SHALOM!
A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION
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Welcoming People With Disabilities

THE STORY OF the man afflicted by paralysis in Mark 2 could be seen as an early example of the lack of accessibility for people with disabilities. Jesus was in a home speaking to a large crowd when four men came carrying a man on a mat. The crowd did not make way for the man and his helpers. The only way he could gain access to Jesus was for his helpers to cut a hole through the roof and let him down on his mat right in front of Jesus.

The immediate reaction of the scribes was not to make way for the paralyzed man and welcome him to a prime spot next to Jesus. Instead, they were outraged at Jesus's first response to him.

Or there's the story of the man who had been lying by the pool in Jerusalem (John 5:1-18). The man had been ill for thirty-eight years and came to the pool every day hoping for a chance to be the first into the pool when the waters stirred so he could be healed. Others always got there first because the man had no one to help him. You might have thought that over the course of all those years, someone would have seen what was happening and would have helped him. But no one came to his aid until Jesus did.

The gospels also include several stories of Jesus healing people with demons. Although it's not clear what or who these demons were, it's not a stretch to imagine them as the manifestations of mental illness. For example, the man in the mountains of the Gerasenes could not be restrained, engaged in self-mutilation, and made strange noises. He begged Jesus not to hurt him. When Jesus drove the demons out of the man into a herd of pigs, people heard about it and came running, only to find the man "sitting there, clothed and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15). For whatever reasons, they were scared that the man seemed normal and asked Jesus to leave their town. Perhaps this kind of healing was too much for them.

At least one lesson from these stories and others is that Jesus welcomed people with disabilities whether the disability was physical or mental. He did not turn them away.

We don't deliberately turn people away from our churches when they have physical and/or mental disabilities. But many churches don't realize that there are often barriers to full inclusion, whether they are the steps down to the fellowship hall, the volume and flashing lights of the worship team, or a simple lack of understanding of a particular disability. My church is built on one level, with wheelchair cutouts and wheelchair-accessible bathroom stalls. One couple deliberately chose this church because of this kind of accessibiity. But in what other ways does my church or yours create barriers to full inclusion?

Primarily through storytelling, this edition of *Shalom!* provides helpful suggestions for how the church can be a more welcoming place for people with disabilities, whatever they happen to be. Perhaps the stories and suggestions will inspire your church to conduct an audit to determine if there are ways you can be more welcoming.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF *SHALOM!*

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

By Douglas Curry

IF YOU'RE HERE this morning, you have a mother. At each of our respective births, medical professionals, family, and friends all had something to say—hopefully something congratulatory, or meaningful, and not something overly trite or just plain unhelpful. Those who are parents or caregivers may have received well wishes of one kind may also have received well wishes of one kind or another as your parental journey began.

What are some of the best things you've heard said upon the birth or placement of a child with a parent? And what are some of the most unhelpful things you've heard said (e.g., "what an 'interesting-looking' child!") David the Psalmist has this to say about each of us:"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfly and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well." (Psalm 139.13-14).

This scripture took on new meaning for me one Sunday in October 1998, October 25, to be exact. What had been a relatively uneventful pregnancy for Heidi suddenly became real in ways we hadn't foreseen. It was one of those situations in life when you're met with a real-life situation that takes you completely by surprise, so much so that you're not even sure it's real. But it only takes mere moments to realize that yes, this is VERY real.

Our son, Sam the man, was born with two congenital heart defects and Down Syndrome—none of which was evident before his birth, notwithstanding multiple ultrasounds and other "routine" pregnancy appointments. We were unprepared and in a shock. I remembered those words from Psalm 139, yet I was perplexed by them as our son struggled to simply breathe and survive his first hours of life outside the womb.

Heidi and I heard a variety of things the day Samuel was born, but one I will never forget came from a very dear friend and mentor, who said to me, "You will learn to love him." While I didn't readily understand these words that day, our journey together with Sam has proved this to be the case.

I'd like to suggest that there's a connection between the words said by a dear friend to us on the day of our son's birth, and the challenge we face as a church in how we think about and treat one another. Since I'm a worship ministries pastor and professor of Christian worship, I'd like to remind us of one of the core principles of biblical worship: it should be hospitable, caring, and welcoming.

What does it mean for worship (and discipleship) to be hospitable? In worship we pray for ourselves, our community, and our world, and are then sent out for lives of service and witness. John Witvliet says that "worship stokes the gratitude in our hearts that leads naturally to serving the needs of our broken world." It starts here.

In recent days at Grantham Church, hospitality has extended in worship and beyond through groups such as One80 Ministries, individuals and couples helping refugees with tasks of daily living, churchwide efforts to maintain the unity of the body through the bond of peace (amid the political polarization and strife all around us), and by showing love in tangible ways to our own people and those in the community and around the world.

Our own son (super Sam) has benefited from the weekly hospitality of the Grantham Church. At the height of the pandemic, the supportive systems, structures, and people working with those who have developmental and physical disabilities basically shut down. Many of those supports have not yet reemerged. Grantham Church has offered a place for Sam to work with his primary caregivers on a daily basis, where he can continue developing skills in reading, counting, identifying shapes and colors, work and volunteer tasks, activities of daily living, and the list goes on.

All of the ministries I've mentioned (and many more that I didn't mention but are very active here at Grantham) are not simply "ancillary" dimensions of the church. They are (or should be) integral to the life of this particular body of Christ.

My wife, Heidi, and I have three boys—Nathanael, Samuel, and Daniel. Sam now has a dual diagnosis: Down Syndrome and full autism spectrum disorder. For our family, the nature of life (both in and out of the church) is a daily reality full of joys and challenges, learning and growth, moments of comfort, and, at other times, complete disorientation. We continue to learn how best to include, involve, and help Sam to belong. Hospitality doesn't come naturally for some of us. Sam continues to tolerate our misunderstandings and teaches us on an ongoing basis what it means to be "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Our pastor addressed inclusion a bit in

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the Lenten series earlier this year, and I'd like to enhance it a bit. Inclusion and belonging is not the Church bringing a larger cultural narrative into its doors in order to join the "inclusivity generation." It is borne in a biblical and theological understanding of how God has created us, and how each of us bears great worth in the sight of God.

In John 9:1-3, Jesus challenges the long-held Jewish belief that calamity or suffering (or disability) was the result of some great sin. The Apostle Paul gives specific instructions to us, the church, as to our approach. Scottish theologian John Swinton develops a distinction between inclusion and belonging. He writes:

> Inclusion is simply not enough. To include people in society is just to have them there. All we have to do is make the church accessible, have the right political structures, make sure people have a cup of tea [or coffee] at the end of the service or whatever. There is a big difference between inclusion and belonging.

To belong, you have to be missed. There's something really, really important about that. People need to long for you, to want you to be there. When you're not there, they should go looking for you.

Sam loves watching movies (he's a Pixar fan, especially of "The Incredibles," and he loves the Minions) and listening to music—from Mozart to samba to bluegrass. Sam participates in fitness, helps Dad mow, and later today, he'll enjoy his favorite meal. Sunday is pepperoni pizza day.

Sam very much dislikes loud/sharp sounds (weed-eaters, saws of any kind, plates/dishes/pots and pans clanging, certain environments of Christian worship where the sound is deafening, children screaming or crying, his parents arguing). Sam might be the most emotionally intuitive member of our family. And while his cognition is quite low (lower than average for a male with Down Syndrome), Sam participates as he can in worship as a member of the body of Christ.

Several years ago, I was having lunch with our then-pastor, John Yeatts. At one point in our conversation together, John said, "How can we better help Sam?" As one who typically doesn't struggle to determine what to say, I was silent. Unfortunately, it wasn't a question I'd been asked by a church leader that often and I wasn't entirely sure what to say. So, I pondered for a moment, and then something somewhat simple occurred to me.

"John," I said, "first, thank you for asking. That means a lot. Nearly every time we say the Lord's Prayer [which is weekly], you seem to rush through it. It's one of the few elements in worship that Sam remembers and can actively participate in. Would you consider slowing down?" He thanked me for my candor, and apparently went home and asked his wife, Amy, if she thought he spoke the Lord's Prayer too quickly.

The following Sunday, Pastor John indicated to our congregation that he would be taking more time with the Lord's Prayer. Even all these years later with our current senior pastor, David Flowers, we continue to pray it together at a more measured pace.

This story isn't about inclusion. It's about Sam (and all of us) belonging. What about you and the congregation of Grantham Church? How can you help others gain a sense of belonging? How can you move from just knowing that people are "fearfully and wonderfully made" to a journey of learning how to love, include, and help others to belong?

Back to unhelpful things to hear at the birth of a child: Heidi and I heard some of those too. We were told that we were "more special" because we now had a family member with a disability. We heard that God was allowing Sam and us to suffer because of our steadfast faithfulness—a sort of odd interpretation of the story of Job. And we heard much worse.

Let's be honest. We ALL have special needs, right? And personally, I've learned that as much as I might help Sam, teach and nurture him, he's also been my teacher along the way. "You will learn to love him," my dear friend said on the day of Sam's birth. She was right; what was complete disorientation and discomfort has become a journey of learning how to love.

For each of us, disorientation and discomfort with learning how to be hospitable and help others to belong can simply be seen as a journey of learning how to love the way God parents and loves us.

What about you? Who in our congregation, in your family, or in the community, do you need to learn how to love so they can begin to belong as a full member of the body of Christ? God, who fashioned each of us and demonstrates that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, offers Jesus, the Son, to atone for us, to reconcile us, and to show what divine hospitality looks like, and God invites us to participate in the journey of learning how to love.

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Editor's Notes

Missing issue: Due to miscommuncation, BIC US congregations did not receive the Spring 2022 edition. If you would like one, please contact the editor.

Subscription renewals: If you haven't renewed your subscription for 2022, please do so soon. The price for a one-year subscription is still $20, with additional contributions welcome to cover the additional cost of mailing overseas and to each Brethren in Christ student enrolled at Messiah University. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and mailed to the editor (address on page 2). you can also renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.

The last topic for 2022 and looking ahead: The fall edition will explore how Brethren in Christ US is working on the Project 250 goal of "Growing to reflect the [gender and racial] demographic realities." Other potential topics for 2023 include: teaching peace, engaging in difficult conversations such as the "culture wars" that are causing so much polarization and division), foundations for active peacemaking. Please contact the editor with your ideas for topics or if you would like to write for *Shalom!* (contact info on page 2).

Alec: Also Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

By Rebekah Basinger

"MOM, THE BABY has Down Syndrome."

With these six words from our older son Adam, our family stepped into the unfamiliar territory of disability with its myriad challenges and stereotypes. To this day, I don't know if it was a blessing or a hardship that our grandson's diagnosis went undetected before his birth. Our daughter-in-law is quick to say that it wouldn't have mattered had they known early in her pregnancy. He—Alec Emerson Basinger—was loved and wanted, from his beginning and without condition.

That said, the shock of his diagnosis was acute in the first hours following Alec's birth. As Randy and I raced from our home in Pennsylvania to the hospital in Northern Virginia, I ticked through in my mind the myriad issues that Adam, Wendy, and their tiny boy would/could/might face in the years ahead. Employment with and then service on the board of the ARC of York (PA) when Adam was a youngster had given me an up-close understanding of the lifetime of the challenges involved in raising a child with a developmental disability, including the toll it can take on a marriage. I was years down the road of what-ifs for Alec even before we had met him.

Fast forward 15 years and most of my initial worries for Alec and his parents have proved overblown. Despite a constant drumbeat of "prepare yourselves for this," and "don't expect that" advice from doctors, therapists, and teachers, Adam and Wendy have remained laser-focused on Alec's potential. They've mastered the ins and outs of individualized educational plans and Wendy in particular, the fine art of advocating without annoying. They are blessed with neighbors who know and watch out for Alec. And they've found a community of support in the Little League Challenger Baseball program, the one place where, in Wendy's words, "no one looks at your child with pity or curiosity."

Unfortunately, the same is less likely to be said about most churches.

We Christians talk a good line about the sanctity of all life, of seeing in every individual the image of God. Yet parents of children with special needs struggle to find faith communities that are willing and/or able to welcome them in. The studies I've read tell a sad story about how hard these families must work to belong. Rather than epitomes of inclusion, churches are more often places of exclusion. Worse, America's houses of worship have actively resisted laws intended to ensure access to public spaces, including fighting for exclusions from the Americans with Disabilities Act.

To be fair, the wide-tent definition of "handicap" makes responding to every individual's and family's situation an oversized challenge for small congregations (the majority in the US and Canada). However, in the years since Alec's birth, I've grown increasingly concerned that capacity and costs aren't the real culprits, but rather that we church folk have allowed society's ableist biases to shape how we think theologically about disability.

Full disclosure: I'm not a theologian. And even if I were, this short essay isn't the place for a detailed review of our Brethren in Christ "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" through the lens of disability. For the purpose of encouraging conversation, however, I'll mention two theological concepts which, when handled carelessly, I believe lead to the devaluation of persons with disabilities.

The fall, original sin, and long-term consequences

I bristle at how quick we are to attribute to the fall just about any and everything that's less than perfect in our world. Fuller Theological Seminary professor Amos Yong writes that "people with disabilities have been seen (historically) either to have in some way deserved the evil that has befallen them or to have personified the evils feared by (nondisabled) humanity."

We modern-day disciples have an easy answer to the question asked by Jesus's disciples upon spotting a man born blind. "Whose sin caused this?" they asked. "We know," we shout, our fingers pointed back toward Adam, Eve, and a wily serpent. Sadly, so simplistic a take on a complicated and much-argued theological concept reduces our grandson Alec to a walking, talking billboard for the consequences of original sin.

But not Jesus. "This happened so the power of God can be seen in this man" (John 9:2), Jesus explained. The "right" question as Yong tells us is "not whether God can use people with intellectual and other disabilities, but whether the rest of us are sufficiently able to discern what God is saying and doing through their lives."

Heaven, resurrection bodies, and assumptions of perfection

I get that there's comfort in imagining a loved one for whom death came slowly and painfully, fully restored and whole in the presence of God. I've spoken of such things myself. Yet along with Yong, I wonder about what it means "to 'restore' a person with intellectual disabilities to wholeness?" Specific to Down Syndrome and other genetic variations, is it possible to "eradicate the disability without eliminating the person?"

We have a problem, I think, when the heaven of our mind's eye more closely resembles Garrison Keillor's Lake Woebegone than anything we find in scripture. I worry that in a place where "all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average," there's no place for the Alec we know and love.

As activist and writer Amy Kenny commented in a podcast discussion about faith and disabilities, "When we think about beautiful bodies, when we have so internalized notions of ableism, racism, fatphobia, ageism that we don't even realize that that's what we are doing, this gets projected onto our notions of what heaven or utopia or new creation are."

A grandmother's prayer

My first words upon seeing Alec were, "He's beautiful." The relief on Adam's face bespoke his fear that Randy and I would be the first to turn away from his precious boy. I wept at the realization.

My prayer then and every day since is that all who meet Alec, and most especially my church community, will see our grandson as we and God see him—loving, funny, happy, a master of pop culture, a multi-sport athlete, and a fantastic big brother to his three younger siblings. Alec has Down Syndrome but the diagnosis isn't who he is. He is Alec Emerson Basinger, fearfully and wonderfully made.

Resources:

Amos Yong, "Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion," *Ars Disputandi,* 9 (2009: 1566–5399.

Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church,* Baker Publishing Group, 2022.

"Co-flourishing in the Kin-dom of the Disabled God: Amy Kenny," Things Not Seen Podcast, June 27, 2022. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/co-flourishing-in-the-kin-dom-of-the-disabled-god-amy-kenny/id542958695?i=1000567792076

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An Open Letter about Wheelchair Accessibility

By Kimberly Forry

DURING THE LAST fifteen years that I've been a full-time wheelchair user, I've had many people share personal experiences with me about a time they found themselves or a close family member temporarily requiring a set of wheels to get around. While recuperating from a knee replacement, a broken foot, or a balky back, their eyes were opened to the challenges of negotiating life on wheels even in a ADA*-compliant society. While I appreciate these insights and the camaraderie that comes from a shared experience, I know that a permanent dependance on a wheelchair and a complete inability to both stand and walk is a much different and ongoing reality.

I could write a verbose reflection on the challenges I've faced as an adult in a wheelchair, or the challenges my son has faced as a child in a wheelchair; however, I was specifically asked to share about my experiences as a member of both "Club Wheelchair" and the church. Since I am also the wife of a pastor, my experiences will reflect several home congregations and church experiences over the course of the last two decades. Below is an open letter to the church-at-large based on our family's combination of disability and church ministry. Maybe this letter will enrich your personal understanding of a walking disability; maybe your own congregation can implement some changes to make your church more welcoming to wheelchairs. Either way, as I have found humor helpful in diffusing frustrations, I hope both to educate and have a little fun along the way!

Dear local church:

I love you! Your diverse mix of people inspires me, helps me to worship and see God, and allows me to use my gifts in service to God and others. But as a person with a permanent walking disability who uses a wheelchair, I must respectfully let you know that you have not thought of everything that will allow me to fully participate in your ministry. Here are a few tips from my years of looking at the church from a "waist-level" viewpoint:

1. Please have multiple van-accessible parking spaces in your parking lot. These are not regular handicapped parking spaces. They are the spaces that have very wide "zebra-stripe" lines beside the space, thus allowing me adequate space to deploy my wheelchair ramp and exit out the side of my van. The reality is, many non-wheelchair handicapped drivers in vehicles other than vans use van-accessible spaces. If your only van-accessible space is already occupied when I get to church, and there is nowhere for me to park and safely exit my van, I'll need to head back home.
2. You have a ramp into the building; hooray! But it's so steep I can't navigate it independently. Or it dumps me out into the front of the sanctuary. (True story.) This is rather awkward, especially if I'm only visiting for a Sunday and would prefer to just slip in the back. Allowing me to enter your building independently in the same area as everyone else makes me feel included and independant.
3. It's likely that after your delicious coffee fellowship, I will need to use the restroom. Family bathrooms are best for someone who uses a wheelchair and cannot stand to transfer. If this is not an option, an extra-large stall with grab-bars is another solution. While most church restrooms have a handicapped stall, it may be only wide enough to accommodate those who can still walk. If you aren't sure if your stalls are wide enough, have someone from the church borrow an adult wheelchair and attempt to navigate the restrooms and stalls to ensure they are accessible to everyone.
4. Only providing options for me to sit in the back of the church makes me feel like an afterthought. I love it when intentional cut-out areas for wheelchairs are included in several areas of your sanctuary. Someone with difficulty walking may appreciate sitting in the back, but my wheels allow me to navigate greater distances. While some wheelchair users can still transfer into another chair or a bench, I can no longer do this. Parking spaces for me in an area other than the back alongside "regular seating" for my family is both thoughtful and greatly appreciated!
5. People dependent on wheelchairs still have God-given gifts they would love to use. My gifts happen to be public speaking and singing, which mean I need to access the front of the sanctuary and the stage. A ramp beside the steps is wonderful. I feel just like any other member of the worship team, choir or ministry staff

entering or exiting the stage. A ramp that enters from the back of the stage is also fine, although I may need some extra time to get on or off of the stage.

Some final assorted thoughts on the challenges of church fellowship in a wheelchair:

- Meetings in church members' homes are not cozier for me. In fact, I start to inwardly panic when church members start talking about moving church meetings and activities to their homes. I know they sincerely mean to be hospitable. But very few homes have step-free entrances. Or places to park and exit my van. Or an accessible bathroom that is on the first floor.
- Backyard picnics mean I spend hours stranded in my manual wheelchair on the grass, unable to get my own food or move around to socialize. While I can occasionally bring along a family member to help me navigate these situations, it is more likely that I will just respectfully decline your invitation or skip the all-church-picnic in a pavilion in the woods.
- Youth group events often include active games. Finding a way that someone in a wheelchair can still participate can be challenging, so feel free to solicit ideas online, from physical therapists or special education teachers in your church, or even from the kids in your group. Teenagers love to try out wheelchairs! Borrow one and have the teens try ways of incorporating it into their favorite games. Or come up with a wheelchair-based game. The kids who rely on wheelchairs everyday will actually have the advantage!

Thank you, church, for your sincere desire to love and welcome everyone. Even when your efforts aren't perfect, I am still blessed to be part of your family. Let's continue on this journey together, learning from each other and growing closer to our Creator God.

*The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990 and prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in several areas, including employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications and access to state and local government' programs and services.

***Kimberly Forry** loves reading, jigsaw puzzles, and Red Sox baseball. She graduated from Messiah College and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in theological and cultural anthropology through Eastern University. Kimberly is married to Adam, and they have three teenagers: Cassie, Trace, and Liam. They are part of the Elizabethtown (PA) Brethren in Crist Church.*

Opening Our Doors

by Adam Jones

ON A TYPICAL Sunday, opening prayer and music has finished. It is time to share thanksgivings for the week. One lady raises her hand. She proceeds to say, "I am grateful that I have become pregnant by the Holy Spirit."

As pastor, I respond, "Thank you for sharing. Who else has a thanksgiving?" We know her well enough to understand that this is a bad mental health day, and the loving thing to do is acknowledge and move on. As we have welcomed folks with severe mental illness, our Sunday culture has changed. I would like to back up and explain how we got here.

Junior has been our greeter for more than twenty years. He is gracious, faithful, and lives with a mental disability. Fourteen years ago, Junior asked me to visit his sister in Bluegrass Care Home (BCH). We went to see her and as we approached, Joyce saw us from afar and her face lit up. She showed us her room and introduced us to her friends there. During our visit we met many folks living at BCH with Joyce—people with mental health problems learning to live independently. Joyce always said goodbye with the words, "I love you," and a hug, every single visit. Joyce really opened my heart. Pretty soon, BCH became a regular pickup stop for our van on Sundays because folks wanted to be with us at Open Door. So began our connection to folks with mental illness.

As you might imagine, folks with mental illness have great difficulty finding a welcoming church. So, I asked our folks at Open Door who suffer from mental illness what they would say to us, the church, about welcoming them. Here is what I found.

Lavada: *"Go to the places where folks are, talk to them, listen to their story."*

If we are to welcome folks with disabilities, we likely need to find them. Once we find folks who suffer from mental illness, a process of education needs to occur. We had to learn names, sit, and listen. These simple acts offer dignity, build trust, and honor the image of God in people. At my neighbor's house, Sarah (who suffers from mental illness) and I listened to my neighbor share a story about picking up a stranger who needed help. In the midst of telling this story of faith, my neighbor described this stranger as "crazy." Immediately, Sarah got up and went outside, clearly upset. Sarah later told me she had been called crazy her whole life. It was a dehumanizing term used to dismiss her. Sarah taught me to strike the word from my vocabulary. Sarah explained that she and others just want to be heard. I learned by listening.

Deloris: *"I felt like God had let me down after this relapse, you all showed up and were God to me."*

Sherri: *"Folks are often dismissed, avoided, and they are alone."*

God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Loneliness was the only thing declared not good in the garden. At Open Door, we pick up folks from mental health institutions every Sunday. Just offering the ride lets folks know they are wanted, by us and by God. I have found over the years that the visitor log at mental health institutions is often almost bare or completely empty. Many people with mental illness live as "social orphans" in the world with no one to call. We have found many followers of

Christ in these institutions. They would love to go to church. They just need a ride.

Mit: *"I love the donuts and coffee. I know I'm different. Open Door accepts me the way I am. I get to say the value statements."*

Vallis: *"You let people talk and participate. We are not seen as a disturbance. Plus, we don't have to dress up at church."*

At Open Door, our folks with mental illness exposed the unspoken cultural expectations of our church services. Over many meetings, we have discussed ways to adapt our Sunday structure in order to be more inclusive and accessible. Some of our folks cannot sit still for long periods due to mental crises, so they regularly move in and out of the meeting. One of our members, Lavada, volunteered to walk with people as they move and sit with them if needed. Some folks have tremors, writhing movements, and other difficult side effects due to their medications. We offer hugs and handshakes, letting them know that those side effects don't bother us. Some folks might talk to themselves during a service, and so we understand that interruptions may occur during the sermon or music. In our Sunday meetings, our congregation has made room for these differences that mental illness can cause.

Our Sunday culture has become more gracious. The program used to be prayer, music, message, announcements. We have incorporated more open sharing time. Now our Sunday program is prayer, music, value statements, sharing thanks, sharing prayer requests, message, and message discussion. It is a risk to make more room like this, but we believe this goes with following Jesus and loving well.

I will close with this verse from Acts 10, when God gives Peter a vision before he meets the profane Gentile Cornelius: "The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'"

At Open Door, we learned that some people are declared profane because of their mental illness; their behavior is different or strange to us. God wants all, not just those who look and act like me. We learned that God has declared these folks wanted and loved in a world that has often dehumanized and dismissed them. I hope we can become a church in which prejudice and loneliness melt away in the midst of a Spirit-filled community grounded in the love of Christ.

***Adam Jones** is pastor of the Open Door Church in Lexington, KY.*

MIDNIGHT MUSINGS

Following John

By Zach Spidel

IN THE OFFICE I keep in the basement of our house there is a stone plaque with a cliché quote on it: "Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, but about learning to dance in the rain." This item is not, in the abstract, my kind of thing. But I have kept it because of the story behind it.

I was serving for the summer as a volunteer worker at Paxton Street Ministries.* They provide, in the name of Jesus, not just housing, but a community of belonging to mentally ill or handicapped folks who would likely otherwise be homeless. When I was there, many of the staff (both short-timers like myself and long-timers) lived in rooms in the main building alongside the residents for whom they cared. It is a beautiful and rarely implemented model. Among those I met was a man named John. John was, I would guess, in his sixties at that time and had led a hard life before finding a home at Paxton.

He couldn't express anything beyond a relatively simple set of ideas and what he did express was delivered in a peculiar but endearing pattern of speech. I call it endearing mainly because I remember him calling everyone "buddy" continually . . . and meaning it.

My very first night staying in the facility, I was hanging out with John and a few other residents in one of the building's common spaces when John asked me if I wanted to go fishing with him. I had never really fished and I had no idea where he intended to go fishing, but with a sense of adventure, and a little uncertainty I agreed. "OK, buddy," he said as he motioned me to follow him.

John took me to his room and rummaged about for his gear and tackle before speeding out the front door of the facility at a fast clip. I called after him to ask where we were going, already beginning to feel a little anxious, but John merely waved me on impatiently. We left Paxton's property and proceeded to walk several more blocks as I wondered just what I had gotten myself into.

I felt responsible for John—had I erred in allowing him to come out like this? Was it my place to "allow" things for John? He couldn't know where he was going, could he? Should I turn back to get help? (I had no cell phone on me.) If I did, would John just end up lost but now without me as a protector and guide? Was that really who I was to John in this moment? Did he need that?

When John finally turned into the parking lot of an industrial building and then slipped through a break in the chain link fence behind it, a small ball of panic formed in my gut for a moment. But unsure what else to do, I slipped through that same chain link fence and rushed after him, praying fiercely in my heart, down a steep, wooded, overgrown hill until we came tramping out next to a bike path that ran parallel to a lovely little stream.

John turned around and gave me a big and knowing grin. He knew what he was doing. Over the next couple of hours, I sat on the bank while John threw his line again and again into the water until the light began to fade from the sky and his interest waned. I enjoyed spending the time with him, but in truth I couldn't have left had I wanted to—I had no idea how to get back to Paxton from where we now were. He would have to lead me home—which he did after splashing about in those sun-dappled waters for a good portion of that summer evening. "See ya, buddy," he told me as we parted ways in the building's lobby after our adventure.

Toward the end of that summer, in the midst of a busy and stressful day, I was walking through that same lobby on my way to do something. I thought it was important then, but I no longer remember what it was. It was pouring rain outside and my own mood, for a variety of reasons, was a bit dark. John happened to be in the lobby then, and called out as I rushed past. "Heyya, buddy! Wanna go out and play?"

I did not. I was in a hurry, and I certainly did not want to get wet. I had stuff to do and felt annoyed at John for the interruption. I barely slowed as I brushed off his request, though I did have time to see sadness bloom on his face as he plumped himself back down in a chair by the main doors.

I made it half way down the hall, before the Spirit's tug became too strong. I turned around, feeling lighter with every step I took toward John. "Let's go," I said, at which he bounded up with another of his big grins and proceeded straight out the door and down the steps into a gigantic puddle.

He stomped in that puddle, kicked it, and laughed out loud. He had no self-consciousness—which is a liberating thing, or it was for me. I jumped in too, and kicked that puddle in a way I hadn't since I was a boy, laughing along with John. And when he had grown a little breathless, John did something I'll never forget; he stopped and turned his face toward the heavens, lifted his hands, and stood there beaming, receiving the rain (I believe) as God's own blessing upon his upturned face. Following John again, as I had that first night, I did the same and let the blessing of God play across my face, and soak through my clothes, and pool up in the raised cups of my hands.

I told that story to some friends on staff before I left for the summer. As a parting gift, they gave me the plaque with which this reflection began to serve as a reminder of all I learned following John that summer.

Zach Spidel *is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.*

*Paxton Ministries in Harrisburg, PA provides affordable housing and support services to adults in need with Christ-like love. As a nonprofit organization, Paxton cares for adults challenged with poverty, mental illness, and intellectual disabilities. By working together as a family of residents, staff, volunteers, supporters, and community partners, they strive to provide housing, help, and healing in the name of Christ. Paxton Ministries has a covenant relationship with the Brethren in Christ Church US. More information at paxtonmin.org.

Accessibility for Everyone

By Christine Hunt

MANOR CHURCH HAS has been privileged to be the setting for a wonderful story of inclusion. As far back as 1996, God has been introducing characters who faced challenges, in community, in order to compel us forward toward the goal of becoming a rich body of diverse abilities.

Certainly, God had been at work in advance, but the birth of a little girl affected by disability began to illuminate the need for greater understanding and support. The necessity and high cost of accessible transportation inspired a project to assist her family with the purchase of a van. The first of many to come, a Sunday morning service with a disability awareness theme, inspired sensitivity and generosity. The seed had been planted.

Another key character was a talented sign language interpreter within our congregation. Beginning with Christmas and special services, she offered her talent, a beautiful and creative act of worship, in order that the Deaf and hard of hearing could worship with us. Over the years many others would share their gifts in this area as well. Interpretation was also provided so that Deaf individuals were able to participate in small groups as well as to serve.

A passionate young couple affected by disability with ties to Joni and Friends entered the story and helped to ignite a zeal to reach families affected by disability. One of two deacon couples charged with oversight in this area, they joined the care pastor in initiating a Disability Task Force. This group earnestly fulfilled their responsibility for planning disability awareness services, evaluating the accessibility of the church building, planning a Day of Pampering and eventually developing a monthly respite ministry.

The Day of Pampering was an incredible act of missional love poured out at the feet of women caring for a family member affected by disability. Professionals from the community offered services such as hair and nail care and massages free of charge while volunteers from the congregation ranging from teens to senior adults graciously served as hostesses, car cleaners, hand waxers, waiters and waitresses, and so much more. Perhaps most importantly, those who served also listened. They glimpsed the toll of constant caregiving and honored those who give of themselves relentlessly.

Real Joy Respite was like a monthly party for children affected by disability and their siblings. Offering parents the luxury of free and competent childcare, and sharing the love of Jesus with hands-on fun for kids and volunteers, it filled an incredible need in the community. Many who came were drawn to join us for Sunday morning services as well and our One to One Buddy ministry was born.

One to One Buddies are trained volunteers who offer loving support and facilitate the participation of all children to the fullest extent possible in all children's programming. Many of these amazing volunteers connect with their "buddy" and invest in the family outside of Sunday morning. They have developed life-long mutual relationships. No one functions at a level so low that they cannot comprehend love. The arms of a young girl without verbal ability wrapped around a neck in a hug are priceless compensation for the investment made. Children of all abilities are enriched as together they encounter Christ in a way that is meaningful to them and celebrate the wonderful and unique way God has created each one.

The seedling disability ministry at Manor was nurtured by Joni and Friends International Disability Ministry. Joni and Friends Family Retreat invites individuals and families to serve as short-term missionaries for one week as they provide a haven of welcome and rest to families affected by disability. Over the years many teens and adults gained valuable training and developed a fervor for ministering to those affected by disability. A great number of these young people went on to study and serve in careers such as physical, occupational and speech therapy as well as special education.

Volunteers go home after a week at camp or a few hours on Sunday morning. But there really is no vacation from disability. One does not outgrow it and it impacts the entire family system. Disability ministry cannot just be a week—it must become a way of life.

In 2007 God invited us to join him in realizing the vision for a fully inclusive and accessible playground where children of all abilities could play side by side. Part of a community park on Manor's campus, Daniel's Den is the result of collaboration with the community and the fulfillment of a mother's dream for her son. Today, groups and families from across the county come to play together in a space that represents the inclusive nature of God's kingdom.

Manor Church was beginning to recognize the need and desire for all our activities and programs to be accessible to everyone. Passionate board members began lobbying for a staff person to oversee the ministry and advocate for families. In 2010, a part-time position was approved for a director of disability ministry. This was one of many significant investments Manor has made in creating space where all are welcome. Over the years, ramps were added to platforms, cut-outs made in pews, elevators and automatic doors installed, accessible bathrooms and sensory rooms created, and adjustments made to lighting. All these efforts have paved the way and removed obstacles. Perhaps the most significant modification has been making room for every person to share their gifts. Disability ministry is not ministry to individuals and families affected by disability, it is ministry with them.

Discerning the need to reach people of all ages and sensitive to lack of social opportunities for many adults affected by disability, Manor launched a coffee house for singles in 2010. Journeys is a joy-filled opportunity for faith-building, fun and fellowship for friends from near and far. An annual "formal" is a banquet that teases of a future feast in the presence of Jesus.

Without a doubt, prayer has laced people and events together into this exceptional tapestry. Prayer creates a sensitivity to the Spirit of God who authors our stories. It is our place of repentance when we get it wrong-because we do, and it's our source of comfort, guidance and inspiration.

There are places of crisis in this story. Understanding needs to be cultivated month after month and year after year. The culture and population of a church evolve and change. Covid has had a significant impact on disability ministry. Many individuals affected by disability are especially vulnerable and must choose to connect remotely. Volunteer shortages are everywhere. Pruning is painful and, in many ways, we are still waiting and longing to see fresh growth and fruit come from periods of loss.

There is beauty in it all. The incredible gift of a love that evades description, shared when we finally realize we are all broken, in fact, dis-abled in some way. It's a treasure we are given when we recognize and respect and receive the gifts God has chosen to place in every individual and as we embrace our own frailty and join in functioning as the beautiful body of Christ.

***Christine Hunt** is the disabilities ministries director at Manor Church, Lancaster. PA.*

Life Lessons from L'Arche

By Timothy Epp

OUR FAMILY LOOKS forward to the sound of the phone ringing on Tuesday night, because it usually means one thing: Mary's calling! Mary is a core member of the L'Arche Hamilton* community, and has been a good friend to our family for many years. In fact, I've known her for over half of my life. When I was twenty years old, I was volunteering at a thrift store when I met a young woman who invited me over for supper. On my arrival, I was introduced to Mary, Roger, Brian, Maggie, and Michael, all of whom would become my friends and mentors.

I had known people categorized as "disabled" throughout my life. One of my cousins has a hearing impairment, and another relative was born with cerebral palsy. I had also worked with people who had been discharged from psychiatric institutions. However, coming into L'Arche was a new experience for me. This was a community of people living with disabilities, together with support people known as "Assistants." This was a place in which every single member was valued, and all contributed to a vibrant community of life and faith. This was a community in which I formed real friendships and learned real life lessons that continue to stay with me. I'll share a few of these here.

On my first day as an Assistant, I had just completed a manual labour job on a fuel ship. I began looking for some work to do, and I was encouraged to sit down and work on a puzzle with Brian. This didn't seem like "real work" to me, and I asked again "what should I be doing?" The house leader said, "Well, you could fix the toilet. And then sit down and do a puzzle with Brian." This was my first lesson: the importance of being present to others, and the challenge of doing so when our lives are often framed around the task-driven busy-ness of life. Taking time to be still and to be present may lead us into a deeper relationship with each other and with God (Psalm 46:10).

My second lesson was that of being open to receiving support from those who appear to be the "weakest link." Roger was a core member who often showed frustration by biting his hand and hitting his forehead. I was a bit nervous around Roger, until the day when I began to feel flu-ish. After taking some medication, I began to feel dizzy. It was Roger who helped me to a chair and who first showed concern for me. Roger was not only a recipient of care, but he was someone who contributed to the life of the community, and who had gifts that I still treasure today. He had a great sense of humour, and that day he showed care and compassion towards me. In helping me to bear my burden of ill health, Roger was following the way of Jesus (Galatians 6:2).

A third lesson that I have learned is to value those things that we often take for granted, such as a welcoming smile, a hug, or the gift of compassion. We often value those things which relate to society's definition of talent or success, but Mary's phone calls are priceless because they remind me that she values my family, and is concerned enough to call once a week to see how we're doing. That may seem like a small thing, but we often fail to take time for each other in our daily lives. Mary is committed to caring for us. We are called to love, just as we have been loved (John 13:34).

Fourth lesson: each one of us has gifts, and each one of us is limited in some ways. When I first met Brian, he amazed me. Brian could communicate with a symbol book, through his own vocalizations, and through his own form of sign language. He could also understand my words. I, on the other hand, had to learn how to interpret his gestures, vocalizations, and symbols. Who was limited in this situation? We both had our own strengths and limitations, but Brian was considered to be "disabled." We need to constantly rethink the ways by which we categorize and label each other. (Galatians 5:22-23).

Finally, I am learning not to "judge a book by its cover," or a person by my first impressions of their outward appearance and behaviour. God calls us instead to examine the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). We can do this by taking the time to really know each other. Maggie was diminutive in size, and she often seemed grumpy to me. She muttered her words, and quite often appeared frustrated. However, she was a charming person once you got to know her. She was great at crossword puzzles, and referred to me as a "gentleman." Maggie had suffered abuse at the psychiatric institution where she resided for many years, as have many people with cognitive disabilities. Perhaps some of those experiences influenced her initial demeanour towards strangers in her life. Other core members have demonstrated their talents at the L'Arche day program workshop, including candle-making and ceramics. Michael has authored two books, and his artwork decorates our yearly L'Arche calendars.

When I teach my course on Disability and Society, I discuss important concepts and theories with my students. However, my friends at L'Arche are the ones who really keep me grounded. Today I'm writing this at the new Inclusion Café, where I purchased a tea and cookie from my friends Michael and Cynthia. I am grateful to God that my daughters have grown up with the L'Arche community, as these friendships and formative experiences have helped them to appreciate diversity in their lives and in the world around them.

Timothy Epp *is professor of sociology in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Redeemer University, Ancaster, ON, and a long-term friend of L'Arche Hamilton. One of his areas of research and writing is disability. Another interest area is race and ethnicity, and he is currently also doing research for a forthcoming article on Canadian Anabaptist interactions with race.*

*L'Arche is an international organization with origins in France (1964). Its mission is to support people with disabilities who are the core of L'Arche communities.

Stigma and Mental Illness

By Harriet Bicksler

For all the improvements in the mental health system over the last decades, people with mental illness are often still stigmatized. Physical illnesses and injuries are usually seen to be natural consequences of living, but not so with mental illness.

If you had a broken leg, would you be left to languish over a weekend in a hospital room until a doctor came on Monday to set your leg? If you had a broken leg, would you have to call on all your community contacts to get someone in authority to demand that you be treated in a timely manner? If you had a broken leg, would you feel free to share your situation on the church prayer chain or ask the pastor to include you in his or her pastoral prayer?

But what if you or a family member had experienced a mental health crisis? Would you feel much more private and worry about what people might think and about the stigma of having a mental health problem? It's relatively easy to talk about a broken leg or a cancer diagnosis, but it's much more difficult to talk about being seriously depressed or anxious because we fear judgment or lack of understanding.

When we hear about people with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or some other mental illness, we should think about how we can support them and their families just as we would with a physical illness. Mental illness is way too complex to dismiss with easy answers and solutions; doing so is a tremendous disservice to the millions of people who struggle every day.

Most churches do well in caring for people with physical issues, but we still have a ways to go until we are comfortable with mental illness, especially when it's chronic. Let's end the stigma.

Harriet Bicksler *is editor of* Shalom! *and retired from the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Susbtance Abuse Services where she worked in communications on children's mental health issues. Excerpted from a blog post she wrote in 2014.*

God's Perfect Gift to the World

By Tony Gruder

I THOUGHT I understood love and had a good concept, at least as much as humanly possible, of the overwhelming love of God. Then God gifted us with a perfect little man, Cooper Lane, who was born with Down Syndrome. From the first time our eyes beheld him and we cradled him in our arms when he was born, we knew that he was going to be truly special. We are learning more and more each day and Cooper is teaching us what a true picture of God's love really is like. I believe that people with Down Syndrome are God's direct gift to this world and are the closest to his heart exhibiting pure love, affection, and how we are to treat others. They love all and do not see race, conditions, or age.

Cooper just turned three years old, and I'm telling you, he is a live wire! He has way much more energy than either his mother or me! Life has not been the same since he was discharged from the hospital soon after he was born. God put together a miraculous plan. We have a great relationship with his birth mother because there wasn't anything that would keep us from wanting a connections with her. Her decision to place him for adoption was because of a severe family tragedy and she wanted him to have a better life than she could afford. We are in communication with her often, share pictures, and have even gone back to Texas for a visit with her and his birth sister. We consider them extended family. This is another way that God's perfect love is taking root. All we as humans have to do is just let love happen.

We were not hesitant in the least when they told us that Cooper could potentially have Down Syndrome. He did not exhibit at birth many of typical features of a child with Down. Sometime later the test results came back to confirm the condition. In fact, when we brought him home and met with the pediatric geneticist, the doctor asked for definitive documentation of the test results as he could not see many signs of Down. Sadly, most families would have walked away when they discovered the possibility of the diagnosis. Not us! And, we have never regretted one day.

He is always smiling, laughing, hugging, blowing kisses, and making us laugh even when we don't want to. My heart melts when I come home for the day and he sees me coming. Those little arms wrap around my leg, and he holds on like a python before I even get a chance to sit down. We actually don't think of Cooper as having special needs as often as one would assume. We have prayed and are praying that he will be high functioning as he has exhibited thus far in life. We push for him to reach those goals and don't back down. We have five other children, all still in the home, and Cooper has them all at the snap of his fingers. God has multiplied love in so many ways in our home. We are thankful to God every day for it!

Not only has our family been enlightened; our church has opened its arms to our whole family including Cooper. The church is focused on youth and children and has a mission to reach those who have not been reached. If you are ever in south central Kentucky on a Wednesday night and want to be blessed, come to church! Sometimes you'll find forty or more kids at our youth services. We have other children in the church who have special needs as well. The majority of these kids have been through major trauma and many have been adopted into new families. It is like God sent them our way and assembled us as a gathering place and community of support for these kids.

Many adults are rolling up their sleeves to work with these youngsters. In fact, the adult Bible class on Wednesdays now looks like a ghost town as so many of the adults rally around the kids. And that's the way we want it! Many of the adults who help were not really invested in the church until they started helping with the kids. It takes a lot of human capital to work with kids and a lot of energy and commitment from each person to make this work, but God has blessed us. The Wednesday night youth event has been thriving for at least three years. Most of the kids are regular attendees and are really disappointed if we have to cancel for weather or other unforeseen circumstances.

I believe that the modern church in general is leaving a precious community of underserved and underprivileged people along the side of road. When you change your focus, God will show you all those who so desperately need to hear the gospel of and for the love of God to be shared with them. I am thankful that the Brethren in Christ Church is driven to help those are otherwise helpless. I am proud to serve alongside you in your efforts to reach out, and I want to encourage all of us in new ways to share Jesus with everyone from the smallest to the greatest!

Tony Gruder *is pastor of the Millerfield (KY) Brethren in Christ Church.*

continued from page 12

both support and criticism. Woven through it all is joy and love. Relaxing one night with friends she writes, "we said we didn't care—that we were happy to be on this journey. We said we still hurt—oh yes, we hurt, but that we loved so much deeper than the hurt and that in itself was empowering."

Along with the written account, the story is also told through numerous photographs. They give the reader another glimpse, literally, into the lives of Hampton and her family and the story of the first year of life with Nella. For some, reading *Bloom* will take them into spaces they have not traveled. Others may find themselves within the pages. Both are valuable and meaningful in understanding more about life with Down Syndrome. Both are worth the read.

Lois Saylor *is an editorial advisor for* Shalom! *and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

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BOOK REVIEW
Bloom: A First Year with Down Syndrome

By Lois A. Saylor

DURING MY HIGH school summers, I worked at a farmer's market. One day Bonnie, a co-worker who could be a little tough, had the biggest smile I ever saw, the kind that lights up a face and spills into the atmosphere. I looked over and saw her younger sister coming into the market, her little sister with Down Syndrome. I swear I have never seen so much love coming out of one person towards another. Bonnie adored her sister completely and then some. I thought of this when I picked up the book, *Bloom: Finding Beauty in the Unexpected,* by Kelle Hampton. But I also remembered how my heart sank when a woman told me her grandchild was diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Grief and sadness. Joy and love. These are the waves Kelle Hampton rides as she tells of the first year of life after her second daughter was born with Down Syndrome. The grief is real and so is the journey into joy.

Bloom is a memoir of the heart, and Hampton dives into the pain, fear, self-doubt, confusion, and self-recriminations for not getting it right. She also explores forgiving herself and becoming that momma bear advocating for her daughter. She knows this diagnosis changes so much and that hurts deeply. She will learn through the year what dreams she must release, but also what dreams come true—those aspirations Down Syndrome doesn't affect at all—and what new dreams bring depth, joy, and love into the family's life.

While the book centers on the birth and first year of her daughter Nella's life, Hampton also reveals some of her own childhood including church, her parents' divorce, her relationship with her sister, and some adult antics before parenthood. These remembrances help to fill out the author as a full person, not just that-mom-with-a-down-syndrome-baby. She is married to a man who has two sons and so it is a full family that faces the birth of their newest member. There are also grandparents and a boat load of friends she calls "the Net." They surround her with support from the birthing room to the first birthday party and beyond.

But even with family, the Net, and her best intentions, grief enters. Here is one description while still in the hospital.

> And, suddenly, without notice, they came again—the sadness demons. I didn't see them coming this time. . . . They came in fast before I could block them and I took a good slap to the face and a punch to the gut so that, within seconds, I was hunched over my plate of food, crying while the demons snickered victoriously in the corner. They had won again. . . .

Hampton also writes about a father's heart. At home when getting ready for Nella's first bath, she found her husband in the garage. He was looking for a space heater, tears in his eyes. "It's her first bath," he explained, "and I don't want her to be cold. She needs a heater." Hampton writes, "While he couldn't sweep away a syndrome, he could soothe away a chill," and "he slowly healed his broken heart by doing."

Brother love is also expressed in one recounted scene. While visiting in the hospital baby Nella's eleven-year-old half-brother was reticent and crying. A nurse friend took him outside the room to talk. He told her, "I'm not crying because I don't love her. I'm crying because I do love her, and I don't ever want anyone to make fun of her."

Hampton takes the reader through the ups and downs of doctor's appointments, therapists, support groups, awareness and fund-raising events, a convention, and writing and processing on her blog where she gets