

BREAKING BARRIERS

Published by Disability Concerns, Christian Reformed Church in North America Winter 2006; Issue 69

Bad Things

Being a Christian doesn't mean bad things can't happen to you.

So when the worst does happen, what do you do?

Those of us who have been hit by a disability understand the loss of freedom, the loss of independence, the loss of what we used to do, and the reality of what we can do now. This loss can cause a depression that's like nothing we have ever experienced.

I know this far too well. I had a major accident when I was 30 years old. A ladder I was standing on broke and

I crashed down, breaking leg bones and blowing out my ankle.

Due to the injury, my right ankle has been fused and I now walk with a cane and with the aid of a special support in my boot. Because of all the operations I live with chronic pain.

Before the accident I had an active family life, three great kids, and an understanding wife. I was an accomplished athlete, involved in football, soccer, archery, and martial arts. I wanted my kids to be in that world, too. Not being able to participate in sports tore me apart. This accident caused depression not just in me but in my whole family.

Myself, I went through a bit of hell. For the first six months our family relied on Christ. Things held together despite the fact that I was receiving only 75% of my income. But eventually I lost all faith. I thought God had forgotten my family and me. I tried to kill myself three times. The last time doctors said I took enough morphine to kill at least three elephant herds. But Christ kept me alive-without him I wouldn't be here.

Some of my depression came from having to walk with a cane. I didn't want to use one, but my doctor warned me of the consequences. He said hip surgery would be next if I didn't start using a cane.

I hated using my cane because it was so...medical. So in the midst of all the depression, the pain, and the loss, I came up with an idea that would help my family, myself, and others. I set up a website called CanesCanada.com, and began sourcing, importing, and selling a wide variety of beautiful yet functional canes and walking sticks. I have everything from elegant silver canes to canes that convert to fishing rods. One of my favorite sayings is "Walk with a smile, and walk with style."

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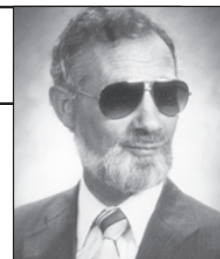


Llano Gorman

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From the Director



People with disabilities are generally quiet people—quiet about their disabilities, at any rate. If they were born with the disability they were probably taught from infancy to be cooperative and to do what their doctors, teachers, and parents told them to do. In other words, they were taught to be “good patients.” If they received the disability later in life they most likely had already learned to think of disabilities as ugly and tragic, something you talk about as little as possible.

The result is that people with disabilities often do not speak up or complain when they should. In fact, some of them may not even realize that opportunities and obligations are being withheld from them. Telling them that they should speak up is like persuading customers to buy something they don’t know they need or want.

However, other disabled people are vividly and poignantly aware of how they are being ignored and neglected, and this is especially painful when it happens to them in church. The following is from a letter I received from a deaf friend, and the pain it expresses is unavoidably clear.

Churches like short-term victims, and their basic response is to give a suffering person flowers, books, cards, visitations. This attention makes someone who is temporarily disabled by illness feel warm fuzzies while taking time off to recover. For a person with a chronic disability, such treatment is degradation.

We don’t want that kind of attention for something that already sets us apart from society. A disability is not an illness from which one can recover by taking time off. It stays around for good, so one has to learn to get along in society in spite of it.

Instead of gifts and attention, we need help to break down the barriers so we can function. But we are seldom asked about the barriers. Church people do not seem interested in hearing that staying home is less painful for those of us who have hearing impairments than is

the isolation of being in a crowd of people with whom we can’t communicate. They don’t want to form groups small enough for us to converse in or to seek us out for one-on-one conversation. They seem not to like learning how to share skills or energy or time so we can be freed from barriers to become productive.

They preach and talk about the church being “family,” yet they ignore the family members who are troubled by long-term disabilities. No matter how disabled a person is, there is always some contribution he or she can make when barriers are broken down. If we are invited to contribute, our own self-esteem will be nurtured and we will have a way of passing on to others the help we ourselves have received.

Every member of the body of Christ has a gift from God’s Spirit, and every member is obliged by the Spirit to use that gift to build up the body. None of us is so strong that we can get by without the help and blessing of the other members, and to neglect anyone is arrogance and pride.

Breaking Barriers is written for two kinds of readers: people with disabilities and members of congregations. We want people with disabilities to read it so they will feel the companionship of others who live with disabilities. We want members of congregations to read it so they will understand what living with a disability is like. I hope my friend’s letter will reach both kinds of readers.

-JV

You may now access
Breaking Barriers through
our website at



<http://www.crcna.org/crdc/index.htm>

Breaking Barriers is a newsletter on disability concerns, published by Disability Concerns, Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2850 Kalamazoo Avenue SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49560; phone: (616) 224-0801. Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Mich.

Canadian publications mail agreement #40063614. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: Disability Concerns, 3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8.

It is published three times a year and is mailed without charge. A \$5.00 suggested donation for annual subscription costs is appreciated.

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Letters are welcome in keeping with the purpose of *Breaking Barriers*. They may be edited for style and length.

—Rev. James Vanderlaan

Caregivers!

Using the following web community address, caregivers can ask and answer questions or make comments that they feel could benefit someone.

www.caregiver.guidedvision.com

Please try it out and let us know what you think.

—JV

Letters

Dear Rev. Vanderlaan,

I am so grateful to receive this newsletter. I am always blessed by the articles that speak so clearly about important issues regarding disabilities. The Spring 2005 issue (#67) especially touched my heart. Your Director's articles revealed what I have discovered in my church: that people with disabilities are usually the most joyful examples of Christianity. One of my friends brings a cup of water to the pulpit before I preach

every Sunday. It is a visible example of caring and loving. The church needs people with disabilities to teach them genuine love.

God knows when I need help. The story about Michele Gyselinck's experience with schizophrenia was perfectly timed with my visit with a man who was displaying all of the symptoms she shared. The article gave me information to guide my thoughts and tongue so that I could give the best godly counsel to this troubled man. How I have thanked God over and over for the timeliness of this article.

I am also encouraged by the articles by Jack Beeksmas and Helen Vanderark because they reaffirm God's purposes for every person regardless of his or her acceptance by this world. The gifts of the disabled are so very important to the Kingdom of God. When the Bible speaks of Heaven and the first being last and last being first, I would not be surprised to see God's choices for first being those whose hearts so purely and enthusiastically loved Him, while their minds and bodies dealt with such disabilities. In that regard, I feel so unworthy of the call of God on my life to minister to this segment of our society. They are some of the few people in my world who often "have it all together." To God alone belongs all the glory for His marvelous ways. I thank you for your ministry and look forward to each upcoming issue of your newsletter.

—Larry J. Campbell

Last summer a Special Needs SERVE project took place at Haven Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland MI. SERVE is a ministry of Youth Unlimited through which thousands of students from all over the world learn the importance of Christian servant hood.

I am a parent of a son with a mental impairment and autistic tendencies.

The opportunity to host a Special Needs SERVE project was obviously a huge responsibility but a very rewarding one! We had 23 students participate from Michigan and Canada, all with a variety of disabilities, Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy spina bifida, muscular dystrophy. We also had student mentors for each of our participants.

Our week consisted of worship, activities, and work! We had motorcycle rides, rides in convertibles, and a limousine ride! We went to the Conference grounds to swim. We watched an awesome juggler and had a blast at a square dance! The students

rotated work sites from painting a barn to working at the Holland Rescue Mission, to working in the Men's kitchen, and to doing clean up yard work for the Center for Women in Transition.

This same experience is available this summer!! July 8-13, 2006. Students aged 14-26, with mental/physical

disabilities are eligible to participate. Application forms are available from Youth Unlimited at Dynamic Youth Ministries in Grand Rapids or from Haven Christian Reformed Church, or by contacting me, Donna Bunce, SERVE Coordinator.

My phone number is 616 688 7756, or my email address is: rubyx2@allcom.net



Every time we worshiped Shawn Wassink would jump up front with his guitar.

Dear Rev. VanderLaan:

Wilma and I have been enjoying *Breaking Barriers*, especially your article in the last issue (#67).

How little we think of it that people with handicaps are vital, necessary members of the body of Christ!

While we were serving in West Sayville CRC, Letitia Seerveld, Calvin Seerveld's mother, passed away. She was so crippled with arthritis that she had to be in a wheelchair. She was an exceptional Christian. Wilma wrote a poem about her:

Her Wheelchair's Standing Empty Now

From crippled body, steeped in pain,
a gentle soul has been set free
and borne triumphant into heaven
to live with Christ eternally.

Her clouded vision now is cleared,
upon her Savior's face to gaze,
while deafened ears in rapture thrill
at angel choirs in hymns of praise.

Her knotted fingers, gnarled and stiff
shall nimble be in His employ.
No more the feeble, stumbling feet;
She'll walk in radiant, graceful joy!

Her wheelchair's standing empty now;
Rejoice!

—Chaplain Vernon and Wilma Luchies
Kalamazoo, MI



The Doubting Disease

by Lynda Jordan



Imagine you are driving on a two-lane road. A truck pulls out in front of you, and you decide to pass it. Everything is going as normal. After you get around the truck, a thought comes into your mind: "Maybe I hit that truck...maybe I forced it off the highway...." You look in your rear view mirror, and there is the truck. "But," your thoughts say, "maybe that isn't the same truck. Maybe the real truck is in the ditch, and the driver is dying." You turn off the road and look back. You don't see anything, but you are convinced that you hit someone or forced the truck off the road. You go on with your day, but you are so worried and convinced you did it that you check your vehicle for scratch marks. You are almost ready to call the police to admit to a hit and run accident. You listen to the radio and TV in case there were any accidents reported.

Or imagine you just found out you were pregnant. You submit to all the normal blood tests. Back at home a thought comes into your mind: "What if I have the HIV/AIDS virus?" You call the doctor to find out the result of the test. A nurse tells you that it is negative. You still aren't convinced. The next day you call again and talk to another nurse. You ask over and over for the results of the test. You are convinced you have AIDS even though there's no reason that would happen. You begin to be terrified of your own blood; it's not just AIDS now, but all other deadly contagious diseases. You are a walking time bomb waiting to infect all people everywhere and ruin everyone's life.

These are just two examples of what I and others with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) go through. More than 5 million adults and children in the United States have OCD.

In *The OCD Workbook: Your Guide to Breaking Free from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder* Bruce Hyman writes:

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is characterized by obsessions and/or compulsions that are time-consuming, distressing, and/or interfere with normal routines, relationships with others, or daily functioning. Obsessions are persistent impulses, ideas, images, or thoughts that intrude into a person's thinking and cause excessive worry and anxiety. Compulsions are mental acts or repetitive behaviors performed in response to obsessions to relieve or prevent worry and/or anxiety. They often have the intent of magically preventing or avoiding some dreaded event such as death, illness, or some perceived misfortune.

The basic types of OCD are checking (to be sure something is turned off), washing and cleaning (to be free of germs), ordering (everything has to be in a certain place), pure obsessions, hoarding (not wanting to throw anything away), and scrupulosity (OCD affects your faith). There are many more examples of each type that I can't list here. You don't have to have all these types at once. I have checking, washing and cleaning (contamination), and other symptoms dealing with harming others. Every person with OCD is different.

OCD comes and goes. Some days I am relatively free from symptoms and other days they consume me. OCD also has the ability to change. It seems that once you have one symptom under control another one comes to take its place. Or a symptom that you have already seemed to master may come back to haunt you again.

OCD ranges in severity. Some people with OCD are able to hide it from those around them. Others are so affected that they are stuck in their own houses or are unable to work. Some people with OCD never leave their beds. When I was at my worst, I would not leave the house or allow others to come into my house for fear of hurting them in some way.

OCD is not logical. When I was first diagnosed, my husband would try to show me the faults in my OCD logic. That didn't help, because OCD does not respond to logic. My obsession with my blood may not be logical to you, but it is very real and obvious to me and my OCD brain.

There is no cure for OCD. There are treatment options to help ease the OCD symptoms, including behavior therapy, medications, and cognitive therapy.

What can you do to help people with OCD? Be patient. You may not understand the obsession, or the obsession may seem ridiculous to you. Try to remain patient and understanding. I have a friend who has OCD and her symptoms don't make sense to me but I do understand the anxiety. You don't have to understand the reasoning behind the symptom to be supportive. Be a listening ear. Sometimes it helps if we can just talk about it. I have wonderful people at my work who support me. If I say I can't do something or touch something, they understand and do it for me. Treat people with OCD the way you would treat anyone else. We have a mental illness, but we are still regular people.

I am a member of the OCD Foundation, which publishes a newsletter and funds research projects to help find more information about OCD. Visit the foundation's website at www.ocfoundation.org. The more you are informed the less frightening mental illness becomes.

Today I continue to deal with my OCD thoughts. When I leave work, I worry whether the computer is shut down, the lights are turned off, and the door is locked. Some days I have to force myself to leave. I still need to look a few times after I pass someone on the road just to reassure myself that I didn't hit anyone.

The Doubting Disease

Even as I finish this article, I have anxiety. I worry that I left something out, got something wrong, or misinformed you about something. I guess I will wait until the anxiety subsides

and know that I have at least made you aware of OCD and maybe even helped you to better understand this disease. If you have any questions or would like to discuss something

further, my email address is lbjordan1@juno.com. Feel free to contact me.

The Price of Dignity

"Like a bladder with feet"-that was how a friend of mind said she felt after her recent visit with a urologist.

And I can still hear the crack in my uncle's voice as he talked about Aunt Pat and her loss of self-worth as Alzheimer's disease took her from being an elegant hostess to a person who could not distinguish between a fork, knife, or spoon.

A while back a friend and I were driving home after an evening out. Our conversation turned to the topic of dignity. We talked about the times when people rob us of our dignity, often unintentionally and often unknowingly.

Most medical professionals are so professional they forget they are dealing with people, not body parts. Many lack bedside manners and when you enter their presence you're called to hang your dignity at the door like your coat.

But let's talk about you and me. How can and do we rob people of their dignity? Perhaps our method is a little subtler, but it's intrusive and invasive nonetheless.

Recently another person and I were invited to the home of an elderly lady for lunch. The person accompanying me kept insisting on "helping" prepare the lunch even after our hostess repeatedly said, "No, thank you, I'm fine."

I'm sure my friend didn't mean to hurt our hostess, but in my mind her actions said, "You're old. I can do it faster and better than you can." In all fairness to my friend, she is agile and could probably run circles around our elderly hostess. But we were in no hurry. What did it matter that

lunch would be slower coming to the table? Wasn't our hostess' dignity worth that much?

We live in a time when we want everything yesterday and we don't want to see anyone struggle painstakingly while we wait. I've stood in the shoes of the able-bodied person and am well aware of the urge to help someone less able than ourselves. More recently I've worn the shoes of the recipient of unsolicited attention; and while I am grateful for the help, there are times when I need to struggle, not for the sake of struggling but for the sake of my dignity.

I'm the first to admit that there are times when I carry it to extreme. For example: setting my alarm an hour early on mornings when I want to wear a certain necklace whose clasp is difficult for me to fasten. I know I could pop it in my pocket, and anyone I asked would gladly do up the clasp for me. But for me, the sense of accomplishment is worth the effort, even if that means getting up at 4:00 a.m.

I have a dear friend (who will remain anonymous) who on occasion has allowed me the privilege of bringing in a cup of coffee. It didn't matter that the cup wasn't filled or that it had slopped en route and now stained the side of the cup. This person knew it made me feel good to help, and allowed me that opportunity to feel good about myself and what I could do for someone else. (Oops-I guess I've done it now! You'll all want your coffee served.)

Seriously though, we need to learn to respect and guard the dignity of

others.

Alzheimer's disease may have robbed Aunt Pat of her social graces and skills, but it could not rob her of her dignity, and my uncle honored her with dignity until she was laid to rest. Even though her mind reverted to childhood, he held her in high esteem and respected her as his wife whom he had vowed to love, honor, and cherish till separated by death.

Friends, faster is not always better. Let's learn the all-but-forgotten art of slowing down, of taking time to smell a rose, of gleaning invaluable lessons from those who have journeyed the long, dusty roads of life ahead of us and are nearing the end of their earthly pilgrimage. They have so much wisdom to share if only we would listen.

Let's allow those "less able" than we are to enjoy a sense of accomplishment and achievement, even if that means watching them struggle. When children learn to walk, they fall many times before becoming accomplished walkers. I remember the look of elation the first time my grandnephew walked alone. What an achievement!

Let's never forget the Golden Rule: "Do to others what you would want others to do to you." Let's begin today to guard each other's dignity. Let's us ask ourselves the question: "What price tag would I put on my dignity?" The answer may surprise you!



by Lori West

On January 4, 2005, Sunrise Mentorship Ministries came into being. Creating and assembling the program took six months, but the vision for such a venture had been struggling towards birth in me for 20 years.

As a Christian with a disability, I have spent my whole life trying to find a place in God's world. I wanted to be with people and participate in activities with others. Many times, I had no difficulty feeling included in the same life that everyone else experienced. As an active member of Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI, I involved myself in almost all the programs offered to my age group, and I am still busy. For this I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents, ministers, and fellow congregants. Central has been very progressive in affirming most of the small and large tasks I wanted to undertake.

However, finding my particular vocation has proven to be a huge struggle. I am aware that my disabilities are not entirely to blame for my past inability to find my way. I know that people in the wider community also experience many of the same problems I have had.

My parents, my first mentors, insisted that I use the talents God had given me to the fullest extent possible. Therefore, I spent well over 20 years obtaining a formal education. In 1985 I graduated from Western Theological Seminary with a masters' degree in divinity. During this time, my life was fairly goal-oriented and organized. I believed I had the necessary skills to enter some form of ministry.

As the years passed, I came to realize that it takes much more than books and classes to be educated. Upon finishing my studies, I found myself with no immediate employment and no prospects for supporting myself. Slowly I began to realize that I was not going to find a job unless I created one for myself.

Until the last few years, full employment for people with disabilities has not been a high priority for the staff of agencies working with adults with disabilities. If young clients qualified to work in supported employment, they were typically placed in jobs that entailed repetitive factory work, errand-running, or filing.

People with disabilities have historically been assigned caseworkers who helped with living arrangements and made sure their clients received a monthly check to cover very basic expenses. But the caseworkers didn't do much more to help clients who felt their future was bleak.

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. This law was an expansion and amplification of other civil rights legislation passed since the 1960s. The ADA was conceived and supported by activists with disabilities who had been working for decades to take their place in society.

Since then, changes have occurred, though slowly. Agencies working with people with disabilities have written policies to protect their clients' rights. Entitlement provi-



sions have been relaxed to allow clients to work without losing many of their benefits. Now case managers are trying to help young people with more transition services and employment options as they graduate from high school. In principle, students can no longer simply graduate with nothing to do.

While we who have disabilities have definitely made positive progress in recent years, we have much to do to make up for lost time! There are still very few employment options for people with disabilities who are over 30. We who are middle-aged are frightened of losing our benefits. Some of us avoid seeking work because we feel it would hurt our present living circumstances.

For the past five years, I have tried to get people over 30 into jobs or legitimate educational experiences. This task has proven difficult since unemployment is high in Michigan. But people with disabilities have many contributions to make, so I have been praying for an answer.

God's eventual response was to put Nancy Claus and me together. Nancy is a dynamic leader at Central who owns her own small business. She has worked with me tirelessly over the past year as my mentor. Without her strength, perseverance and constant love I literally would have lost much of my faith and will. Nancy has the gift of discernment, and senses when my legitimate calls for authentic justice and lasting change dwindle into fruitless complaining.

Together Nancy and I have formed Sunrise Mentorship Ministries. Mentorship is the vehicle by which we help people with disabilities find their place in society. We match mentors and clients according to personality type, interests, and level of experience. They work working on a

A New Day, continued

one-to-one basis in increments of three months to one year. To qualify for the program, clients must demonstrate a sincere desire to make permanent positive changes in their lives and be willing to do whatever is necessary to alter their present circumstances. Mentors must possess the patience and perseverance to assist clients in reaching their goals. With Nancy's assistance, I serve as mentorship coordinator for this fledgling mentorship program. Because of her and her husband's financial generosity, I am paid for my efforts.

This new venture will not completely help adults with disabilities find their place in society. In fact, it is only a

single step in assisting people to realize their full potential. Our purpose is to give participants knowledge and confidence. With new hope, they can keep taking the steps necessary to build a brighter future for themselves and for those who will follow in their tracks.

Anyone wishing to reach us can call 616-456-9195 or write us at:

Sunrise Mentorship Ministries
Central Reformed Church
10 College Ave. NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Bad Things, continued from page 1

I still have times of depression, but I have regained my life. I am moving forward. My family is growing up and things are moving along far better than when I almost took my life.

Depression and disability are a reality, but helping others can help you take your eyes off yourself. I still have my problems, but I have my friend beside me. Jesus is the answer, even if we choose to ignore him.

During this whole ordeal I kept thinking, "How did Job do it?" His faith was flawless, and his loyalty was steadfast. But Job had a special relationship with God. He talked to God about everything. Job spoke honestly and easily without fear. But do we? Am I there yet? The simple answer is No. But is there hope? Always.

When I get to the point where I think I can not handle it, I look at the small miracles God has given me: the sun on my face, the air I breathe, creation around me, my family, the simple things that all of us forget to give thanks for. I realize now that instead of talking to God, I talked at him.

Every day is a new day and with that day we should try to give thanks for the small things God has given us. Depression and pain are nasty things, and we must all try to live one second, one minute, one hour, and one day at a time. Try to focus on the positives in life, no matter how small.

And remember, it is we who run away from God, God does not run away from us. But when we run, God has his arms open for us to come back. Sometimes I feel God runs alongside us to pick us up. And as we all have heard and know, sometimes he even carries us. This is one of those times.

*Llano Gorman
President, Canes Canada*

ONTARIO SPRING CONFERENCE 2006

April 29, 2006 is the date of the Ontario, Canada, Spring Disability Conference, the ninth annual gathering in a one-day format! The location this year will be the Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Waterdown, close to the Burlington, Ontario, offices of the CRC. These conferences, while set up to train congregational Disability Contact persons, also benefit pastoral care workers, pastors, elders and deacons.

The keynote speaker, Emeritus Ethics Professor James Olthuis, will address the topic of "Pastoral Care for Those Dealing with Disabilities", first explored in the 2005 conference. Dr. Olthuis, formerly with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, is well qualified for the task: he is an engaging speaker with a unique vantage point. Participants will have ample opportunity for input and questions through participation in small groups.

All who are interested in disability issues are welcome to attend. Further details are available from Kim Vanderniet, Administrative Assistant Disability Concerns at 1-800-730-3490 or by email at vandernietk@crcna.ca

The Kindnesses of the Lord

by Heidi Boorman

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us-yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me," and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Sometimes I wish I were a very little child. The world is full of miseries and unkindness, and the very young are not as aware of this. Being able to ride in a stroller looks like the best thing.

When I see this verse, I am gradually comforted. I see that God is compassionate and kind. I see that he has chosen people to be his, and even in my sorrows, I believe that I am one of them. The things that distress me also distress him. The more I can grow to reflect his character, the clearer my witness will be. The presence of the Holy Spirit translates my inept prayers even when I am depressed.

God loves me enough to take me away from the devil's hand. My soul is out of Satan's reach. This verse even says God carries me! Who needs a stroller? Being carried by God has to be better.

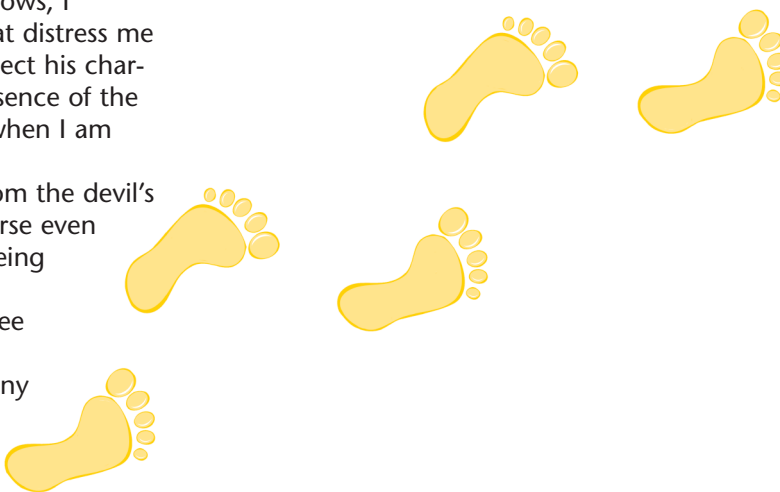
As the Holy Spirit shifts my perspective, I see things I can do. I can tell about all the things God has done and provided for me. How many are there? Although I do have cerebral palsy and my body doesn't function as

well as an ordinary person's, my mind is undamaged, and I can think and be creative. God allowed me to grow up in a Christian family, and I know the most important thing of all, the security of belief in Jesus Christ.

After I graduated from an excellent Christian college, I was unemployed for quite some time. One of the jobs I applied for was in a town in California. After I learned that I did not get that job, I also heard that flooding heavily damaged the California town. God spared me any involvement with that situation by refusing me employment there.

The job God did open to me was with a Christian publisher in my own hometown. I could do my work in my own home, without needing to travel. I helped prepare many manuscripts for publication, works that still praise God's power.

God has done even more for me than this, but what could *you* tell? What has God done for you?



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