

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

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A Ministry of Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America Disability Concerns

To Love and to Be Loved in the Body of Christ

Kara Weaver is a senior at Hope College with a social work major and a youth ministry minor. She is serving a yearlong internship with RCA Disability Concerns.

I love my sister, Amber. She is beautiful, strong, vivacious, compassionate, talented, and gifted. She loves to dance, sing, swim, ride horses, watch movies, and hang out with friends. Like any teenage sister, Amber frequently gets on my nerves, makes me laugh, and constantly steals my stuff.

Not only is Amber one of my best friends and biggest inspirations, but she also is my number one cheerleader. She gives me the best hugs and warms my heart with her smiles. While she has her stubborn side, Amber always knows just what to say to make me feel like the most important person in the world. Amber has taught me how to love and how to be loved.



Amber (left) and Kara Weaver: loving sisters and good friends.

Through her example, I am constantly learning what it means to come to Christ with the heart of a child.

Did I mention that Amber has Down Syndrome?

Having a sister with a disability is a gift and a blessing to me. When I tell people that my sister has Down Syndrome, it often evokes responses such

as, “Oh, I’m sorry,” or, “Wow, that must be hard.” Invariably, these are people who have not spent any significant amount of time around my sister. They have never worshiped alongside her, arms stretched to the heavens, indifferent to who might see. They have never heard her singing, unconcerned about who might hear. They were not present when she requested baptism, missing the joy evident in her eyes when she was raised from the water. They have never experienced the power of her prayers.

Amber is not a distraction, an inconvenience, or someone to feel sorry for. She is my sister, whom I love and treasure. She is a part of the body of Christ.

Afraid to Be Vulnerable—Afraid to Be Silent

Kelly Vander Pol is a 2005 graduate of Dordt College. She works as a reporter for a newspaper in northwest Iowa and has cerebral palsy.

One Sunday morning, I felt a godly nudge. It started with Pastor Mark’s plea for more Sunday school teachers. I whispered to the person next to me, “Ric, there ya go! They need teachers; go to it!” Sighing, he replied, “Yeah, on top of Mission Committee, Long Range Planning Committee, and Council? I don’t think so.”

Ric’s response was understandable and all too familiar among church members today, especially those with busy family and work schedules. People may want to say no but feel obligated to serve. However, I couldn’t resist thinking, *I wonder how it feels to be used in the church, and yet wanting a break from the busyness of being used. I wonder what it would be like to use my gifts and have them be valued.*

This spring I volunteered to create sign-up sheets for a retreat. The following Sunday, the sign-up sheets were not the ones I had created. Instead of asking me to change the format—which would have been completely appropriate—someone made new ones. This

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▶ theme

Fall: Statistics Canada and the U.S. Census Bureau report between 4 percent and 10.5 percent of people 15 to 24 live with a disability. This issue of *Breaking Barriers* is by and about **young people who live with disabilities.**

Winter: Our next issue will focus on **visual impairment.** If you live with a visual impairment or would like to describe how your congregation has accommodated people with visual impairments, please send us your story by **December 15, 2010.**

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decision made more work for others and conveyed a negative message to me.

I am no stranger to the sincere but patronizing intentions of others allowing me to do my part but treating me as if I'm an eager child wanting to act like an adult. I also know the sting of outright rejection.

Having experienced both patronization and rejection, the idea of putting myself out there is daunting. I'm frightened by the thought of putting my heart into the act of service, knowing that I might be patronized or rejected.

As frightened as I am to be vulnerable, I'm more frightened to stay silent. I need to use the gifts that God has given me. He has never left me, even when I couldn't reach out to him. I owe him my willingness and commitment to serve, regardless of the responses I might receive.

Along with a renewed commitment to serve my Lord, I have a renewed longing to learn—to learn from his Word, from experiences, and from others. I'm going to put on the full armor of God, so that I can be a ready and willing child of God. I want to keep on learning, along with all other Christians, to forgive others and to glorify God through it.



Kelly Vander Pol: longing to serve and to learn.

Offering Youth Ministry that Includes Teenagers with Disabilities

Terry DeYoung is the Coordinator for Disability Concerns, Reformed Church in America.

Youth ministry may not openly oppose the inclusion of teenagers with disabilities, but the actions of many programs communicate a low commitment to this goal.

In a study drawn from interviews with parents and guardians of youth with disabilities, seminary professor Amy Elizabeth Jacober noted in the April-June 2010 *Journal on Religion, Disability & Health* that parents “wanted their children to know God and experience the fellowship of other believers to the best of their child’s ability.” She also found the same parents “were amazingly gracious toward those whom they identified as neither ministering to nor teaching their child as they did for others connected with the church.”

As people created in the image of God, youth with disabilities have something valuable to offer, and “we in the body of Christ need them as much as they need us.” Jacober encourages the practice of “incarnational youth ministry” that introduces others to the person of Jesus and journeys with them to grow in Christ.

In informal discussions, dozens of youth workers and youth ministry professors were asked if they had any teenagers with disabilities in their youth group or knew of any in their churches. “The answer consistently was no,” Jacober said. “At best, they would know of a youth but add that the family had decided the youth group was not a good fit. Or they indicated they had no idea how to include a youth with a disability and did not want to hurt or offend anyone by making a mistake.”

When parents were asked to suggest ways to teach their child about Jesus and the Christian faith and include teenagers with disabilities in youth ministry, several concrete steps emerged:

- Remember that teenagers with disabilities are first and foremost teenagers, *not* a disability who happens to be a teenager.
- Do a little research and learn how many teenagers with disabilities live in your community.
- Put yourself and others in the position to develop relationships with youth with disabilities. Do not be afraid to ask youth with disabilities questions about themselves.
- Ask parents about their child, their child’s disability, and their own lives.
- Talk with special education teachers and read anything you can find on specific disabilities; expect things to take longer and plan accordingly.
- Become an advocate for teenagers with disabilities and their families.
- Use a peer support or “buddy” system for teenagers with a disability. Safety is a first priority for any parent and youth.
- Utilize small groups to facilitate meaningful participation and promote interactions.
- Do not worry or be afraid of how much a teenager with intellectual disability is or is not getting your message about Jesus. Your job is to share Jesus, not to determine what they are or are not getting.
- Adapt your programming and activities to truly include youth with disabilities. Do not just allow them to observe and call it participation.
- Educate your leaders, volunteers, and entire youth group on issues regarding teenagers with disabilities.

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If You Only Knew!

Heather Calton and Elly Van Alten are daughter and mother. Elly serves Classis Alberta North (CRC) as Regional Disability Advocate.

Heather: Picture this scene. A woman is with her daughter, perhaps walking together in the grocery store or standing in line at a coffee shop. The woman's child is obviously shy, deferring to her when asked a question from the barista or hyper aware of where her mother is while walking the aisles. Every so often there's a quick brush from the daughter's hand on the mother's purse strap, reassurance that she's with someone safe. Maybe you think this is an endearing scene—a child finding safety with a parent or an ideal child who never strays too far. Let me make one little adjustment to the picture in your mind: that child is me, and I was 25 years old at the time.

I suffer from depression and anxiety. It's plagued me since elementary school. I couldn't

leave my house without a safe person, and sometimes even that wasn't enough. Often, just the thought of going out was enough to make me physically ill. There were days when getting out of bed was beyond me. There's Caller ID on our phone because otherwise I never would have answered it. Not knowing who was on the other end would be enough to cause an anxiety attack.

That scene I described? That was a good day: the result of a day or two of encouragement from my mom until I felt safe enough to leave the house—my mom building me up so that I wasn't consumed by depression. I'm lucky to have her, both as a cheerleader and as a safe person. I used to worry that I would burn her out.

Elly: As a mom, it was very difficult to watch my child experiencing depression and anxiety, as well as the effect it was having on her life. It was even more difficult to judge how far to go in pushing my daughter to do what she needed to do. Fortunately, as a registered nurse I had some idea how and



Heather Calton (left) and Elly Van Alten: working through depression and anxiety.

where to access help for my daughter. Unfortunately, much of the help was incomplete or ineffective and not tailored to her particular issues and needs. We spent many nights talking till 2 or 3 in the morning, and/or going to an emergency department because she was so profoundly depressed that she felt suicidal.

Heather: It's now two years later, and things are a little different. Personal accounts like

this usually have happy, uplifting, hopeful endings, but I'm not going to do that for you. There's nothing I hated more when I was feeling my worst than being told a cheery little tale about how I shouldn't give up and that things would get better. Maybe the person you'd like to share this with isn't up for that stuff either. It's not about the happy endings, but about making the hard stuff just a little more bearable.

Of Friendships and Angels, Missions and Bears

Kim Reohr serves as the Disability Advocate for First Church (RCA) in Albany, New York.

My son, now 22, was born weighing 6 pounds following a difficult pregnancy. It was a real struggle to feed him from the very first feeding. If only I had known then what I know now: The stimulation of being so close was overwhelming for him. The touch, smell, and everything that goes along with feeding a baby in your arms was just too much.

He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) early and also found to have some cognitive deficits. The feeding issues continued into his early years, showing in low weight gain. That brought on a battery of tests by many doctors. Through all of this, he always wore a huge smile.

School started and that led to learning how to advocate for him to learn as an individual. People would tell us, "We have a certain way to teach children with learning disabilities," and we would respond, "but we are teaching Stephen."

He became part of the youth group at church and that was the beginning of great things for him. It brought him true and understanding friendships, travels, missions, understanding of others, and more. Also it brought us respite. He went to Camp

Fowler (an RCA camp in Speculator, New York) for many years as a camper, then as a co-counselor, and finally as a volunteer in the kitchen. All of it was accompanied by acceptance for who he is. On his first trip to Fowler, Stephen left home with seven folded shirts and returned a week later with six folded shirts, but, after just a week, he could tell us what each plant could do, how to camp, and how to keep bears away from even your toothpaste.

Within the past year he has graduated from culinary school, begun working at a local grocery store, passed four of the five sections for his GED, and acquired his driver's license. All of those things, we thought, would be lifetime goals. Recently he was nominated, elected, and ordained as a deacon.

We are so grateful for the angels that surround him. They have given him strength to grow in a normal world. Through the struggles, the smiles, and the successes, Stephen has taught us that all people have strengths.

It is essential that we advocate for the inclusion of all people in the life of the church.

Key Lesson for Self-Advocacy in the Church: Just Ask

Katie Prins is the Executive Director of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services of Michigan.

I was the only deaf child in a family of six. I was born prematurely and due to complications became profoundly deaf. I went to mainstream school with an interpreter, wore hearing aids, practiced lip reading, and used sign language as my primary mode of communication.



Katie Prins: advocating for inclusion in church.

I grew up attending a predominantly Dutch, Christian Reformed Church (CRC) with my family in Southern California. In my experience, church interpreters mostly interpreted in community churches, in mega-churches, or in their own church, but not in the CRC. My church had no other deaf individuals who knew sign language. In addition, I was a shy teenager who preferred to be out of the limelight. For these reasons, I did not seek an interpreter. Instead, during worship, I would leaf through the Bible or read random Christian books that I had brought with me.

I accepted that I was the only deaf person in my church, but when I became a teen I started realizing it was not an inclusive environment. I wanted to stay in my faith, so I started exploring different options. Between eighth grade and my junior year in high school, a woman at our church kindly volunteered to transcribe the previous week's sermon from an audio tape, and I would read that sermon the following week in church. Like others in the congregation, my pastor's words now inspired me, and I grew in my faith. The woman did this for me faithfully, barely missing a week for four years. Through these sermons, I became more familiar with the Bible and the historical context behind biblical stories. I learned how to apply the Bible to today's world and how Christians should react in certain situations. And, I discovered that where there's a will, there's a way.

The same year that I got my driver's license, the woman moved away. Without sermons readily available to me at my own church, I started attending a community church nearby because it provided two interpreters every week. Several other deaf individuals also attended there. While my heart still belonged to the CRC, I needed access to God's Word. I attended the community church on and off for almost two years before I moved away for college.

Through these and other experiences, I learned that it was best to find a way to attend the church I *want*, not the church that was *easy*.

So my encouragement to others is always to advocate for yourself, even in God's church, and not to give up.

Today, I attend a CRC congregation in Michigan that provides an interpreter on a weekly basis, but only after I asked for one. Again, I am the only deaf individual in my church, just as when I was a child in Southern California, but this time I am right there with the congregation every sermon of the way.

Ways to Engage Youth and Young Adults

Mark Stephenson is the Director of Disability Concerns, Christian Reformed Church.

Looking for diverse possibilities for engaging young people around disability issues in ways that are interactive and educational? Here are three possibilities:

- Sean Forbes is a deaf rapper from Detroit who recently signed a record deal. "I'm Deaf," available on iTunes, plays creatively with stereotypes with lyrics like this, "I look like a cyborg. I'm so robotic. I'm the next spokesperson For Hooked on Phonics." His website (deafandloud.com) plays a video of "I'm Deaf." Forbes helped start the Deaf Professional Arts Network, making music accessible to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.
- D.J. Svoboda created "Imagifriends" based on difficult situations he has faced growing up with autism. The brightly colored Imagifriends help one another in Imagiville, where everyone is accepted. "I want to use my art to help encourage others with autism and to let them know that they too can help make the world a better place," said Svoboda, who enjoys sharing his faith. Imagifriends have found their way into books, puzzles, and their own website (www.myimagiville.com).
- With the help of a wheelchair, youth groups can do an accessibility audit of their church, learning about accessibility and empathy for people with disabilities while providing a valuable service to the church. Go to network.crcna.org/disability and search for "youth accessibility audit" for an article and links to audit forms.

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For more information, or to provide financial support, contact CRC Disability Concerns (2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560; www.crcna.org/disability) or RCA Disability Concerns (4500 60th St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512; www.rca.org/disability).

—Mark Stephenson and Terry DeYoung