THE STANDARD BEARER

MAY 15, 2026

VOLUME 102, NUMBER 10

WONDERFULLY MADE

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CONTENTS

REFORMED FREE PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION

The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a monthly periodical with two special issues (Fall and Spring) published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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Annual subscription price
Print: $32 USA / $52 international
Digital: $12 / free to print subscribers

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BROUGHT BY KINDNESS FROM LODEBAR

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And David said unto him [Mephibosheth], Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually—2 Samuel 9:7

What a day it was when kindness came to the sad village of Lodebar to "fetch" a lame, lost, and fearful son of the covenant and carry him to be seated at the king's table!

Was this merely David's kindness to a lame man? Was it only a kindness kindled by David's memories of his beloved Jonathan? No, David had said that his desire was to show the kindness of *God* to him (2 Sam. 7: 3).

We see here the appearance of the "kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man" (Tit. 3:4), a kindness flowing out of "the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). It was God's covenant kindness, proceeding from the eternal thoughts of His heart, and established in the blood of our Mediator. It heals all our diseases, soothes all our sorrows, and redeems our life from destruction.

When the lame and helpless Mephibosheth fell on his face before his throne, David saw in him the features of his father Jonathan. This moved him to show great kindness. So our God sees us in the countenance of His only begotten Son, and is moved to show us His consolation and saving kindness when we are "pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life" (2 Cor. 1:8).

Mephibosheth was five years old when his father Jonathan, his grandfather King Saul, and all but one of his uncles were killed in battle against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. His nanny, realizing that she held in her arms the heir to Saul's throne, and fearing that a rival king would seek to kill the child, fled with Mephibosheth. She was unaware of the covenant David had made with Jonathan—sworn before God to preserve each other's family (1 Sam. 20:42). In her hasty flight she dropped him, and he suffered a severe injury which paralyzed his legs for life (2 Sam. 4:4).

Soon after, the boy was secreted away to Lodebar. There he lived out his childhood, married, and "had a young son whose name was Micha" (2 Sam. 7:12). Lodebar means "no pasture" or simply "nothing there." It was on the east side of the Jordan River in a dry desert north of the Dead Sea, the Death Valley of Palestine. He lived in obscurity in the house of Machir, a follower of David (2 Sam. 17:27). The little we know about Mephibosheth's life in Lodebar is grim. He was obviously totally dependent on others, had little say over his life, enjoyed few visitors (if any), and was severely limited in his movements. Lodebar in Scripture is a byword for spiritual dryness, hopelessness, and brokenness of heart (see Amos 6:13). So it was with Mephibosheth, that is, until God's lovingkindness came to his house to seek and save this lost son of Abraham (Luke 19:9).

Now it is important that we recognize that this is not simply a matter of David being nice to someone. His actions did not flow from the well of his own compassion. His kindness sprang from a deeper source. It was a response to the covenant kindness God had shown to him!

The history of 2 Samuel 9 begins with David asking whether Saul had any surviving descendants to whom "I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake" (2 Sam. 9:1). This desire was not a random thought passing through his mind—occasioned by the relative peace that his kingdom enjoyed (see 2 Sam. 8). Rather, his desire to show kindness arose in his soul from amazing promises God had spoken to him in 2 Samuel 7.

Second Samuel 7 records David's long-held desire to build a house for God. The prophet Nathan was sent

to tell David that instead God would build a house for David. This house would be His presence with David and His promise that from David's lineage would come the Messiah. When David hears God speak of the great mercy shown to him, he sees the sheer kindness of his God who had taken him "from the sheepcote and from following sheep and made him to be ruler over [His] people" (v. 8). David was overwhelmed by God's kindness: "Who am I, O Lord God, that thou hast brought me hitherto?" (v. 18).

It was out of his personal experience of God's gracious kindness that David desires to show kindness to Mephibosheth. It was not the milk of human kindness which flowed towards Lodebar, but the offerings of a heart overwhelmed in gratitude for God's grace. Likewise we do not show kindness to another from our own perceived position of superiority, but instead we recognize our own lowliness and God's amazing goodness to us sinners.

Kindness is mercy in action. Kindness is seen in what it does, heard in the tone in which it speaks, and felt in the bearing of the giver. God's lovingkindness is seen in what He has done. He has not "spared his own Son but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). God's kindness is heard in the words He speaks, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5). Jehovah's kindness is felt in the compassion He has for us in our infirmities and weaknesses.

We see this kindness pictured in David's dealing with Mephibosheth. What David did for this man from Lodebar is a glorious, full-framed picture of God's kindness found in our enthroned Christ.

We can only surmise what Mephibosheth was anticipating as he made his journey to Jerusalem. He must have been apprehensive and afraid. After all, he was the grandson of Saul who had tried to kill David! He belonged to the tribe that had led Israel in a seven-years war against David, whom God had named to be the king. He was powerless and alone.

David shows the kindness of God to him. He speaks personally to Mephibosheth and calls him by name. His first words are "Fear not! For I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan, thy father's sake" (v. 7). In other words, anything you will enjoy as a result of my kindness is not on account of anything in you. I made a promise concerning you long ago, a promise you know nothing about.

And then David explains the provisions that he has made. "I will restore to you all the land of Saul, your father" (v. 7); I give to you an inheritance among the saints. I will adopt you as my own son; you shall live with me in Jerusalem as an heir enjoying my protection. You will have a place at the king's table each day; what I intend to give you is not simply things, but myself in fellowship, not simply bare necessities, but the fullness of blessing.

Such is God's kindness to us in Christ! He has given us a place in His church, adoption as sons and daughters of God, and covenant fellowship with Him. "And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16)

What was Mephibosheth's response? "And he bowed himself and said, What is thy servant that thou shouldest look up upon such a dead dog as I am?" (v. 8).

His response showed a deep humility, and then sheer astonishment. He does not say; "Well finally someone woke up and is doing something for me! Here I am, forgotten and forsaken for all these years. This has not been fair to me, I deserved better."

No, his response is the very opposite. He is astonished. David's kindness does not make any sense to him. Why would you do this for a dead dog?

That is a very self-deprecating thing to say. Should he have said that?

Mephibosheth meant what he said. The term "dead dog" is not too strong for a believer to use when we stand in the reality of our sins before the tender mercies of God.

Have we faced the fact that whether we are gifted or limited, beautiful or homely, agile or arthritic, quick or slow, our sinful nature places us at the bottom of the pile? We are unable and unwilling to walk in God's good paths: lame, sinful, diseased, and unworthy. The message comes to us today from every side: "God really likes nice people, and you are a nice person. You should celebrate you. You have a good chance of being brought to the King's table because you deserve it."

The truth is the reverse. Mephibosheth gives the only response to God's amazing mercies. The response we give to God, who shows His lovingkindness is:

"And can it be?"

"What wondrous love is this?"

Remember this was David's awed response to God for His mercy when he was seated on a throne (2 Sam. 7:19), and this was Mephibosheth's response when he

lay upon his face before a throne. We are debtors to grace. God's grace to the undeserving always humbles and brings us to our knees in astonishment.

If Mephibosheth was humbled by David's mercies, how then shall we respond in the presence of our gracious God?

Grace is light; it illumines us to see ourselves and God at the same time. When God's grace is at work in us, we will see our own impurity, helplessness, and utter need. And at the same time we will see exactly what is so amazing and astounding about God's grace.

We will sing, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!"

Why? "Who healeth all thy diseases, who redeemeth thy life from destruction, who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies" (Ps. 103:1-4).

An earthly king would invite the beautiful, strong, and powerful people of his kingdom to be his guests about his table. What King sends out His messengers to bring to His table "the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind" (Luke 14:23)? What King, after drawing publicans and sinners to His house, will sit down and eat and drink with them and then call them sons and daughters? The King of glory does!

Mephibosheth was not at the king's table to bring something to his king but to reveal something about his king. He was not there to add what was lacking, but to receive what he was lacking. The greatest blessing you will ever receive is fellowship with the King Himself in all your burdens and trials. In His presence you will be renewed by His promise that all things will work for your good. At His feet you are assured that His grace will be sufficient for whatever He sends into your life.

Under our King's table are lame legs. Seated around His table are the lowly and contrite in heart. All at His table are humbled and astounded at the amazing kindness of our King who has so exceedingly loved us.

The burdens of our bodies do not rob us of the privileges that are ours in Christ. At the Lord's Table we learn to rejoice in our infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon us. Our infirmities do not cause us to fall into despondency, but rather at His table, the lame leap as a deer, the blind see, and the deaf hear.

No matter the lot God has assigned to us or the burden we must bear, we have all been fetched from Lodebar—out of loneliness and exile—and brought to the feast of God's lovingkindness. Freely we have received, freely we show His kindness to each other.

EDITOR'S NOTES

This issue of the *Standard Bearer* is *very special* as it focuses on special needs members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. I am confident that you will relish it from cover to cover, and as you hear the testimony of true faith, you will stand amazed at the power of God's grace.

We are indebted to all the contributors who put their heart and soul into each article submitted. As one of you wrote in an email, "This was a labor of love and lots of tears were shed yet again while we reminisced…." Thank you! Your superb efforts will help us grow in our understanding of all the members of Christ's body.

Thanks also to all the individuals and families featured in these articles. You opened your heart and life for our learning and we are grateful. To the many families and individuals who have faced challenges because of disabilities, but were not mentioned or photographed, we are thankful for you also.

Thanks to Erika Kiel for the cover design and Cori Peterson from Hudsonville PRC for the cover photos, taken at the "Serve One Another Day" during the 2025 Protestant Reformed Young People's Convention.

To God be many thanks for music and singing, and for the truth of the gospel so that we have something to sing about. Several months ago, a Christian Fellowship group here in West Michigan held a "Hearts' United Day" at a Covenant Christian High School basketball game. In connection with that event, the school devoted a huge section of wall in a main hallway to profiles and pictures of all the special needs participants. Those who read through those profiles were probably struck by the one thing everyone mentioned: love for music and singing, and especially having different groups come to perform and sing along with them at special events. How could we live without music!

One more thing before you keep reading. If anyone sees Joshua Griess (Loveland, CO), please give him a high-five on behalf of the *Standard Bearer*. We sent out our masterplan and request to writers on January 15, giving writers three months to produce an article by the due date of April 15. Josh finished his article in 3 days, 12 hours, 52 minutes, and 53 seconds (see his article for the time stamp). Nice work, Josh! You must have smashed the record for the fastest an article has ever been submitted!

B. Huizinga

SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS OF GOD'S COVENANT: TRUTH, PROGRESS, AND NO TERMINATION

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TRUTH: BELONGING TO GOD'S COVENANT

As my colleague, Professor Doug Kuiper, pointed out to me recently after he had read many different articles in various church magazines and books on the topic of special needs children, no one talks about the covenant! We have been given a precious heritage in the truth of God's covenant and we need to consider it in connection with special needs members.

The covenant of God is not a contract, treaty, or pact as has been widely taught (and what would that mean for special needs individuals?), but the warm relationship of friendship that God establishes with His chosen people in Jesus Christ. In that relationship, God loves, saves, and protects His people as His friend-servants, and by His almighty grace, they love, worship, and serve Him as their Friend-Sovereign. God promises to be the God of us and our spiritual seed in the line of generations. Our brothers and sisters with physical or mental disabilities belong to this covenant of God as much as anyone else. Whether as adults or as children, those with special needs also enjoy the family life of God.

Many aspects of the covenant are important to think about in connection with special needs members. I will only mention three. First, God's covenant is *gracious*. We are not adopted by God and incorporated into the fellowship of Christ's death and resurrection through our own meritorious will-power, strength, or intelligence. God's covenant is not a relationship of worthiness whereby the "strong" and "honorable" can earn their way in and keep themselves secure in God's love, while "those members of the body which seem to be more feeble" (1 Cor. 12:22) and "which we think to be less honourable" (v. 23) are left on the outside looking in with sad eyes and a drooping countenance because they do not have the same willpower, strength, or intelligence. Of ourselves, we are *all* spiritually disabled and Christ is now and forever the full sufficiency of everyone in God's covenant.

Second, the covenant is *friendship*. The staggering truth of the gospel is that the Most High God, who dwells in light unto which no man can approach, is our Friend for Jesus' sake. We can dwell together with Him in intimate communion, knowing Him as we are known, loving Him as we are loved, and speaking with Him as He speaks to us. This is also true for special needs members of the covenant. Sometimes certain disabilities make communicating and relational interactions with others challenging. However, there is always a way of access open to the heavenly Father so that we can speak to Him in prayer even as He speaks to us through His Word. Even when some saints have significant intellectual disabilities and very limited, non-verbal communication, we should not underestimate God's power to communicate His love to their hearts and minds through the simplest expressions of the gospel spoken and sung.

Third, the covenant is *servanthood*. God is not only our Friend but our Sovereign whom we are obligated to love and serve in the unique position and with the unique abilities He has given to us. Special needs members are not exempt from service. If they belong to God's covenant, then the demands of the covenant come upon them also. Each according to his ability is called and privileged to serve God and others. As they are able, special needs members also find great joy in serving even in the simplest tasks in the life of the church. For those most severely disabled, their act of service may often be more passive as they serve the church with illustrations of God's grace and as precious objects of affection.

PROGRESS: CHANGES FOR GOOD

In the last several generations, God has brought significant progress in the way His people view and treat special needs brothers and sisters. This progress can be illustrated from the book *Elim: A Chicago Christian School and Life Training Center for the Disabled*.[1] Author Robert Swierenga provides a detailed history of Elim, the first *Reformed* Christian school in America dedicated to providing specialized education for people with mental and physical disabilities. The Dutch Reformed in the Chicagoland were "pioneers in this newly emerging field of special education," for when Elim began in 1948 it was still "the dark ages for the disabled" (p. xvii). After Elim began, it grew rapidly by riding the crest of the wave of special education consciousness in the 1950s and mandates from the federal and state governments that by 1968 required special education in public schools. The stories from this book featuring the Christian Reformed Church likely mirror the history of many Christian churches across denominational lines and show two areas of significant progress.

First, special needs children were formerly ignored out of ignorance or shame. Swierenga notes that until the 1940s it was common for parents to keep children with special needs hidden behind closed doors for their entire lives. For example, he tells how one child was told to hide whenever the doorbell rang (p. 2), and among the five boys and two girls who made up the first seven students at Elim, "…several had not even been away from home before. They did not recognize objects as familiar as a child's swing" (p. 3). Imagine that—a child so concealed from the public that he or she has never seen a playground!

How thankful we can be that God has brought Christians to see that special needs children are not objects of shame to hide, but valuable and cherished saints—fellow members of His *covenant*! God's friends! Why would we hide God's friends, when He is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16)? Upon those "we think to be less honourable" we are called to "bestow more abundant honour" (1 Cor. 12:23) by bringing them into public view for our friendship, attention, service, and care.

We can be thankful for events such as the following in our Protestant Reformed circles (and there are plenty of other efforts that could be mentioned):

- "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made Day"

  This is an annual event at many of our elementary schools to help raise awareness for mental, physical, and other disabilities. There is usually a chapel and throughout the school day the students participate in activities to help learn about different disabilities.
- "Serve One Another Day"

  This was a new idea for 2025 PR Young Peoples' Convention, located at a camp relatively close to the Grand Rapids, MI area. On this day, individuals with special needs came to the camp to join the hundreds of conventioneers for free-time and specially planned activities. It was a great opportunity to put the convention theme "Free to Serve" into action. The photos on the front cover of this magazine capture well the spirit of the day.

A second area of significant progress is in eduction. When Elim began in the 1940s, there were no teachers trained in special education and so it was a struggle to find qualified and willing teachers. At the time, the college of the CRC, Calvin College (now University) offered no degrees in special education. The first two teachers at Elim were exemplary Christian women, one a nurse, the other employed by a bank, but neither had any formal training in education, let alone special education (pp. 2-3).

How far the Christian church, including the PRC, has come by God's grace! God has given to us the Society for Protestant Reformed Special Education for over 40 years! It was established in 1983 with "the mission to provide God-centered education within the Christian school structure for those with special educational needs, whether they be mental or physical" (from the 2025 PRSE *Newsletter*). Currently, seven men from the West Michigan area serve on this board with subcommittees for education, publicity, technology, finance, building and transportation, and fundraising.

Significantly, the Society's four foundational principles are grounded in the truth of the *covenant*, the final stating, "In His infinite wisdom God has given to some covenant parents children who are mentally and/or physically handicapped. They too must receive covenant instruction according to their ability. This instruction is the solemn responsibility of all God's

1 Robert P. Swierenga, *Elim: A Chicago Christian School and Life-Training Center for the Disabled* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005). All page references to this book will be included in parentheses in the body of the article.

people" (from PRSE website). The doctrine of the covenant demands that if our children cannot benefit from the regular instruction given in existing Christian schools and they need specialized care and instruction, we work to the utmost of our power to provide them what they need. Under God's blessing we have aimed to do this, and He has given us devoted teachers, para-pros, and assistants who faithfully serve in special education programs and in other ways at various schools, carefully tailoring instruction and support to the needs of each child. Moreover, in God's providence, many Christan colleges and public universities currently offer a degree in special education.

NO TERMINATION: INFANTICIDE AND ABORTION ARE MURDER!

But we would never have the privilege to know, cherish, and serve these special needs friend-servants of God in His covenant if we disposed of them. There is something worse, much worse, than hiding or ignoring them: terminating their lives by murdering them. What a dark and depraved world this is!

The November-December 2025 issue of *Reformed Perspective*, a magazine that goes out to a primarily Canadian audience, featured an article entitled "Veya's Story." Veya Hope was a darling little girl born to her parents on December 4, 2023, and taken to glory on August 1, 2025. She was born with Down Syndrome and because of a heart defect requiring surgery, was eventually transferred to SickKids Hospital in Toronto, one of the leading children's hospitals in the world. But Veya's parents got the distinct impression that the staff at SickKids had no desire to fight for the life of little Veya. Veya's mother recounts how the medical team there tried to "stealth euthanize" Veya by denying her life-saving measures, such as a necessary liver transplant for her undiagnosed liver disease. She stated, "…you could just tell through the conversations with the doctors that they were really just trying to wrap things up with her and kind of coerce us into letting her go rather than help her" (p. 19). Based on this experience and her survey of the national landscape, Veya's mother concluded, "Canada has become a death culture" (p. 21).

Veya's story was picked up and featured in an article entitled "Practicers of Infanticide" in the January 2026 issue of *First Things,* an inter-religious magazine whose founding editor and current editor are Roman Catholic. The author of the article, Alexander Rainkin, cites various studies to show that "SickKids has historically been at the forefront of letting children die of their disabilities, especially children with Down syndrome" (p. 44). Moreover, he argues that the practice of selective nontreatment based on disabilities is not unique to SickKids Hospital but "accords with the direction of the field of medicine over the past century. The preventable deaths of children with disabilities occur, for the most part, without media interest" (p. 45). According to Rainkin, we know very little about what the medical world is doing to special needs children because we are not told.

Jeremy and Megi Feenstra of Hope PRC, Redlands, CA came face to face with this culture of death in the United States in a proposal for termination. Their special needs son, Tanner John, was born on June 8, 2019 at the astonishing small size of 1 lb. 2 oz. Before Tanner was born, an ultrasound revealed something very disconcerting and so their doctor advised that they terminate the pregnancy. When you get to the end of this magazine, you can read a little contribution from the Feenstras about Tanner (almost 7 years old now!) and their interactions with their doctor regarding abortion (see p. 313).

Termination? Termination is not medical care but murder. God forbids murder, especially the murder of precious children born to believers! Ezekiel 16:21 comes to mind: "That thou hast slain my children, and delivered them to cause them to pass through the fire for them?" *My* children! When the Israelites wickedly devoted their children to the fire as sacrifices to an idol, God was indignant and charged them with murdering *His* children.

"Termination" is not only murder, but theft that robs our Christian communities of the special privilege of cherishing, serving, and learning from all the wonderful special needs members of God's covenant. We do not despise, disregard, or dishonor any of our fellow members, and certainly not the most severely disabled, by "terminating" them. Rather, we "bestow more abundant honour" (1 Cor. 12:23), even as "God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked" (1 Cor. 12:24).

KOINONIA AND SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S CHURCH*

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Does your congregation include someone who was born with a physical or neurological abnormality? Down Syndrome? Autism? Cerebral palsy? William's Syndrome? Guillane-Barre Syndrome? Fragile X Syndrome? Or some other condition?

Do you know of a fellow believer who was not *born* with an abnormality, but who later had a stroke, aneurysm, traumatic fall, or accident, and suffered the effects ever since?

Such people serve the body of Christ, and Christ's church serves them, even when we do not notice it or understand how. This mutual service is a spiritual reality. God gave also to special needs members "the measure of faith" and "gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us" (Rom. 12:3, 6), and the Spirit gives them also an office (1 Cor. 12).

Although this mutual service happens often without notice, we are called consciously to serve these special needs members and receive their gifts for our service. This article focuses on that calling.

KOINONIA

Koinonia is the New Testament Greek word that expresses the reality of believers serving believers. The word is often translated "fellowship," but sometimes "communication" (Phile. 6), "contribution" (Rom. 15:26), or "communion" (1 Cor. 10:16). This fellowship is not merely social or verbal interaction, but any *outward* expression of an *inner* unity. This outward expression has as its goal *service to others* in the body.

The inner unity of regenerated believers is one of life and salvation; Christ's blood was shed for us, and He lives in us. Also, that inner unity indicates that we are part of the same body, serving the same body and Lord.

Because of this unity, the members of the body serve each other. But we must be conscious of our calling to express that unity outwardly. Explaining the communion of saints, the Heidelberg Catechism in A. 55 says, "First, that all and every one who believes, being members of Christ, are in common partakers of Him and of all His riches and gifts; secondly, that everyone must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members."

So also special needs members of the church have a spiritual gift with which they serve the church, and need other members of the church to serve them. This is true whether they are young or old, and whether their special needs were since birth or resulted from a later trauma.

So how is this *koinonia* manifest? In what concrete ways do and can the members of the church serve special needs members? And how do special needs members serve the church?

* The ideas presented in this article come from three main sources. One is my own experience as a parent of a child with special needs, as well as pastoring other parents of such children. Because this experience is still very limited, I have read numerous books over the years regarding various special needs and appropriate ways to respond. These are the second source. The third is books I read specifically to prepare to write this article. These include the following:

- Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), especially chapter 9.
- Brian Brock, *Disability: Living Into the Diversity of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), especially chapter 5.
- Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2006).
- Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, eds, *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), especially chapters 3, 16, 18, 19.
- Andrew and Rachel Wilson, *The Life We Never Expected: Hopeful Reflections on the Challenges of Parenting Children with Special Needs* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

SERVING THE SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS

Each special needs person is different. One serves a person with cerebral palsy differently than a person with no legs. Even two people who have the same special need have different personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. So what follows are general guidelines. One must get to know each special needs person individually to learn how specifically to serve him or her.

Understand them

Because true fellowship is possible only when two understand each other, we must work to understand our brothers and sisters with special needs.

This means understanding the *nature* of their special need. What is Guillane Barre Syndrome? William's Syndrome? Fragile X Syndrome? Ask what it is, or read a book about it, or search the internet. We need not be experts about the special need, but can have a basic understanding of it.

This also means understanding the *effects* of this special need. Autistic people often stim—rock back and forth, flap their hands in the air, or repeat words. Others require a special diet or a structured routine that includes an early bedtime. And people with communication difficulties or sensory overload have meltdowns. One who does not understand might view these as temper tantrums, but they are not. Meltdowns happen when one's brain or sensory inputs or emotions are overloaded, and the person needs rest before he or she can respond appropriately.

Lastly, understanding them includes realizing the *permanence* of their disability. Not until Christ raises their bodies will their disability be gone. It is naïve to think that disabled persons or their caregivers can do something to rid the person of the disability.

Converse with them

We serve special needs people by talking to them *regularly*. Talking to them shows we care and helps them not feel isolated.

This can be difficult. They might be hard of hearing, or it might be difficult to understand their speech. Some, when we ask how they are, will give a five-minute, rapid-fire presentation about polar bears—rather irrelevant to our daily life. But count it a privilege! With effort and regularity, we can understand them better. And God directed the timing of that speech about polar bears; what we think irrelevant today can, to our surprise, be relevant next week.

Accommodate them

We accommodate special needs people when we make changes to meet their needs. Is the person physically handicapped? Then the church accommodates by ensuring that the building and restrooms are handicapped-accessible. A person in a wheelchair needs to enter a bathroom or stall, be able to maneuver in it, get out of it and in again.

Sometimes efforts to accommodate one person negatively affects another. For instance, some autistic individuals (even some non-autistic ones) experience "sensory overload"—the lights are too bright, or the lights or fans make a high-pitched noise that bothers them, and the sound system is too loud. But changing the lighting and lowering the sound might make it more difficult for those who have poor eyesight or are hard of hearing. Sometimes accommodation involves designating a special room in which the special needs individual can sit during worship. Or the individual might accommodate himself by wearing noise-cancelling and muffling headphones. When the individual makes his or her own accommodation, the congregation must be understanding, not critical.

Include them

If we do not understand and talk to these special needs individuals, we will not know how to include them; and if we will not accommodate them, we give the impression that we are not interested in including them. Only when we work to understand and know them, can we include them.

"Include them" means doing what we can to ensure that they are at worship and other congregational gatherings. It means visiting with the families of special needs members, and with the members themselves.

In one apparent way, the Protestant Reformed community has made *huge* strides at including special needs individuals. I refer to our special needs programs in our Christian schools, and to teachers who have learned how wisely to accommodate.

Pray for them

We ought always pray for every member of the body of Christ. So pray for special needs members too.

SERVING THE PARENTS OR CAREGIVERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS

What to avoid

Avoid suggesting to the parents that they somehow contributed to the need or made it worse. If this is true, and the parents do not see it, professionals can help them see it. But most members of the church cannot know that such an assertion is true.

Avoid—or be clear why you are doing it—asking "why" questions: why does your child act the way he does? Do you know what went "wrong" so that your child is the way he or she is? Such questions should not be asked out of mere inquisitiveness or as a conversation piece. Those who truly love and care, who have demonstrated that love and care in concrete ways, and have built a relationship with the family, may ask these questions in order better to understand and serve. But such questions should not be a general discussion topic.

Avoid patronizing—saying or doing things that give the appearance of kindness and helpfulness, but actually convey that you think the parent needs your advice or actions in order to carry out their calling.

What to do

Listen to the parents' grief. Parents grieve when learning that their child will never walk, or sing, or marry, or hold a job. They might feel relief alongside of grief; a mother may have begun to think that something was wrong with *her*, because others did not see what she saw in her child. A diagnosis validated her motherly instinct that she was right all along. Yet, there is grief. This grief is *not self-pity or discontentment*. It is grief. Listen to their grief.

Understand the emotional toll that having such a child takes on the family. Being a fulltime caregiver of a special needs child can be exhausting. So understand why only one parent comes to Bible study, or they alternate, or they do not come at all. Understand why they leave church functions early, or why they do not adjust their schedule to accommodate a special event you have planned.

Maybe you can give relief; maybe you can care for the child for four hours while mother sleeps or shops or while the parents get away for supper so they can be alone and talk. To be a relief caregiver is service! Yet, depending on the nature of the special need and the phase of life one is in, the list of relief caregivers might be short, and the relief caregiver needs training and time to learn the task.

But befriend these parents, pray for them, pray with them, visit them, and love them with the love of Christ.

SPECIAL NEEDS MEMBERS SERVING THE CHURCH

Special needs members also serve the covenant community. Some do encouraging things: drawing a picture for somebody or writing a card for your birthday. Others have such child-like faith that their presence alone encourages us to trust in God. (All is going well for me, yet I complain. How can I do that, when before me is a special needs child who is always smiling and exhibiting contentment?)

Some might serve a specific task. One Down Syndrome boy was entrusted with filling the pastor's water glass before every service.[1] In one of our churches, a man with Down Syndrome took his turn ushering. And special needs members have tasks in their own homes; they might be assigned chores in school; they have a place in Bible studies. What little task could be assigned to a special needs individual in your family, church, or school?

So look for ways to include them. Look for ways by which you realize they serve you. And give thanks for them, considering yourself better for knowing them.

Two concluding comments. The first is for any couple who just realized that God has given them a special needs child. You will have challenges; but we all do in some form or another. Challenges lead us to rely on God, so go to Him often. And expect your life to be enriched in a deeper way than it would be otherwise!

The second is for anyone in the funeral line, visiting relatives of a special needs person who died. Do not rejoice with them that a burden is lifted. Their relative was not a burden; he or she was a loved one. Weep with those who weep.

1 Stephanie Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 187. This is an excellent book that all should read. I did not include it in the previous note because it falls in the second, not third, category of sources that I used.

TRIALS AND BLESSINGS

KRIS MOELKER
daughter of Dave and Bonnie Moelker and member of Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

In His infinite wisdom and good pleasure, our heavenly Father created me with a short umbilical cord, which He determined would wrap around my neck causing a lack of oxygen just before I was born. To show forth His power and glory, He preserved the lives of a new mother and baby. On that Good Friday morning in the early 1970s, He gave two new parents, an extended family, church family, and broader community of believers the trial and blessing of a special baby with Cerebral Palsy (CP). Every detail of that morning and my entire life our heavenly Father has determined, has used, and will continue to use to shape me for my place in the church, which is the body of Christ.

As I list some of the trials that I have each day, I pray that this may give the reader a glimpse into the struggles God sends me.

My speech is slow and hard to understand. Unless the listeners concentrate on listening to me, they may have to ask me to repeat myself or spell the words I am saying. Walking is difficult due to my weak muscles and poor balance, but it is possible with assistance from a loved one or with the use of a two-wheel walker. I do not have the strength to independently move quickly unless I am driving my power wheelchair. My hands are slow at performing tasks, so I have difficulty working together to sign my name on a birthday card or important document, fasten buttons or zippers, or tie a loose shoelace. At mealtimes, I must rely on my parents, family members, or friends to prepare my food, put it on a dinner plate with a special guard, cut up my food, give me a special "spork" so I can scoop up the food and put it into my mouth. Drinking requires the container to have a straw placed at a safe distance so I can suck the beverage without spilling its contents. My muscle coordination struggles from the moment I awake until the moment God blesses me with peaceful sleep. I must deliberately concentrate as my brain, muscles, and my entire body struggle together each moment of each day.

At various times in my life, God has sent me struggles with anxiety and depression. In His perfect wisdom, God brought me into a dark pit in my early 50s where I despaired and wanted Him to take me home to heaven. My parents, siblings, elders, deacons, pastor, friends, and doctors brought me the Word on their visits, sent me text messages and emails and prescribed medications, but I sank deeper into the pit. God rescued me from the pit through five months of biblical counseling. Due to my condition, my biblical counselor counseled me at my home. I praise God for using biblical counseling to change me from an anxious woman living with CP to a woman living with CP who is leaning on Jesus even more in my daily walk with Him.

Reflecting on this dark time in my life, I see how my gracious, merciful Father in His love for me was taking away my pride. God was making me more aware of my complete dependence upon Him for strength for my body, mind, and soul. His chastening hand showed me the ugliness of my sin of not trusting His wisdom in determining and carrying out every detail of my life according to His counsel. He reminded me how helpless I am by slowly taking away my zeal and strength, so I had more difficulty waking up early in the morning, transferring from my bed to my wheelchair, dressing myself and worshipping Him joyfully at home and in public gatherings. God reduced my ability to work 20 hours a week to 8-10 hours a week from home as a data entry clerk for Vibration Research. In His time, He restored these blessings as He taught me to lean on and trust Him for all things.

As I am blessed with middle age, I am struck by how gracious and longsuffering my heavenly Father

has been in His care of me. I am more helpless than many people. My Father knows this because this has been His plan for me from all eternity. I see His pity of me when I look at Him with the eye of faith. Psalm 103:13, 14 reminds me of this: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

What a blessing to have the gift of parents [Dave and Bonnie] who have been able to show me the love of Christ by using their abilities, time, and energy to provide for my physical, emotional, and spiritual needs for over 50 years. As members of the church, they lovingly brought me to baptism as an infant and used the means God gave them to keep their vows.

What a blessing to grow up as a daughter of the King in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as the church and school community where I live were just beginning to learn how to embrace and include members, students, and neighbors who have special needs. From infancy until the present time, I have had the blessing of publicly worshipping God with my family and church family in His house on many Lord's Days. God has given me the blessing of attending many Sunday School classes, catechism classes, and society meetings. God used the commitment and support of my parents to mainstream me from my special education classroom at the public school to Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School and Covenant Christian High School where I received nine years of Christian education in the same classrooms as my siblings, cousins, and other children from my church. What a blessing to have the strength to take three years of college classes to receive an associates degree.

"Kris, you have a special place in our Hope Church family." "Kris, we appreciate texts you send us on our birthdays and anniversaries." "We love to see the smile on your face as we walk past you to our seats each Sunday." "We appreciate your prayers and your words of encouragement." These are some examples of encouraging comments I have heard from members of my family and fellow members of Hope PRC where I have been a life-long member. Comments such as these have meant so much to me as a special needs member of Hope church. God has used them to show forth His praise in my unique place in the body of Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, remember all God's children have a special place in Christ's body. All special needs members, our families, and our caregivers need your encouragement and prayers. Please pray for the special needs members, their families, and caregivers privately, in your family devotions and in your congregational prayers. "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

MY EXPERIENCE WITH AUTISM

JOSHUA GRIESS
son of Dennis and Sharon Griess and member of Loveland PRC in Loveland, Colorado

THE EARLY YEARS

I was 3 years old when I was first diagnosed with Autism...at least that's the first time *my parents* were aware of it! Looooooong time ago! Now at this typing, I'm 36, so a bit over a billion seconds ago! Is autism a disability or a different ability?! Both?! It's a quote widely attributed to Stuart Duncan: "Autism is not a disability, it's a different ability"! Although he is wrong to say it is not a *disability* because it is, he is right to say it is a *different* ability, because it is that too. Autism is a mental (mind) condition in which the brain works differently. It's also known as a "spectrum," because it's different for some! Personally, mine is in the middle degree! As it turns out, when I was 3, they didn't know

very much about autism, it was a really new thing then. Now they know much more about it years later! My mother has mentioned to me about a woman from King Soopers (grocery store in Loveland), who came up to my mother and said, "I hope you don't get offended, but does your son have autism?!" And my mother said, "Yes!" And then the lady mentioned a place at a hospital that helps with autism therapy! I assume the therapy was for reading and all that! I know it was for talking! My therapy teacher helped me learn how to talk! As it turns out, if we didn't go through this therapy, there's a really good possibility that I wouldn't be able to talk!!! So it's a good thing we did that, otherwise people, including me, couldn't hear my beautiful voice!!! Ha ha, I'm also really humble!

I used to have seizures when I was in that age area. We later discovered seizures have a connection with being autistic. My sister would love to take care of me and years later she became a nurse!

Now it's been years since all that. Since I've been through therapy, my life is pretty normal...okay, maybe that is going too far!

WHAT AUTISM IS LIKE FOR ME NOW

One positive thing about autism, for some of us, is there are certain subjects we're absolutely obsessed with. For me, it's numbers: named numbers, especially high numbers, especially high named numbers!!! Autism is a means God uses for some of us to be this way, and I am certainly thankful to God for this part! There are numbers so huge that they literally can't even fit in the (observable) universe! In fact, even the digits of these numbers, if each digit was a Planck volume (the absolute smallest volume) the number couldn't fit in the (observable) universe! In fact, it would take countless (observable) universes to fit them! Here's two such numbers, 'Triple Terrible Tethrathoth', TREE (3), (My **absolute favorite!!!**) I recently started writing numbers from 0, now up to 15,408! Another subject that fascinated me when I was younger was planets!

I'm not supposed to spin too much, such as go on rides that spin a lot, because it's possible it could trigger a seizure again, although I don't think it's ever happened, but there is too much possibility there!

At least some people with autism do what's known as "stimming"! It's moving certain ways. For me, it's stretching, not all the time, but sometimes I stretch an extra amount! Maybe partially on purpose, partially automatic??!! And looking all over! As in moving all over to look all over! At least some autistic people get what's known as "meltdowns"! That's literally when you freak out! I rarely get them! Did I get them more when I was younger?! Yes, I did. My mother told me about when I was younger, with people around, she learned to tell when it was about to happen, and had me go in my room where it was quiet and look at books. I honestly can't even remember any of that, but...it must have happened a few times at least when I was younger! Although it's possible to get a meltdown if you don't have autism, apparently it's more common if you have autism!

For people with autism sometimes they cannot handle certain noises. A while ago I got this book off of Amazon called, *Being Autistic!* This book says, "We might cover our ears or close our eyes to block out any sensory stuff that is annoying us." I sometimes cover my ears over noises I find hard to hear. There are certain noises (if they're louder it's worse, but even if they're not as loud,) that make me **absolutely upset!** It does help of course that I sometimes wear ear plugs!! Of course God gives grace as a "fruit of the Spirit being... longsuffering..."—imperfect though of course! (Gal. 5:22-23 and Col. 3:12-14)! Noises such as sniffling and yawning upset me! Although I can understand yawning at least to a certain extent, but sniffling?! **That I can't** understand at all!!

Not everything we do has something to do with autism, only some does, for us (including me) who have autism! God gave to each of us different challenges and we all do our best with what God has given us.

LOOKING FORWARD WITH HOPE

Now I want to mention looking forward to heaven! My **absolute favorite** phrase in all of Scripture is, "And there shall be no more curse..." taken from Revelation 22:3a! I **gladly admit I'm absolutely obsessed** with that phrase!!! I don't look at autism (including mine) as a bad thing in the sense of God's plan for my life, but in and of itself it **is a bad thing** *as* part of the curse on the human race, on the creation as a whole in general. For other 'special needs' it's the same way, which is what this *Standard Bearer* is all about! No matter the condition

of God's children, regenerated as God's children, we all have a place in the body now (1 Cor. 12:12-31)! And we will have a place in the body in the next life too! What will that be like for us with disabilities and different abilities? I told you earlier that one thing I look at as a blessing with autism is having an intense focus and fascination with certain subjects. That makes me wonder if in the eternal heaven, could God make us keenly fascinated with an intense focus with certain subjects apart from autism?! He sure could, He's God! I believe we'll continue to be ourselves in the eternal heaven, and part of that is our interests, fascinations, so...yah! As long as they have nothing to do with sin of themselves, or of autism in and of itself! Such as (for me) having an intense interest in numbers, **especially** high numbers, for other(s), perhaps music, etc.! I think God will even use that in the next life!

So in the eternal heaven I won't and can't have autism and won't and can't have sin...forever!!! I'm happy to be rid of autism and **especially** sin in the next life. I'd **gladly** be gone with sin in this life if I could, but I can't! But let me quote someone who has autism named Dr. Temple Grandin, and say that in *this life*, "If I could snap my fingers and be nonautistic, I would not." It is what I know, and God's good plan. How much of who I am is me, and how much is autism? How much has autism brought out parts of me that are me but not autism? I don't know. But in heaven we are going to find out!

CONCLUSION

Has God used me for the good of the church? Maybe some ways I don't even realize, but I am thankful for friendships and that people in church understand me and are kind to me! This means a lot to me! Thank you for letting me write!

01/19/2026
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COMING TO TERMS WITH OUR DAUGHTER'S DIAGNOSIS

RUSS AND LISA POTJER
parents of Isabella Ruth and members of Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

Have you ever prayed that God would give your unborn child a disability? Your answer to that question would probably be the same as the answer to this one: Have you ever prayed that God would afflict you with a disability? Disabilities are a part of the curse that came because of the Fall. We would not ask for them. What we do ask is that our Father would bring into our lives anything that serves our salvation and the grace to submit to His plan. Our family has experienced the amazing grace that only comes from God as we submit to Him. By grace we have seen His goodness to us in the life we have with a child that is severely multiply impaired.

Our daughter, Isabella Ruth, was born in 2007. In utero, it was discovered that she had a heart problem called atrial septal defect. She would need open heart surgery to repair it, but it would wait until she had grown because it was difficult to work on the small heart of an infant. A few days later, we took her home apprehensively, afraid we had a medically fragile baby to care for. We did not know then that she had another life-threatening condition. A few months later, she had the first of many similar episodes where her little body would go tense and she would seem to have trouble breathing for several seconds up to a few minutes. Sometimes she would even start turning gray. She also started falling behind developmentally. We wanted to blame her health problems on her heart defect but her cardiologist did not agree. When her heart was repaired with open heart surgery at 15 months and the episodes and developmental delays continued, we saw that the cardiologist was right. Some of her episodes brought

us to the ER, which sometimes turned into overnight stays while more tests were run. I remember growing exhausted as the stress took its toll. In 2009 we were referred to a neurologist who ordered a muscle biopsy. He did not really know what he was looking for. The biopsy did give an answer to the questions we had, but it was a difficult answer. Isabella had a rare metabolic disorder called Pyruvate Dehydrogenase Deficiency. This is a neurodegenerative disorder caused by a deficiency in an enzyme called pyruvate, a crucial enzyme in the metabolic process of turning carbohydrates into energy. Her unprocessed carbohydrates cause a buildup of lactic acid in her blood stream causing seizures and eventual organ failure. In general, individuals who showed symptoms have died in childhood and currently there is no cure. We learned about a new treatment—a ketogenic diet that "tricks" the body to run on fat and protein instead of carbohydrates.

We spent the weeks following the day we received her diagnosis in a fog of grief. Suddenly, we had a new identity as parents of a special needs child. I did not want it. I wanted to have, love, and care for our daughter but I did not want to accept the fact that she would be severely impaired. Not only were we grieved about her impaired life, but we were also struggling with the knowledge that we might lose her. It weighed heavily on us day to day.

As the weeks turned into months and then into years, we learned more about the struggles of life with a severely disabled child. We were filled with pity for her as we saw how limited she was in being able to enjoy this earthly life. The joy of food was off limits for her. The joy of physical activity was not possible for her—she did not learn to walk until she was 4. The joy of communication was extremely limited for her—she has never learned to speak. It seemed she would have a life full of doctor appointments, medical equipment and procedures, and tough battles with every illness she acquired. Dentist appointments turned traumatic because she did not understand what was going on and would fight the entire time. Even worse, if her gums needed numbing, she could not understand that she should not chew on her tingling lip or cheek. Despite my efforts to hold on to her mouth while the numbness wore off, she hurt herself. She also became more isolated due to her inability to communicate and move about freely. While the lack of socializing never seems to bother her, it hurts us to see her more out of the community than in it. What joy could we share with her?

I struggled with self-pity as her mother. Every time I was confronted with the difference between Isabella and another child her age, my heart hurt. I was also very aware of all the eyes that turned to see my little girl who looked, acted, and sounded different. Awkward moments felt frequent in typical mom conversations as other moms would be sharing little joys and frustrations and suddenly realize that aspect of my life with my daughter was so different or did not even exist in some cases. I felt I was constantly being reminded of things that Isabella and we as her parents would never have. Even at home, we felt discouraged. As Isabella grew older, we could not share meals together at the table as a complete family because she was on a very strict diet and she would want our food. We have found it challenging to go places, especially as she got older. There is a lot of planning involved due to her diet and incontinence. Her limited mobility has made a lot of types of outings or vacations difficult or even impossible.

Over the years, these feelings have slowly changed. We can now answer the question: what joy? Our family grew; God gave us three more children whose lives are also affected by their big sister's disorder. We needed to have the right heart towards God in this trial because we knew they would struggle as we had with self-pity, bitterness, jealousy, discontent, and other sins. We prayed for God to show us that He was indeed good. He helped us first by leading us to focus on glorifying God; He was worthy, no matter our circumstances. God has been so gracious to us in answering our prayers and gently showing us how this burden of Isabella's disorder is being used for our good.

First, our rejoicing in the Lord grew. The verse "God is my portion" has more meaning to us because her limitations are what drives us to find our joy in Him. Our personal prayer life and family worship times have grown. We sing, read His Word, and pray together more often. To compensate for the separation at mealtimes, we began gathering in the living room as a whole family for longer devotions after the table was cleared. The Bible tells us that "fullness of joy" is

to be found in His presence. As we were brought into His presence more often, we found that to be true. That joy of being in His presence will be more fully realized in heaven. What great comfort to know of the fullness of joy that will be hers when the Lord does bring her to Himself. Carrying the burden of the possibility of losing her any day compels us to grow closer to Him in preparation for that day.

Our trust in God grew. The experience of His good care of us now helps us to trust His future care. In the little things, from providing loving bus drivers, to giving her a *love* for fireworks (my birthday is the Fourth of July), God has proven repeatedly that He cares for us. Because the future seemed overwhelmingly fearful, we learned to live one day at a time, putting our trust in Him for today and leaving tomorrow's fears in His hands. When we are confronted with how different she is from other girls her age, we remind ourselves that this was *always* God's plan. It was never His plan for her to talk, hang out with friends, drive, date, or marry. But because *this* is His plan, we could trust that it is good, just in a different way. We prayed for the grace for *her* to trust Him and be aware of His goodness in this different life. He answers these prayers. Most people who see her out in public are immediately aware that she is severely disabled and they want to reach out to her in some way. They feel the need to make her happy, but they quickly learn she already is. We often hear others who have been around her comment in awe about how happy and content she is. This has not always been true. We did have difficult seasons when we felt she was not happy and had to search for the reason and make some changes. But overall, she is very content. We believe this is evidence that God has given her to see and trust His goodness to her.

We learned to focus on being thankful. Yes, there are many hard things that have come with the disorder but there are also good things on which we focus and for which we give thanks. Isabella is now 19 years old! She still acts like a two-year-old in many ways. Do we not all wish that our children would keep their cute little ways about them? Isabella has. She still looks at us with that sweet happy face of a toddler. She still wants her mama around all the time. She still gets into "little kid" trouble—emptying out boxes of Kleenexes, pouring a Costco-sized bottle of cumin out over her bed and playing in it like sand—and such like. She always makes it funnier with a little smirk and giggle when confronted. When she hears that her dad is home from work, she will yell "Boo!" from her room. That is her "hello" to him. Because of her, we have met many new friends. We are thankful for all the special joys she brings in all the aspects of her life. Thanksgiving also comes when we remind ourselves to consider what we deserve. Do we even deserve to have life? What right do we have to demand a certain kind of life? Should we not be glad to serve God in whatever circumstance He puts us in, out of thankfulness to Him for being saved from sin and death?

We have learned a new level of self-denial and have come to see that what God teaches us about losing our lives for His sake is true; in so doing, you will find your life. Daily life is full of her care. She requires assistance with everything: dressing, brushing teeth, showering, walking, and such like. She is incontinent and tube fed so our schedules revolve around her changings and feedings. We go through a 45-minute process of flushing her bowels every other day. She takes five different medications. Her diet consists of a shake that needs to be made fresh every morning. Because she has epilepsy, we are always on a certain level of alertness in case we must help her come out of a seizure with rescue meds. Because she has autism, she is very set in some of her routines. She also has a hard time being in crowds; she does not like her path to be interrupted. Lately, as a brand-new challenge, she has refused to leave places we take her. All these things cause us to groan a little as our plans are often ruled and affected by these behaviors. Repeatedly, we have to put what we want aside and serve God by helping and accommodating her. Repeatedly, we have experienced His blessing in serving Him in this way.

We love Isabella and all our children very much. God has done much to shape all of us through Isabella's disorder. Dear reader, if you have been given a difficult trial, ask God to give you the grace to submit to that life and to see His goodness to you in that trial. Focus on glorifying Him in all things and we trust you will find that He will answer your prayers, perhaps in very similar ways He has answered ours.

CARING FOR ADULT SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

KURT AND RUTH KAPTEIN
parents of Amy and Kara Kaptein and members of Zion PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

We have been asked to write about our path that pertains to the caring of our girls and the responsibility that we have as parents now that they are older. For proper context to this article, it is important that we introduce our two daughters and family to you.

Amy is 40 years old; she is the oldest of our five children. Amy was diagnosed with an Autism cognitive impairment when she was five years old. She attended the Early Childhood program at Jenison Public for one year. When she was six years old, we enrolled her into the Protestant Reformed Special Education Program at Heritage Christian. She continued in the Special Ed program at Covenant Christian High School. After a successful time at Covenant, she went to Ottawa Area Center in the CBI (Community Based Instruction) program. She had the opportunity to go to different job sites to find a place where she can enhance and grow her vocational skills. In 2009 she was hired at Culvers in Jenison and is currently employed there. Amy enjoys playing basketball, pickleball, and volleyball. She also enjoys taking walks and riding her bike. During the winter months she loves going to the Covenant basketball games and spends many hours doing difficult puzzles. Amy loves to babysit her nieces and nephews, and they love her! Amy is a blessing to our family and to all those who know her!

Kara is 27 years old and the youngest of our children. Kara started her schooling when she was 18 months old at the Early Childhood Program through Ottawa Area Center. At three years old she started the PPI (Pre-Primary Impaired) program at Jenison Public School. She was very young and to put her on the bus at three years old was very hard and something we will never forget! At six years old she was enrolled into Kindergarten and the Special Education Program at Heritage Christian. She also continued with her education at Covenant Christian in Special Education. After Covenant she attended the Young Adult Services Program at Ottawa Area Center. She was put in various job settings and learned many skills in the program to help her with her independence. She excelled as an activity aid to the life enrichment program at American House in Jenison. Kara has been there over six years already and loves what she does there. She has had opportunity to work with the residents of the memory care unit but has been transferred to the residents that live in the independent living facility. She oversees and coordinates the exercise opportunities for residents, playing games and doing crafts with them. She is a blessing to those who live there, and they are a blessing to her. Kara's main hobby is taking pictures at the Covenant Christian girls and boys basketball games. Kara has also taken pictures for families and has also done some casual pictures for weddings. She loves to take bike rides, play volleyball and pickleball.

Psalm 139:14 says, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." From this verse we recognize that God has given us two special needs daughters who are fearfully and wonderfully made. He has also given the church our two special needs daughters to care for and to instruct in the fear of the Lord. They are unique in their abilities, their interests, and their personalities. We have also seen that they are unique in the gifts that they can bring to those in the church who are hurting, going through the joys of

their lives, and who need encouragement from day to day. We stand amazed at how God has taken the simple things of their Christian faith and used them to have a profound effect on the people that they enjoy serving as they have grown up from the young years of their life to the present place where God has placed them.

Writing an article on this topic reveals a temptation to write what we have done, what we are doing, and what our plans are as we get older as parents and then expect others to follow. This would be the wrong way to read an article like this, and we would not want anyone to take this article as a ten-step program for what you must consider when your special needs children get this age or that age. Remember, God made every one of our children unique in their own way so that they can glorify Him in the simplest of ways, which requires their own unique plan.

So now the question, What are the unique challenges and rewards that we have experienced throughout our life with our children?

First of all, the love and affection shown to them through our schools has been the highlight of their lives. They made friendships, developed safety lessons, learned their ABC's, learned "touch math," learned about God's creation, learned about the church, and sang the songs of the church. Knowing that God powerfully controls everything that happens in the world and for themselves is instilled into their hearts today. God, in His providence, has made available to them a townhouse in Hudsonville where they can live on their own with much support from family and friends.

We must understand the responsibility that God's people have to care for the people of the church that have difficulties. Using Signup Genius on the internet, rides to work are coordinated with them, and baking food for them is done with members of the church at scheduled times, activity/game nights are scheduled for them by the church, and prayers are offered on their behalf daily by those that know them. This is not only helpful to us as parents, but also such a great opportunity for Amy and Kara to experience the communion of the saints. Those are the memories and the ongoing care that is given to them each day.

Do you sense a common theme in the introductions and their current situation when it comes to the caring of our daughters? We sincerely hope so. The unique challenges are there for sure, but when we think of what those challenges have led to, we can only rejoice in our Lord Jesus Christ for the lifelong rewards that He has brought us for our girls. We have been privileged to watch the Lord's hand leading friends and the church to fulfill all the needs that they have. The needs are very evident as we look to care for all our special children.

So fellow church members, under the leading hand of Jesus our Shepherd, pay attention to this small number of members you come in contact with and reach out to parents, hold the hands of our unique children, walk by the side of them, ask them if they need anything, pray continually with and for them, not only today but for every day of their lives as you come in contact with them. We as parents can feel and see the mercies of Christ as these things are carried out on behalf of Amy and Kara by the church. Are they unique? Absolutely! Are there rewards as we have cared for them? Absolutely! May we follow the words of Christ in Matthew 25 where He says, "For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me."

And now the next question: What preparations have we been making when caregivers get older and cannot provide full-time care for their special needs children?

This may be answered in more of a practical way:

- ***Practice independence.*** We have experienced the difficulty of having them move out from under our roof and in their own house. It is hard breaking that bond after having them live with us for over 40 years. We would suggest that you prepare your special needs children for this independence when they are young. As we get older, it is hard not to worry, but we know that our God is sovereign and He will be with our girls and take care of them, even when we are not able.
- ***Encourage friendships*** with your children from family, church family, and friends. This is a good opportunity to pray for our children with special needs, pray for their parents and siblings. Text, call, stop in and visit them. They love to have friends pray with them and have devotions with them.

In closing, we thank God for being our faithful Father. There are a lot of thoughts, activities, and unique challenges that must be met each day on behalf of our special needs children. It may be hard not to look ahead and worry about the lives of our girls in the future. We have learned to take a day at a time, and to be diligent in preparing for the future. We have been assured that God, church, and family will always be with Amy and Kara, just as He has been in the past. Their hearts truly love God and for this we are so thankful!

Amy and Kara both love to sing; they feel God's love to them through singing. They also have favorite Bible passages. Amy's is Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." Kara's is Psalm 143:8, "Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust; cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee."

COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

GREG AND LIZ BRUINSMA

parents of Nolan Bruinsma and members of Peace PRC in Dyer, Indiana

NOLAN BRUINSMA

Nolan Bruinsma was born February 11, 2005. He was the firstborn of Greg and Liz Bruinsma. We were young, newly married, and ready to start a family. At six weeks old, Nolan experienced second-degree sun burns on his hands and face after going for short walks outside under his stroller canopy for two consecutive days in April. This raised alarm bells. Nolan's maternal uncle had a rare genetic disorder called Xeroderma Pigmentosum. What are the chances that Nolan could have this same genetic disorder? "Infinitesimal" is what the dermatologist said. It turns out that "infinitesimal" and "one in a million" do not really matter in statistics when you serve a God who is sovereign over all things. God determined that Nolan would have this genetic disorder no matter how small the chances. God also determined in His wisdom, which is infinite, that Nolan would be given to our family and for us to care for. Nolan was diagnosed with Xeroderma Pigmentosum (XP) by the National Institutes of Health at 18 months old. XP is a rare, inherited autosomal recessive genetic disorder causing extreme UV radiation sensitivity due to deficient DNA repair mechanisms. In layman's terms: Nolan's skin must *not* be exposed to the sun and he is 10,000 times more likely to develop skin cancers from sun exposure.

We were aware that Nolan might have some physical and mental delays due to this rare condition but were hopeful that he might be part of the 80% of patients who do not experience mental and physical involvement. He was always a little slow with his milestones but just fast enough not to qualify for any kind of early intervention. Finally, at the age of 18 months, he was delayed enough in the therapy world to qualify for physical therapy, occupational therapy, developmental therapy, and speech therapy.

Once Nolan turned 3 years old, he attended the local public school to continue his therapies and be in a peer-structured pre-school. When he turned kindergarten age, we wrote a letter to our Protestant Reformed school board outlining our deep desire for Nolan to attend our Christian school along with his peers, cousins, and, one day, siblings. We were gently told this was not possible, as PRCS was not set up for his kind of needs. Each year we continued to write letters to the school board with our great desire for him to attend. During those years PRCS allowed Nolan to participate in his class on Friday afternoons with an aid. These were special years and a way for Nolan's class to get to know him and include him. Nolan continued in the public school system through 4th grade. He was cared for and taught by many teachers and aids who loved him and were

patient with him. He learned many great things at the public school and they were very good to us and him.

We were *so* excited when PRCS opened the Achieve room for children who needed more than our Discovery/Resource Center could accommodate. From then on, Nolan attended PRCS with his fellow church friends, peers, and siblings. It was amazing! The Achieve room with the various teachers and aids through the years have been such a blessing to our family. To have Nolan attend our Christian school and be part of the body of Christ alongside his peers was such an overwhelmingly positive experience for all involved. His classmates were so kind and inclusive. Other children from other grades got to know him. He would walk the halls and get high fives and knuckles from all his friends, and he would "knock over" his friends with a push and they would dramatically fall to the floor while Nolan would laugh and laugh.

During those elementary school years Nolan was making mental and physical progress, albeit slowly. He continued his therapies even in our PR Christian school, with the public school coming in for therapy services. Nolan could walk, run, say about 300 word approximations, was potty trained, fed himself, and, we would say, was operating at about a 2-3-year old level. These were good years. Our family grew during this time as well. We were blessed with two more sons who were normal developing and one daughter who also has XP. Nolan was charming, curious, fast, carefree, and loving. He loved to sing in church and at home and listen to music. He loved playing games on his iPad, listening to Covenant Christian high school choir's YouTube channel—and he loved chips! Oh, how he loved his snacks. Church and hanging out with family were his favorite things. He would say "church" over and over and over. We distinctly recall his last spoken word to be "church."

Around the age of seven we decided to have Nolan's hearing checked. We had some concerns about his hearing, and from research groups that we were a part of, we knew that hearing loss could be a sign of neurological decline. We were shocked when the results came back with profound hearing loss. Along with that diagnosis came the reality that Nolan would continue to decline mentally and physically. What that would look like, we did not know. But we did know that hearing loss was the first sign of regression. At first regression was slow. But over time it seemed an overwhelming loss of functions all at once. He moved from walking unassisted to walking with a walker. Then he was upgraded to a wheelchair. From there were eating/swallowing struggles that resulted in him being fed through a G-tube. Bathroom complications meant sensitive procedures that only a few could manage to perform. He eventually underwent surgery to give relief in the bathroom functions. Nolan also sustained a spinal fusion of his whole spine to relieve scoliosis complications. These surgeries were a big deal and we learned much about him and how medically fragile he was. All of this was happening in his late junior high and early high-school years. Around his freshman year Nolan was fully wheelchair bound, not eating or drinking by mouth, not eliminating waste on his own, coughing and choking frequently, and was completely dependent on others for every aspect of his daily living and care. Nolan survived two bouts of pneumonia that resulted in surgeries and extended hospital stays. Then COVID-19 came on the scene. We were worried about his health especially at this time, but God sustained him and as far as we know, he never got COVID.

On the morning of January 24, 2022, Jesus visited our home and took Nolan to be with Him in glory. He was 16 years old. He was "healthy" and "in a good place." We were not expecting it, although we were not expecting him to live a long life either. The Lord answered Jesus' prayer of John 17:24, which states, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am...." That day we were overcome with staggering grief over the death of our firstborn special child. Very soon after his death, we were able to make this confession: God dealt with us gently in taking Nolan from us.

Let us explain. Our fear and concern was that Nolan would be sick in the hospital when his time would come. Maybe we would even have to make hard choices as to the end of his life. Most likely if he was in the hospital, he would be in Indianapolis, where we doctored. Indianapolis is 2½ hours south of us and away from family. We were afraid he would be in pain and struggle. God orchestrated that whole day to be gentle with us. Early that morning school was canceled because of snow. Nolan was home, in his own bed, there was no struggle heard. We have every confidence he was peacefully taken in his slumber. We did not have to make hard decisions

or see him struggle. God made it possible for our whole family to be home and for us to be together that morning. Extended family members came over that day, including cousins, to grieve with us and care for us. God held us tenderly and graciously cared for us thorough our family and fellow saints. Rev. R. Barnhill organized a night of singing and prayer at Peace church for us and our extended family, including all nieces and nephews. We visited with close family and friends after the church singing. Rev. Barnhill also spoke at a special all-school chapel that week for the benefit of the school children that knew Nolan so well. We were spiritually cared for in this way during our time of immense grief. God was so good to us and to our children.

Greg would worry how he would react when his "little man" was gone. He was afraid he would not be able to handle it or go on. We did not know at that time, but in hindsight, we see that God was graciously leading us there too. We had already started grieving Nolan's death with every new diagnosis, with every milestone lost, each set back, medical difficulty, and surgery. These griefs were hard to bear over his lifetime but made the final grief just a little softer. The night before Nolan died Greg got the most precious last moments with Nolan. Nolan was upset in bed, which often happened, and Greg prayed with him and sang to him, "What a day that will be when my Jesus I will see." Little did we know how soon that would be. What a gift of grace!

Liz's grief was greatly connected to her daily care of Nolan for all his needs. She cared so diligently for his body and for his skin—all his devices and tubes that helped us keep him alive and provide good quality of life for him. Suddenly, her job as a mother changed dramatically. Medical supplies were no longer needed that, just the day before, were life-giving for Nolan. Strict schedules and medicine alarms on her phone no longer relevant. Upcoming appointments to cancel and phone calls to make. All that tender love and detailed care was not necessary now for Nolan. He had all the care he would ever need now, in heaven. Liz has found grief best described by author Tim Challies in his book, *Seasons of Sorrow*. He states,

> One of the realities of grieving as a Christian is the coexistence of heights of joy alongside depths of sorrow. They run parallel, like two streams flowing from a common mountain peak and traveling through the same valley, yet never quite touching, never quite emptying into the sea to become one…. While the streams of joy and sorrow run in parallel, they are not identical. The stream of joy is more like a gentle brook, while the stream of sorrow is like a raging river. It is sorrow, not joy, that threatens to overwhelm me, pull me in, and drag me under. I've never had to remind myself to temper my joy with sorrow, but I often have to search for light amid the darkness.

During Nolan's lifetime we saw the Holy Spirit working in his life in simple ways. As the Bible teaches, a simple childlike faith. Nolan loved to sing and praise God in his own little way of making a joyful noise, particularly Psalter number 391, which he often sang. He would add the last word of each line along with whoever he was singing with, often his grandmother. This Psalter number holds special significance to us still. We cannot sing it without tears. Nolan would pray at the meal table just as any other child is taught to do. He would say the last word of each phrase of the Lord's prayer along with us. Even at the end of his life, we would tuck him into bed and pray with him each night. Even if he was a little agitated, we would nestle in close to his ear and pray with him. He would instantly quiet down. He knew we were approaching the throne of the Most High God, his God. We have confidence that Nolan was a covenant child of God and as it is beautifully stated in Canons 1.17 of infants, we believe of Nolan:

> Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace in which they, together with their parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy.

Our grief now is still real. Time has softened the sharp edges of pain that we felt that first day, week, and year. But time will never completely heal our wound of losing Nolan. That wound is easily torn open and bleeds afresh—for instance, when we hear a certain song, listen to a certain Bible passage, wrap ourselves in a blanket made from his shirts, wear his old socks, or see his picture. But there is a scab that covers the wound to buffer our deepest grief and our strong earthly ties to our firstborn son. The gospel promises of hope and resurrection are written all over that scab. They give us comfort and assurance of salvation and of everlasting life in heaven with our Savior. They

remind us that Nolan's race is finished; his journey here is complete. His resting place in heaven was ready for him. His earthy struggles with sin and discomfort are over! His soul, on that last day, will be reunited with a perfect body, free of genetic anomalies. What comfort our heavenly Father gives to us each day! Mercies for today and promised mercies for tomorrow. "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23).

SAME LAKE, DIFFERENT BOAT*

LINDA VERBURG

member of Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, Indiana. She taught in the Discovery Center/Resource Room of the Protestant Reformed Christian School in Dyer for over twenty years.

It has been established in this special issue of the *Standard Bearer* that we, as Protestant Reformed churches, have been given the opportunity and responsibility to come alongside those parents to whom the Lord has given special needs children, those with cognitive and/or physical disabilities. When a special needs child is born, the child becomes not just a member of one of our families (the "different boat") but that child also becomes a member of our larger, covenantal community (the "same lake"). Therefore, it is also that covenant community that seeks to help the parents meet the child's educational needs by making a place for them in our Christian day schools. Our calling to help each child reach their God-given potential applies to these children with disabilities as well.

CHALLENGES

In preparing for this article, I spoke with both current and past Special Ed teachers and we agreed there are certainly *challenges* that come to the community in establishing these programs. The first can be the financial *challenge* to the specific school community due to the particular needs of such a program: making appropriate classroom space in the school, hiring qualified staff, and purchasing the necessary supplies, equipment, and educational materials. In some of our schools, these may be necessary to meet the needs of just one student, while in other schools it may be for a larger group of students. We, as a community, are especially thankful for the work of the Society for PR Special Education that has come alongside many of our day schools and parents to help provide some of the financial means to meet this challenge.

A second *challenge* is finding appropriately trained personnel, both teachers and paraprofessionals. The knowledge necessary to meet the individual needs of each child goes beyond a Gen Ed teaching degree, requiring not only an understanding of the specific disability of each child but must also include knowledge and training on how to best meet the necessary academic, physical, social, and emotional needs of perhaps several different children who are in the program at the same time, each with a unique set of needs. Those needs can change from year to year as the student progresses or, in some cases, regresses and must be carefully monitored and adjusted. These variables obligate the Special Ed teacher to take the time and energy to: stay current with "best practices" so that adjustments can be made to curriculum and behaviors; understand the results of testing and how to adapt curriculum to those results; learn how to incorporate therapy practices into daily routine, and more. There is a shortage of such qualified special education personnel for our schools and I encourage our young people to visit our schools, see the wonderful opportunities, and consider if the Lord is calling them to this specialized teaching.

* Stephanie O. Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006).

Another *challenge* is actually determining what the best way to meet each student's unique needs may be, academically, behaviorally, socially, or perhaps with life-skills training for older students. This will involve working closely with the Gen Ed teachers to determine and develop accommodations and modifications to the teachers' material and classroom procedures, as well as developing IEPs (individualized educational plans) to lay out the specific goals, instruction methods, and materials required. It may involve the need to work closely with the local public school or local Spec Ed co-op in order to receive testing and needed physical, occupational, social/behavioral, and speech therapies. This relationship with "outside" resources can be a difficult *challenge* for staff and parents to navigate as it often reflects a different educational philosophy than we hold in our covenant schools. Also, the time spent in these therapies, although necessary, usually requires a sacrifice of instruction and social time.

Finally, it can be *challenging* to incorporate these students into the general education classroom as much as we would like because of the curriculum's level of difficulty as the grades advance, and/or the cognitive, physical, and health restrictions of the individual student. To determine how, when, and during what instruction and social time placement in the Gen Ed classroom can take place necessitates much time, trial and error, flexibility, and collaboration between the Spec Ed and the Gen Ed teams in an already busy schedule. Sadly, there are, have been, and will be situations when, even with the best intentions and practices, a school cannot meet the needs of a particular special needs student. It is then a *challenge* for everyone involved to accept this outcome. We pray that we may continue to support that child and family as a covenant community and look for other ways to include them in our church life and activities.

BENEFITS

In spite of these challenges, there are a multitude of *benefits* for both the special needs child and for the greater community of students and staff. It is a *benefit* that the Spec Ed and Gen Ed teams in our Christian day schools share the same Christian values and biblical views of our covenant children as the parents. For these teachers, this is not "just a job" but a calling from God to provide, to the best of their ability, what this individual child requires in order to help prepare him for his specific place in community and to help him grow in his ability to glorify God in whatever ways he is able. There is the *benefit* and reward of seeing these children develop and flourish and take up their place in the covenant community. It is a *benefit* for the child to be able to attend the same school as his siblings and the children they go to church with, hearing the same Bible stories, learning and singing along (or just smiling and clapping) with familiar Psalter numbers and songs, being a part of recess activities and lunch time, all the while developing bonds and building social skills with their peers. For the peers and school staff, inclusion in our day schools affords the *benefit* of breaking down the "stigma" and discomfort of relating to a person with special needs and helps put them more at ease to interact inside and outside of the school day.

Another wonderful *benefit* is that we in the school community learn to be more empathetic, compassionate, and to give honor to those with different learning abilities. We see firsthand the challenges that God has given to some and learn to be humbled that our own abilities are not of our own making but gifts from God, meant to be used in the service of others. Gen Ed students can *benefit* by becoming a part of the planning process for their special needs peers, discovering and building activities that include their special needs classmates both in class and out. "There is an interdependent unity that comes from diversity in the body of Christ. Everyone *benefits* when we choose intentional relationships with people of differing abilities."[1] Intentionally seeking to include our community's special needs children helps the school, church, and covenant community become more than the "same lake, each in our own boat" analogy. Our covenant communities become a brighter reflection for generations to come of Romans 12:5, "So we, being many, are *one body* in Christ, and *every one* members one of another."

In closing, I would like to encourage members to read the book *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* by Stephanie O. Hubach. The author herself was "surprised by disability" when her youngest son was born with Down Syndrome. In this book, the author develops a scriptural

1 Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 41.

framework and gives practical guidelines by describing her own family's "wrestling with God and his Word, the realities of family life, and the all-too-frequent inadequacies of the broader Christian community's response." She then brings us to an "…understanding that is positively portrayed…as a vision for a better way."[2] This book was the catalyst that brought me to advocate actively for the need, at that time, of our own Christian day school to expand its Resource Room/Discovery Center program to include children from our area churches with cognitive and physical disabilities. After several years and much labor by the school board, our school's "Achieve" program was opened and the needs of these children are now met on a daily basis, incorporating them in the day-to-day instruction and activities of our PR day school; truly, "one body, many members."

2 Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 16.

I AM NOT MY OWN: REFLECTIONS ON LIFE WITH DISABILITY IN THE CHURCH

CHAD NIENHUIS

president of the Board of PR Special Education and member of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan.

Chad solicited, collected, and organized the reflections of this article, including the fun tidbits of information at the end of each section.

INTRODUCTION

What is thy only comfort in life and death?

These words are so familiar to each of us that we cannot count the number of times we have heard them. We memorized them as children, and they remain among the most treasured passages of our spiritual lives. We all confess "I am not my own," and we know to whom we belong. But if we take a step back, we also confess, "I am not…" and we can fill in the rest. I am not my weaknesses or my own strength. I am not my height or my age. I am not my marital status, my gifts, my abilities, my possessions. And because I belong to Jesus Christ, I am to use all of these—my height, my age, my gifts, my station in life—in service of Him.

For the people in the reflections that follow, that confession takes a particular shape: "I am not my disability or my diagnosis. I am not only the parent or sibling of a child with special needs. I belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." And belonging to Him means that when the burdens of life seem too heavy to carry, the strength to carry them is not our own either. You will hear in these pages how God has taught families this lesson: how He has used a disability, a diagnosis, a different kind of life, to remind all of us that we belong to Him, and that He is good.

TANNER

Written by Jeremy & Megi Feenstra, members of Hope PRC in Redlands, CA

Six years ago, God led Jeremy and me through an intensely difficult trial. We had been married about two months when we found out we were pregnant with our first child. At our first prenatal appointment we got to listen to the baby's heartbeat, and I remember being in awe of that little miracle growing inside me! But our excitement was short-lived—later that evening we received a call from my OB's office, asking us to come in and discuss some findings on the ultrasound. No further details were given, leading to a sleepless night filled with worry and anxiety.

The next day our doctor informed us the ultrasound revealed the baby had a medical condition called hydrocephalus, where fluid builds up in the brain and can cause brain damage. She also said that, because of this issue, our baby would not develop normally, and she recommended terminating the pregnancy to avoid many difficulties moving forward. We were in a state of shock after hearing this news, as well as the

recommendation to abort, but took this as a unique opportunity to witness to our doctor. We explained that we would never consider an abortion because every life is precious to God, who is the Lord and Creator of all, fashioning His children in many different ways and with many different needs. No matter what our baby looked like or what special needs he would have, we would still love him as any other parent loves their child! Psalm 127:3 says, "Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD; and the fruit of the womb is His reward."

Unfortunately, at our next appointment this same doctor again recommended terminating the pregnancy. We reiterated our previously stated beliefs, and then found a new doctor who valued the baby's life as we did. We do not know if or how our witness ultimately affected our original doctor, but pray that God used it to plant a seed in her heart.

Read Tanner's full story: https://hopeprc.org/pamphlets

- *Tanner is going to be 7 years old on June 8. He absolutely loves to be surrounded by his family and church family. He loves going to church. It makes people smile when he sprawls through the groups with his biggest smiles.*
- *Tanner doesn't communicate verbally just yet. But he does love to say "shh!"*
- *The unexpected gift that has come from this journey with Tanner was the outpouring of love shown to us and him from the body of Christ since he was first born.*

SIMON

Written by Matthew & Chelsea Kamps, members of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, MI

When we received an autism diagnosis for Simon 7 years ago, we did not know what the next years would look like for him and our family. What we did know was that God had given us this precious child and the great calling to be his parents.

As we began down this path God planned for us, we quickly found that we would need help understanding and navigating the unique challenges of autism. Each year that Simon grew older we found ourselves facing new struggles both at home and at school. In those early years there was a lot of learning and work to do to find what would help Simon. There were days when we were overwhelmed and weary. We still have our days where we stumble in our trying and grow discouraged. But what we found most helpful was when we stopped looking at the challenges as impossible mountains and stopped trying to fix Simon's disability. Instead, in humble dependence on God, we love and care for him and try our best to equip him for life.

God is our help. He provides in each step. From therapies to teacher and special ed meetings, in the daily routines and set and met goals, we see God's grace in each one and we praise God for the gift this child is to us. Simon is an amazingly kind and smart 13 year old. If you ask him he could tell you many facts about reptiles, sea creatures, and insects. His new passion is history, especially U.S. presidents. His favorite Bible verse is Psalm 139:14, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."

- *Simon's favorite president is Teddy Roosevelt because he had numerous unique animals at the White House, including a pet bear, a badger, a hyena, and snakes.*
- *When Simon was diagnosed, we had our concerns about possible behavioral and social struggles based on what we saw and read about other kids with autism. But what we found was that Simon had his own struggles and unique strengths and weaknesses. When we realized this, we were able to help him as an individual, not as a broader diagnosis.*

COLTON

Written by Ben & Heidi Soodsma, members of Randolph PRC in Randolph, WI

When Colton was born and we learned he had Down syndrome, we were filled with questions about his future and how best to support him. We quickly realized that typical benchmarks at school and the doctor's office do not

always apply, so we have had to rely on patience and flexibility, often making plans only to adjust them as new challenges arise. At school, his teachers have been wonderful at meeting Colton where he is and encouraging his growth, for which we are deeply grateful. Colton's kindness and joyful spirit have enriched our family's life immensely.

Amid therapies, school adjustments, and daily hurdles, we have experienced the Lord's steady provision—offering us patience, peace, and support of saints near and far. Over time, we have grown to trust that the Lord has given Colton both a name and a place. Colton plays an important role within our family, at school, in church, and among all the Lord's people. Most importantly, Colton is cherished as a child of the King.

This additional chromosome has proven to be a far greater blessing than we ever could have imagined. The encouragement and love we have received along this journey have been a tremendous source of comfort, and we are deeply grateful for the family of God that surrounds us. Above all, we are especially thankful that God, in His wisdom, chose us to travel this path together as a family.

- *Colton loves school! He loves his teachers and his classmates. He likes to play with the toy globe in the classroom.*
- *Colton loves animals and loves to learn about animals, but his favorite animals are the ones that roar and growl. He loves to pet and watch animals and thinks every one is cute. He will rub his cheek against the animal when possible and say "aww," even if it's a rough old toad.*
- *Colton has a cloth swing in the house and can spin and spin and spin.*
- *Colton loves to be tickled, teased, and wrestled. He is a giggle box and loves to be goofy—pulling silly faces, doing the opposite of what you ask him, tickling you just so you'll tickle him back, poking you and running away just hoping you'll chase him.*
- *A teacher gave these thoughts about Colton. The way he says "awwww" anytime he sees any baby animal or anything cute for that matter. How he* loves *his new haircuts and will bend down and point to his head so everyone can see it. Animal/dinosaur noises. I think if any kid in school hears little footsteps and then feels a poke or tap on their back, they all know it's Colton saying hi to them on his way down the hall.*

KATE

Written by Joel VanEgdom, a member of Doon PRC in Doon, IA

Kate has a rare genetic condition called Williams Syndrome, which is characterized by a microdeletion of a small number of genes at conception. Those with Williams Syndrome typically have both unique gifts and significant challenges.

We have been blessed positively in many ways by God's gift of Kate. Having a child in our family with a disability has taught us increased humility, patience, and trust in our heavenly Father. We daily cast our cares upon Him (1 Pet. 5:7) and trust in Him, knowing He will direct our paths (Prov 3:5-6).

Kate's presence and perspective remind us regularly that this earth, and what we often mistakenly view as important in our earthly pilgrimage, is merely temporal, and we must look forward to eternal life in perfection. We marvel as well at the wonder of conception and birth, and the guiding hand of the Father who fashions each of His children physically, mentally, and emotionally to be precious jewels of His crown. Researching and understanding the unique characteristics of Williams Syndrome has really opened our eyes to the wonder of our creation.

Kate's condition has unique positive attributes through which she instructs us as well. Her care for others and their well-being, her desire for fellowship and socializing, her love for music and singing, her heartfelt prayers…all have been positive influences on our family and church family.

Our local congregation in Doon has been tremendously supportive of Kate and of our family throughout the years. Though the members may not directly observe some of her more challenging moments, the saints in our local congregations have cared for her in many ways.

It has also been a joy for us to see saints from the broader denomination welcome Kate's attendance at multiple Young People's conventions, and we sincerely appreciate the accommodations the planning

committees have made to enable her to participate. She loves the social interaction, has built lasting relationships with others from across our denomination, and I know her presence has been a blessing for many others attending the conventions as well. She is already eagerly anticipating attending again this year, and we pray the Lord will use the convention to bless her and again strengthen her faith.

- *Kate loves her dogs, Nova and Annie, and if you talk to her, she will definitely tell you all about them!*
- *Kate's favorite song is Psalter 136C because the song speaks of God's abounding grace and mercy.*
- *Kate's favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace," which she often plays by ear on the piano.*
- *Kate's prayers at evening devotions can be lengthy and always include asking God to care for those going through trials.*
- *Kate is terrified of heights. On a class trip to the Iowa State Capitol building, this fear led to her dad carrying her (at age 11) up and down the majority of the 298 stairs to the top of the golden dome.*

PEGGY

Written by Barb Jansma, a member of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, MI

Peggy Jansma was our first child born on August 4, 1975 in Hull, Iowa. She was a tiny 5 lb. baby, but met and surpassed all of her developmental milestones. She did, however, develop sensory issues at a very young age. As a baby and young child, everything went into her mouth. The sense of moving fast was a terror feeling for her. She would scream if she felt she was going too fast in a car or pickup or bicycle. She was deathly afraid of enclosed areas and the dark. Loud sounds also bothered her. The feeling of certain clothing made her itch.

Many prayers were made for her. When she was young, she always wanted to walk away, so we got her a dog. The dog would follow her all over and even into the cornfields. It was not until she was in junior high that we discovered she did not mingle with her peers but felt more comfortable with much older people or younger children. She was finally diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at the age of 26.

Peggy still needs lots of structure in her life. She writes everything down on her calendar. She still loves to work puzzles, play video games, and attend programs geared for special needs individuals. We are so very thankful for our churches' special needs group and groups in our community. The Lord has been good and has shown us Peggy is able to live on her own with the help of godly people in her life and the Harmony Homes Community. We know that God has given His people these precious children for our good and for the good of His church. Praise the Lord!

We found her playing in a mud puddle and said, "Why are you in the mud puddle?" Her answer: "To get clean like the pigs do. You said they roll in mud to clean themselves." (See photo to the left.)

ELLIOTT

Written by Elliott Baldwin, a member of Peace PRC in Dyer, IN

Are you unique? God's Word definitely says you are. He only made one of you and one of me! Sometimes we enjoy our uniqueness, and sometimes our uniqueness can be our thorn. That is how it is for me with Asperger's. I enjoy being me, but it is also difficult. Understanding everyday communication and social norms does not come easily for me. Probably the hardest part is when I cannot read between the lines, when I cannot find words to represent my own thoughts, when my emotions bottleneck, or when I feel like I cannot think as fast as a conversation is going. I usually do not feel confident enough to talk in groups of people. On the surface, it may seem like I am just quiet.

On the flip side, I pay close attention to detail, and I love routines, so that helps me a lot in my job at Culver's

(I work the register and dining area, and I run orders to the drive-thru). And my lifelong knack for music means that even though words can be hard to find (thanks, Dad and Mom, for helping me develop this article!), God's gift of music means I always have a way to "talk" from my heart.

I was three-and-a-half years old when my family moved from Hong Kong to Michigan, then to Iowa, and finally to Indiana in 2016. God has such a vast church, and I am grateful to be in this small corner of it at Peace PRC, where I have trusted friends who mean a lot to me, a supportive community, and many opportunities to see the Lord uniquely growing me through—instead of past—my disability.

LEVI AND ALLISON PASTOOR

Written by Nate & Ellen Pastoor, members of Grandville PRC in Grandville, MI

There is no ideal place to serve God, except for the place He sets you down.

For us, that place is a family of five children—three with special needs and two typically developing. It is not the story we pictured, but it is the path God chose for us. And over time, He has shown us that this life, unpredictable and messy as it is, is the perfect place for us to serve Him.

We have learned to rest on a few steady truths: God is sovereign—nothing in our home is outside His good plan. God loves us—even when His love takes forms we do not always understand. We can trust Him—that He will avert evil or turn it to our good and His glory.

These truths do not make things easy, but they give shape and meaning to the challenges we face.

Patience and weariness often go together. Long therapy sessions and unpredictable days stretch us thin, yet each small victory feels like a glimpse of God's kindness along the way.

Grief and grace meet when we see other children reaching milestones our own may never reach. Still, God gently reminds us that our children's worth is not found in achievement but in being His beloved image-bearers.

Joy and guilt often sit side by side. We delight in laughter and sweet moments, but guilt can creep in—are we giving each of them enough? Yet grace steadies us again: we are not called to be perfect parents, only faithful ones.

Exhaustion and mercy shape much of our rhythm. The paperwork, appointments, and sleepless nights can feel endless, but Christ meets us right there—not always with relief, but always with sustaining strength.

Fear and hope walk closely together. The future can feel uncertain, so we try to live one day at a time. Looking back, we see unmistakable faithfulness—and that history gives courage to face what is ahead.

We long for the day when Christ returns and all things are made new. Until then, we trust that the God who set us down in this place will keep walking with us through the waters. And that, more than anything else, is our peace.

Levi:

- *Loves going on airplanes and staying in hotels.*
- *Loves watching services of various PRC congregations on YouTube and SermonAudio, especially the handshaking at the end. Even though we sit near the front in church, he is typically the first one out to shake the pastor's hand.*
- *He does not often sing in church, but he sings and sings at home. And when he does sing in church, it is opera style.*
- *He is particular about his Bibles and Psalters—loves to page through them, but they need to be pristine—no wrinkles or creases or dents.*
- *Levi likes to tell jokes. He has a rotation of 5 or 6 go-to jokes. "Why did the chicken cross the road? Be-cause!" (like a chicken noise).*
- *Levi struggles with anxiety, and it often keeps him from joining in as easily as other kids. But he loves his friends deeply, and their care for him has been a beautiful reminder of Christ's love.*
- *Levi was sure we were going to Costa Rica for spring break. We told him we were not—but he had other plans. By the time Ellen visited his classroom, the staff were in full vacation mode too: countdown calendar, excitement, the works. Levi did not just believe it…he recruited the whole team.*

Allison:

- *Ally loves to chat with her grandparents and typically calls all of them on a daily basis.*
- *Ally prefers to communicate with others via text and will often send out several "Good Morning Sunshine" texts to family and friends.*
- *Ally is a faithful Wordle player—each day trying to beat her grandpa.*

WILL

Written by Dave Hanko, a member of Grace PRC in Standale, MI

When Will was born, he looked and acted like a healthy newborn. It was only after missing some milestones that Joan and I became concerned and brought him in for testing. At 9 months old he was diagnosed as severely cognitively impaired, meaning that Will would require 24/7 supervision and care for daily activities throughout his life.

When told of the difficulties that Will would face in his life, we were committed to helping him because he is *our* son. If the first five years of one's life are so very important to one's development, we were going to do everything we could for Will during that time. Within the next year after reading many books and articles, we learned of the International Christian Association of Neuro-developmentalists (I-CAN). After a trip to Ohio where Will was evaluated, we were provided with a program designed specifically for Will that encompassed his diet, behavior, memory, movement, and senses. We committed ourselves to working with Will for three hours each day, six days a week. Our stated goal was (if possible) to get Will caught up with his peers by kindergarten.

I remember his kindergarten program well. The young children looked sharp in their Sunday best. They were well behaved. They knew so many songs by heart and sang them with enthusiasm. They were just starting their education. They were just beginning a life that would most likely include eighth-grade graduation, learning to drive a car, getting a job, graduating from high school, going to college, getting married, raising a family. Except Will. He would not. He could not. And the reality of this hit us hard. As parents and grandparents sat listening and smiling at their children and grandchildren, we had tears running down our faces.

Will learns slowly. It takes him a long time to grasp a concept. Sometimes we are the same way. Joan and I now understand that one does not need a diploma, a driver's license, a career, or a good marriage to be used by God for His glory. Our son will never serve as an elder, deacon, or school board member. But God has already used Will for His glory. Caring for Will each day reminds us of our own weaknesses and inabilities. We constantly call to mind 2 Corinthians 12:9, "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

- *During collection, Will asked me if Prof. R. Decker's picture was on the one-dollar bill.*
- *Music is a huge part of Will's life. He can be heard singing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" in church and while hiking in the mountains, or singing the Menards jingle in the store.*
- *Will is very friendly. When he recognized Mr. Kuiper standing next to him, he wanted to shake his hand, but they were both standing in front of a urinal.*

TRAVIS

Written by Courtney (Peterson) Jessup, a member of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, MI

I had the "unique" childhood experience of growing up with a sibling with special needs. I put unique in quotation marks because I probably did have a unique childhood, but I never viewed it that way because I did not know anything different. Growing up, I loved to work with Travis and help him develop new skills. It often took Travis a long time to learn something new, and it required a lot of

patience to teach him. Travis needed a lot of attention and care, and I willingly took on that role when my parents were busy. It was often my job to keep him happy on car rides, take care of him while my parents unpacked for vacation, or just generally be his buddy when my parents were busy with something else. One of my biggest jobs as Travis' older sister was being his interpreter. Many people (including my parents at times) had a difficult time understanding what Travis was saying, and I had a way of understanding his different words for things or following his train of thought to know what he was talking about.

Now that I am grown and have a family of my own, I still have the opportunity to care for Travis when my parents are out of town. I often get asked if it is extra work for us when we have Travis stay with us. Yes, it definitely is, but it is a great way for us to continue our relationship with him and spend quality time with him. Travis needs a lot of help throughout the day, either with basic needs such as preparing food for him, or finding ways to keep him entertained. One of the things I love most about having Travis stay with us is seeing the relationships that he and my own children develop. My children love to have their uncle Travis over. They love to play basketball, board games, and video games with him. Even in their young age, my children look for ways they can help their uncle Travis, and they understand that more of my time will be taken up in caring for him during those weeks. Having a brother with special needs is a trial and a sacrifice, but most of all, he is a blessing that our family was given by God.

Every day in the summer, Travis makes 1,700 basketball shots. He has been known to make up to 25 free throws in a row with his home-court advantage.

CONCLUSION

The men and women who contributed to this article opened a window into their lives that most of us rarely see. None of them pretend it is easy. But none of them let the challenges become the whole story. They wrote openly about their lives, and we are grateful for it.

What their stories make clear is how wide the spectrum of need truly is. Some conditions were known before birth; others went unnamed for years, even decades. Some needs are visible the moment you walk into a room; others you would never know were there. Each person, each family, each journey is its own.

What strikes me is how rarely these families ask anything of the rest of us. But I believe we owe them something nonetheless: a warm greeting on a Sunday morning, a conversation that does not rush past someone who takes longer to respond, prayers, specific and from the heart, raised daily for these families and their silent struggles.

One father told me about a group of his son's friends from high school: young men who now have careers and families of their own, who still make time, seven years later, to take his son out for ice cream and shoot some basketball with him. An hour or two, every few months. He told me how much he loves seeing it. How much it means to him.

We give thanks to God for His perfect design. He has formed the body of Christ exactly as He intends. His church, our family, is only complete with all its members, their varied needs and varied gifts together. Those young men taking their friend out for ice cream are not doing something extraordinary. They are being what the church is supposed to be. His way is good.

There is a shortage of such qualified special education personnel for our schools and I encourage our young people to visit our schools, see the wonderful opportunities, and consider if the Lord is calling them to this specialized teaching.

cf. p. 311

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Crete PRC express our Christian sympathies to Mr. and Mrs. Paul Feenstra in the death of their infant son, **Nathan Henry**. "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, President
Philip E. Van Baren, Council Clerk

CALL TO SYNOD 2026

Synod 2025 appointed Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, MI the calling church for the 2026 Synod.

The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2026 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 9, 2026 at 8:00 A.M., in the Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, MI.

The pre-synodical service will be held on Monday evening, June 8, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. G. Eriks, president of the 2025 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the Consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Jeff Kalsbeek, clerk.hopeprc@gmail.com. Phone: (616) 291-1234.

Consistory of Hope PRC

The Spring 2026 issue of the Protestant Reformed Theological Journal is now available in print and digital formats!

This new issue contains the printed form of speeches given at the PRCA Classis West Officebearers' Conference in Crete PRC (IL) last September (2025). The articles relate to some practical aspects of justification by faith. Also, Prof. D. Engelsma responds to Dr. J. Bolt's (Calvin Theological Seminary) articles on H. Hoeksema and the PRC's rejection of common grace. Special articles may also be found on the confession of faith and the church order of a new Reformed confederation in Germany (BBERG). In addition, there are reviews of six new books, which reviews are always informative and edifying.


Protestant Reformed Theological Journal

in this issue:

Volume 59 • April 2026 • Number 2

The PRTJ is free of charge to all who are interested. Digital versions may be downloaded at www.prcts.org/journal. Print copies may be ordered by calling the seminary office at 616-531-1490, or by emailing the secretary at seminarysecretary@prca.org.