

# Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs everybody serves

ISSUE #76 WINTER 2008

✠ A Ministry of Christian Reformed Disability Concerns

## The Irony of Volunteering

Ron Nydam, Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Calvin Seminary

**W**hile on a 10-week sabbatical leave in Colorado several years ago, I volunteered in the nordic program at Devil's Thumb Ranch and the alpine program at Winter Park. What a treat to spend Fridays on the slopes with some great people who have a tough time managing their minds. Friday is Behavior Health Day in the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD) schedule at Winter Park. The day starts out in the busy shuffle of people, paper, and gear, and off we then go on the adventure of meeting another person. You do that first nanosecond of assessing when you say hello and quietly gauge what is coming back at you in terms of both comfort and understanding. And you adjust as best you can to keep the anxiety of meeting reasonably low. It works best when you are really



able, for another nanosecond, to forget about yourself, forget about your worries of the day, forget the tough things that you may later go home to, and wonder what it might be like to be the way that he or she is. It is such a long stretch for most of us even to imagine how difficult it might be not to be able to stop our minds from thinking about something, obsessing about something frightening, and wondering why you see and maybe hear things that aren't there.

It made me wonder a little bit. Who is this program really for? You might think that the game plan of NSCD is *for* the students and their families. Of course, the program has a heart for the people in our communities who face all kinds of disabilities. But something is still missing in this

comment, because, really, the program is just as much for the volunteer. We get something, something sometimes unexpected and unplanned.

There is no substitute for what happens when we get out of our skins long enough to show up in somebody else's life with a helping hand or a healing heart or whatever. The real strength of NSCD may well be that in the midst of what is sometimes a self-serving world we as volunteers get pushed into the world of other people who are challenged in special ways. In these worlds of NSCD students, we discover what we never get when we are looking for it, namely the pleasure of unselfconsciousness, of forgetting ourselves enough to enjoy the people who show up with us on the slopes. Being a player in

In the spring 2008 issue of *Breaking Barriers*, we will feature articles on the joys and challenges of growing older. **Please send us your notes, articles, and letters on increasing in age.** It doesn't have to be fancy or long. We'll take care of the editing.

the NSCD program gives each of us the opportunity to learn from somebody else that we can't quite give ourselves—that we can really matter!

### ? did you know...

You can give appreciated assets (such as stocks and mutual fund investments) to Disability Concerns and pay no tax on their increased value. Contributions to Disability Concerns are fully tax deductible. For more information, please call us at 888-463-0272.





Thank you also for the article (spring 2007) on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD). I hope that adoptive parents whose children seem unable to observe normal boundaries will be reached with this information, along with their fellow church members.

Christian adoptive parents tend to begin their interactions with their child with high hopes and the complete conviction that their intervention and caring will make all the difference. Fellow Christians typically believe that bad behaviors in children emanate from parental ignorance, negligence, or misapplication of biblical principles.

What a let-down for the whole church when a beloved child who has regularly participated in Sunday school and listened to good teaching from the pulpit consistently and markedly deviates from even the most basic norms of society! The adoptive parents are crushed by their failure. Fellow Christians can't

seem to resist checking to see if proper disciplinary techniques were employed, further adding to the parents' misery.

As the child in question becomes older, he or she is usually distanced from the church because of the realization on both sides that there is a huge mismatch in expectations and performance. "Out of sight, out of mind" certainly describes the status of the many FASD children who have grown up in church and then end up on social assistance or in jail.

What would be most helpful for all concerned would be a wider supply of accurate information on this ruinous disability, (a brain injury that results in poor judgment, impulsivity, and the maddening repetition of problem behaviors), and more support and encouragement for the affected families.

Groups to support the families of FAS children are being formed, under the name Alcohol Babies

Anonymous. We welcome correspondence, especially from folks like the author of the article, who are often criticized instead of supported by their fellow believers.

name withheld,  
alcoholbabies@gmail.com

Thank you for the article about the family dealing with a child with FASD. I think this is what my 40-year-old adopted son has. He has been in and out of jail since he was 16. He was always lying a lot and stealing. He changed jobs every half-year to year, although he has been a hard worker always.

He is a likeable person, and is thankful for prison ministry. He did several Bible studies, and he prays a lot. He talks to some inmates about the Lord as the only way. But it seems he can't stand on his own or learn from past wrongs. My husband doesn't share my thoughts about FASD, because he has said for many years now, "Our

son is a born criminal and will never change." Our son writes us every month from prison. He loves us and says, "Don't blame yourself for what I do wrong. I wish I knew why I do the things I do. You used to tell me that I don't think enough. How true!"

A hospital counselor told me that I should tell our son I think that he has FASD. I did, and now I'm waiting for his answer. I hope that if he knows, he can get counseling for his problem, and not fall prey to other people to go wrong.

name withheld

I appreciate the *Breaking Barriers* publication. It is written in a way that is very interesting and informative.

We also have a monthly newsletter, and write ups are included pertaining to disability concerns.

Thank you,  
Phyllis Ottens  
Morrison, Illinois

## Preaching and Disability

Rev. Tom Vos, Regional Advocate for Classis Northcentral Iowa



Recently a pastor in Japan asked *Disability Concerns* how best to preach to people with visual impairments. I asked Rev.

Tom Vos to respond to this question. Here is part of his reply:

I am a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, serving a church in Wellsburg, Iowa. I have a visual disability so that I rely on audio input from my computer for virtually all of my work, including leading worship.

In many ways, those of us with disabilities are like anyone else. If you have opportunity to talk with some of those with disabilities you might ask them what issues they must deal with because of their disability. Also ask the more positive question of how they have experienced God's grace.

Some people are more sensitive about words than others. To speak of "blindness" is fine, but recognize that for some of us

"visual disability" is more accurate, since many people are not totally blind. If you were preaching to me, I would not want you to refer to me as "disabled." I have a disability that has a huge impact on my life, but I am not disabled. My disability does not define who I am. I am a child of God, a husband, a father, a pastor who has a disability.

As you preach, be thinking about unique challenges faced by people with visual impairments. Having a disability requires me to do more work, for example, to access materials that sighted persons use. Adapting to life's routines—using a white cane for mobility, trying to do things like shop, read the news, or get to a doctor's appointment—all become issues to deal with. It's likely that with a number

of people with disabilities listening, there will be a variety in the ways they are dealing with the disability. Some may feel very comfortable with what they can do; others may be frustrated and even dealing with issues of anger with God.

You will want to minister to people with disabilities in the name of the Lord. You will also want to challenge them. They each have gifts to use in the service of the Lord, and in serving one another. Our disabilities must not be an excuse. Disabilities are a challenge of course, and there are some things we can't do, but each of us is gifted by God. We need to be encouraged to search out ways we can build up one another and participate in the life of the church.

## Memories!

*Andries De Boer, Church Disability Advocate at Georgetown CRC in Ontario*

**W**henever I have a drippy nose in the winter, I think back to when I was a child, sitting in church! Back comes this picture of the pew in front of us where an elderly couple sat. The old gentleman who sat there often had a drip suspended from his nose, and we watched in utter fascination to see whether it would drop. Ah, churchgoing in my youth was so edifying!

This memory really leads to another rather more important one because another family occupied that pew in front of us too.

I spent most of my youth in Dokkum, Friesland. It is one of the eleven original fortified cities of that most northerly province of the Netherlands, the country of birth of many of the first members of our denomination.

On the ramparts of that ancient city are two tall windmills one of which belonged to the Boomgaard family—a strange name all right for a milling family, for Boomgaard literally means “tree garden” or “orchard.”

The family later moved all of eight kilometers to the village where my dad was pastor of the local “Gereformeerde Kerk,” or “Christian Reformed Church.” I was eight years old at the time—sixty years ago now!

The Boomgaards had nine children who had all moved out of the house by this time. One of their daughters was what we called a “midget.” Her parents could have been protective and said: “Oh, you poor little thing!” Instead they pushed her to get an education in a time when girls would barely get through elementary school, let alone go on to high school and university. Miss Boomgaard possessed a keen intellect, no matter her diminutive size, and she attained a good position in the municipal administration of the city of Amsterdam. She earned a good living and a petite, pretty sister managed their household.

Those were the people who also occupied the pew in front of ours and my mother would say: “Look at Miss Boomgaard and what she has accomplished in her life. Don’t you ever dare feel sorry for yourself.”

Funny thing what a drippy nose in winter reminds you of!



## health corner

### Disability and Calling

*Ann Kutudis-Kenien, Regional Advocate for Classis Southeast US*

We each have a calling, but I was stopped in my tracks by an exacerbation of multiple sclerosis (MS) sixteen years ago. At the height of my career as a nurse practitioner helping couples with infertility, I lost my vision, my employment, and almost lost my mind. I stopped going to church because I was angry at God and afraid of losing control of my bladder.

A church friend, Marion, visited me at home in New York on Sundays. We prayed together, laughed together, and I did some sobbing in her arms. I was touched by Marion’s visits, and moved by the power of God when my MS went into remission, allowing me to see again.

At that time, I began to discover a new calling. I became a Regional Advocate with Disability Concerns. In this work I have been able to help churches learn new and better ways to welcome and include people with disabilities into their ministries. For example, I helped one church make a building modification; an interior ramp now allows a choir member who uses a wheelchair to ascend the podium and sing with them.

I often thank God now for my vision, and for the gifts of persistence and empathy as I walk through his world with this disability. I know the Holy Spirit is driving me to continue this valuable mission. And I can.

God’s calling for you may change over time, but he has called you to serve him in the unique ways that only you can. If you think God may be leading you to serve as an advocate for people with disabilities, please contact Disability Concerns at 1-888-463-0272 or [disabilityconcerns@crca.org](mailto:disabilityconcerns@crca.org). Follow him in whatever calling he has for you, and let Disability Concerns’ Church and Regional Advocates help you and your congregation. It’s part of our calling!



## resources

### Optasia Ministry

<http://www.optasiaministry.org>

Optasia Ministry provides Bibles and biblical study materials to Christians with visual disabilities who are using screen reading software at a very low cost. Rev. Tom Vos, pastor of Wellsburg CRC who lives with visual impairment, and his son founded Optasia ministry last year.

### Job Accommodation Network

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu>



A free service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy from the U.S. Department of Labor. The site provides helpful information on helping people with disabilities find employment which applies to the US and Canada, and includes many links to other web sites including some Canadian links for job searching.

### Estate Planning

*Removing the Mystery* written by Graeme S. Treeby, is an estate planning guide for Ontario families of people with disabilities. This guide is loaded with useful information on Discretionary (Henson) Trusts, acquiring government benefits and providing a decent quality of life for a child with disabilities. For more information visit [www.specialneedsplanning.ca](http://www.specialneedsplanning.ca) or [www.ofcp.on.ca](http://www.ofcp.on.ca) (click on “Publications”) or call Christian Stewardship Services at 1-800-267-8890. The CD costs \$10, and in paperback it’s \$30.

**Service opportunity:** This coming summer young people ages 14 to 26 have an opportunity through Youth Unlimited to participate in a special needs SERVE project in either Ottawa, Ontario, or Zeeland, Michigan. Young people with or without disabilities are welcome to apply. Nondisabled young adults will serve as helpers for young adults who have disabilities. Visit [www.youthunlimited.org](http://www.youthunlimited.org) and click on “Missions,” click on “list of locations,” then click on the two entries for “Ottawa” or the two entries for “Zeeland” for details.



## meditation

### Short Eyes

Eric Ribbens, Associate Professor of biology at Western Illinois University

My grace is sufficient for you. 2 Corinthians 12:9

I sing, "I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see." But that's the problem, God. I can't see. No peripheral vision; I'm legally blind! I don't drive any more. I haven't seen stars for years. I have scabs on my legs from constantly walking into things. I used to love to play basketball and baseball; now I flinch when I try to play wiffle ball with my nine-year old daughter! I don't walk around during our church greeting time because I'm afraid I'll step on someone. Everything I do goes wrong.

I have retinitis pigmentosa—tunnel vision. My peripheral sight is falling apart, and no one can tell me how bad it will get. At least I can still teach, but what if my eyes get so bad that I can't do that? I became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference, which I know I do, but what if I can't see at all? Do you want me to be totally useless, Lord?

God asks, "Don't you believe my grace is sufficient?"

Yes, I trust you, God. I know you will always be there. It's not you I'm worried about but me. I am just a sour, selfish old sinner. I'm afraid that if I can't see, I'll fall apart. I'm scared, God.

God replies, "Don't you know my grace will take care of your response too?"

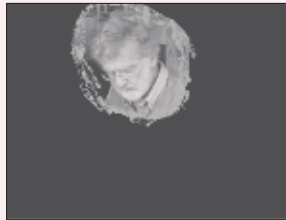
Thank you, Lord. I need that. I depend on your care.

I've had conversations like this one inside my head several times recently. It seems silly, but it has helped me to realize that God's grace is enough even to take care of me as I respond. I don't have to do it on my own; I can rely on him no matter what happens. I have my wife and daughters to help. I have the church, giving me rides, support, expressing God's love. But especially and always I have God's grace, and I firmly believe that no matter what happens, that grace is sufficient for me. Are you are struggling with a problem too? You are not alone. If you believe God, if you trust him, his grace is sufficient. His grace is more than enough to take care of you, no matter what happens. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

normal vision:



what I see:



what I'm worried about:



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### Two Regional Disability Advocates Pass Away in 2007

Mark Stephenson, Director of Disability Concerns

People who have disabilities tend to have shorter life expectancy than non-disabled people.

Though Rev. Karl Wiersum and Mr. Bill Murty lived with disabilities, their deaths came as a shock for their family and friends, as well as for all of us who are involved with Disability Concerns. Karl developed an internal hematoma and passed away while on vacation in Florida in September. Bill contracted a severe infection and passed away in December.

Some people may have been tempted to judge them by their appearances. Karl and Bill had to use wheelchairs. But both men were gifted and eager to serve their Lord in a variety of ways.

I was eager to work with them in the service of God and his people, but was able to do so only briefly. They are missed by all of us who knew them. May God give his special blessing to the loved ones they leave behind.

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