to realize that asking for assistance is not a sign of failure on my part but only of my willingness to acknowledge that I need some help. I have come to terms with my disability and can say, "Yes, it is a limitation." Part of my reason for coming to this acceptance is that I now recognize that all of us, not just people with disabilities, have limitations of one type or another.

I think of children and smile. Children are very open to asking questions and letting their feelings be known. They come up to me and ask how I read, write, and so on. Be open, like children, and ask if you don't know the answer. Also be accepting like children. They frequently don't see the disability as a big deal. It's just another part of the person.

There is work to be done, both by people with disabilities and by the rest of the population, in learning how to deal with each other. I firmly believe that people who have disabilities must try to educate the rest of the population, and the rest of the population should also make efforts to learn what to do.

In order to live my life to the fullest I need you to accept me and give me a chance. This is love, and love is what Jesus calls all of us to do.

## A Note to Our Regular Readers

Some of you have been receiving and reading *Breaking Barriers* for many years. You may remember when our newsletter was called *Christian Companions*. Many of you have contributed articles and letters for publication, and many more have contributed financially to help us with the cost of this newsletter. Thank you so much for your faithfulness, and we pray that our work has been and continues to be a service to you. Please pray for the ministry of Disability Concerns as well.

Because we want to make the best use of the money God provides for our ministry, we are making changes to the distribution of *Breaking Barriers* to eliminate duplicate mailings. If you are receiving a copy at your home and at your church and would like to continue to do so, please let us know. If we don't hear from you, we will delete your home subscription (this only applies to those of you receiving two copies). If you have questions, please phone us at 888-463-0272; email disability concerns@crcna.org; or write Disability Concerns, CRCNA, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

In the next issue of *Breaking Barriers* we plan to highlight senior citizens and disability. More than 40 percent of people over age 65 have a disability. If you are over 65 and have experience with a disability—your own or a loved one's—please tell us your story. If you are younger than 65 and an older person has had an impact on your thinking about disability, we'd like to hear about that too. We will edit your submissions, and print as many stories as space allows.

—Editor



## letters

I read with some disbelief the response, written by Ms. Aldrich-Wikkerink, to "FASD Brings Need for Support" in the spring issue of *Breaking Barriers*. The unnamed writer of the article opened her heart and shared her story with honesty and grace. As parents of three adopted Russian-born children, one of whom has FASD, we were blessed through the reading of this article and, being very familiar with the struggles of this family, feel grateful that this disability was addressed in this publication. I feel some indignation, however, that this family's challenges were dismissed by a stranger. Making the decision to adopt is complicated; and raising an adopted child with FASD can be a lonely and isolating adventure, as the author of the article so clearly pointed out. The opinions expressed in Ms. Aldrich-Wikkerink's response are all too familiar to my husband

and me; sadly, they are all too common in our Christian circles. The very least we can do as Christians is to reach out with caring arms and uphold and encourage those who have been blessed with the compassion and courage to adopt children with disabilities. May God bless that family, and may the church community they are a part of do what Jesus would do—wrap them in loving arms of encouragement, practical support, and prayer!

Liz Koetsier  
Camlachie, Ontario

I'm a member of the board at Salem Christian Homes here in Southern California. I find *Breaking Barriers* to be a very encouraging and moving magazine. It confirms and validates what I'm doing. I really appreciated your last issue, the Summer 2007 one.

Norberto Wolf  
Bellflower, California

## What Makes a Life Worth Living?

Ted Verseput, former Director of Disability Concerns

from issue 8

The term, “Quality of life,” has taken on a negative implication. We usually hear about it in connection with euthanasia and abortion for impaired fetuses. In that context it has come to mean that if an individual does not meet certain criteria for existence, he or she does not have the right to live. That frightens me. It raises vital questions. Who will decide the standards of “quality” life? Who will make the decisions as to whether an individual meets those standards? Who will enforce the standards?

Even we who are close to people with multiple disabilities find ourselves wondering at times if their lives are really worthwhile. They cannot feed or dress themselves, walk, or speak. Every decision is made for them: what they will do and when and how. What kind of life is that? Is it “quality”? Is it worthwhile? Such thoughts are encouraged by our society’s approach to “quality of life,” and they are destructive.

Thankfully, there is an eternal standard of “quality.” At the beginning of time God made man in his own image, and “God is love.” Ever since that time the essence of life has been to love and to be loved. God loves us, and demonstrates that love through the life

and death of Jesus Christ. God continually shows his love in his grace to us. God has also made clear that the essential requirement of humans is to receive his love and to show it in turn to others. Only by living in this atmosphere of love do we have “quality” life.

Our daughter, Salli, is extremely limited in what she can do. But when we enter the home where she lives and hear her exaggerated squeal of delight, we know that she loves us and she knows that we love her. The same is true of the majority of people who are considered mentally limited. Indeed, there are extremely few persons who are so limited that they cannot appreciate being loved and responding to that love. In fact, we cannot be sure that anyone is in that category. And that’s “quality” life as God has established it. God alone has the right to set that standard and the right to judge by it.

The duty of parents, society, and the church is clear. We are to contribute to everyone’s “quality of life.” We should do this by seeking to make the lives of all people more comfortable, joyful, and meaningful. But above all we must provide to all the opportunity to love and be loved. If this is present, all human life in all circumstances is “quality.”



Verseput, his late wife Arlene, and Salli

## What Difference Is Disability Concerns Making?

John Cook, Disability Concerns Regional Advocate from Classis Eastern Canada

In my own church and classis I have seen that Disability Concerns has helped churches to enfold people with disabilities into the church community. Ramps are built. Gifts are recognized. Needs are better seen and tended to. In my own church I have observed that pains due to disabilities are less likely to be hidden, and more likely to be exposed and revealed. Needs have become part of our currency. People talk to me, their “church disability advocate,” about their ailments, their cancer, their relapses.

What might we strive for in the future in the work of Disability Concerns? We might more clearly give voice to the Good News, as seen in the Person who always reached out to those who were hidden, whose needs were not touched. Eugene Peterson writes that God touches man exactly where he is: in the workplace, the kitchen, the wheelchair. Very down to earth, and, possibly, very grubby. Likewise, a healthy church will embrace and enfold all who come through its doors, just as they are!



### health corner

#### Stress and the Holidays

Elly Van Alten, Disability Concerns Regional Advocate from Classis Alberta North

Christmas and other holidays can bring sadness and stress as well as joy. People who are depressed sometimes get more depressed (even to the point of suicide). Holiday celebrations remind us of losses (especially of loved ones or relationships), financial troubles, and other stressors. Some people avoid family festivities because they are emotionally stressful.

Persons with physical illnesses may not be able to travel to be with family, or they may only have the energy to join in the celebration for a short period of time. Persons in care facilities may not be able to attend our traditional holiday festivities.

Here are some strategies for dealing with these issues:

- **Make celebrations low-key.** We can all benefit from decreasing the stress of holiday preparations. Statistics show that family violence increases during the holidays due to stress levels and unreasonable expectations of family gatherings.
- **Start new traditions,** especially when the loss of a family member is involved (through death, estrangement, or admission to a care facility). Even in these new traditions there is room to celebrate the good memories that we have of the person who is missing. A visit to a care facility will bring joy to your family member as well as to others.
- **Remember the reason for the season.** After all, Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, and that’s worth celebrating! For many people this has totally faded from the picture, but perhaps if we make it more about *him* than *us*, Christmas can become joyful again.

