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What Parents of Handicapped Children Want From Their Church

Originally published in NAPMR Quarterly, Winter 1988

by **Rev. Sam Timbrook** and **Helen Timbrook**

Why Me?

For the first time in many parents' lives, they ask God this question. A situation that they have no control over and that will affect every moment of life on this earth has occurred --the birth of a disabled child. The natural reaction is to question why and why them.

Those who will be teaching or working with these parents (and siblings) must not condemn or ridicule those who share that they are asking questions of God. So many church members have been led to believe that you do not question God, but that you simply take whatever happens. As a result, when parents or siblings with an exceptional family member share their feelings, people react with shock.

Noted author, Eugenia Price, gives a beautiful explanation on questioning God: "Jesus felt free to shout, 'Why?' at the Father (on the cross) because He knew His Father's heart, knew His every intention toward Him--toward us all--forever and from the beginning. This knowing, this intimacy, this confidence which the Father understood left the Savior free to question..."

There Are a Lot of Gray Areas in Life

Parents and siblings of a handicapped person have learned from

experience that there is not just yes or no—but maybe. They have learned that pat answers are no longer present in their parenting, brothering, or sistering. Physicians, psychologists, therapists, educators, and others who have touched their lives, have affirmed that life is uncertain and that some queries do not have definite answers.

Many Bible teachers in churches need to be careful in their classes. Every theological question with a nice, neat answer or reply can cause those parents or siblings hearing such theories to react negatively or angrily because they are now residing in one of those "divine mysteries."

Failure Can Enter the Lives of Christians

Many parents of exceptional children feel that they have failed—instead of a perfect baby or offspring, they have borne an imperfect child. They feel that they have failed not only their expectations, but those of brothers and/or sisters, grandparents, close relatives, and friends. And they know that they have tried to follow Christian principles, have been fulfilled in other areas of their lives, and then adversity strikes when they least expect it.

The persons in teaching positions in the church need to be cautious about promoting principles of "Suc-

cess in the Christian's Life." Two and two do not always add up to four. If you do A, B, AND C, God's will may not always bring about D and E.

Also, failure of many marriages happen when there is an exceptional member. Four out of every five marriages containing a handicapped child fail. The parent left with the responsibility for that child will feel anger, guilt, shame, etc. He/she will face two failures, will be scared, and will not trust and believe in someone in the same degree. This has to have a major impact on his/her relationship with God.

Pedestal Syndrome

Church members need to be very careful about verbally praising parents or siblings of handicapped children or presenting them as an example of faith and ultimate trust in God. That kind of "calculation" is very hard to live up to. Undo pressure is immediately administered to that family. People need to realize that that family does not have any magic potion that makes their Christian walk with God any easier or closer than any other Christian family. They want the freedom to share their desperations and joys through words and even tears. All they ask in return is a listening ear and a strong arm and the opportunity to reciprocate in the future.

Sibling's Rights

- ♥ To be recognized as an individual person
- ♥ Not to be forgotten
- ♥ To expect some personal time and communication with parents
- ♥ To express feelings without criticism of judgment
- ♥ To ask questions and receive honest answers
- ♥ To have "private" time
- ♥ To not be a "built-in" babysitter
- ♥ To obtain financial assistance without feeling guilty for asking
- ♥ To have questions answered with honesty
- ♥ To "learn" from handicapped sibling

Parent's Rights

- ♥ To be respected as a person made and loved by God
- ♥ To ask questions and receive honest answers
- ♥ To express anger, grief
- ♥ To keep informed
- ♥ To have professionals explain diagnosis, evaluations, and prognosis in understandable terms
- ♥ To be equal partners with appropriate professionals in all decisions affecting the child
- ♥ To know all the options before making decisions
- ♥ To help set up short-range and long-range goals
- ♥ To advocate without fear of ostracism
- ♥ To not feel guilty for placement of their child when resources run out
- ♥ To have the right to say in times of stress, "I can't cope anymore."
- ♥ To think about their own needs
- ♥ To get away for recreation/relaxation
- ♥ To spend money/time on a hobby or self
- ♥ To firmly discipline my child without criticism
- ♥ To not be judged by someone who has not "walked the same path"
- ♥ To be willing to risk without criticism.

Changes in the Family

- ♥ Joy is replaced by solemnity at birth
- ♥ Pride is replaced by uncertainty at birth
- ♥ Instant change in priorities occurs
- ♥ Regular routine of daily life is altered
- ♥ Time with family is limited (couple's relationship suffers)
- ♥ Relationship with sibling(s) is affected
- ♥ Unending stress happens
- ♥ Physical, mental, emotional exhaustion occurs
- ♥ Past friendships may change
- ♥ Babysitting becomes a problem
- ♥ Attending activities as a family decreases
- ♥ Financial worries increase
- ♥ Career/employment is often affected
- ♥ Education (academic and spiritual) is a worry
- ♥ Future is a constant worry

Desires of Parents

- ♥ Acceptance of their child as a person
- ♥ Acceptance of the family
- ♥ Establishment of a warm, trusting, supportive, and growing relationship
- ♥ Help in facing facts of reality
- ♥ Help in finding adequate plan for caring of their child
- ♥ Chance to share experiences
- ♥ Provision of meaningful Christian education for their child
- ♥ Guidance in struggling with questions/stress

What Parents Want

The Open Church

A truly "open" church is one not only with ramps but an open, accepting attitude.

Two of the most frequent responses or attitudes of church congregations are the result of ignorance and fear about the handicapped.

The Pastor is the "key" person. Most generally, the individual members will follow the leadership of their minister. If most pastors will realize that these individuals and especially their families are existing in an ongoing "grief process," they will be able to relate to these people. Pastors receive training in this area. So, if they can remember that the family members of the "exceptional" do not have a point where grieving terminates,

they will be able to better understand the family's behavior.

People are afraid of the unknown and to many handicapped people represent the unknown. To deal with this fear, they simply ignore. The four men who took their paralyzed friend (Mark 2:1-12) literally made people aware of their comrade by "dropping" him into the middle of the congregation.

Christian love is exemplified by a perfect Christ loving us, an imperfect world. Each exceptional person and their family members are individuals whom God loves. They (even the exceptional one) are more like us than different. They need and want acceptance, dignity, approval, affection, and most of all love—of human beings and of God.

At the time this article was originally published, **Sam** and **Helen Timbrook** of Auxvasse, Missouri, had a ministry through the church to handicapped persons and their families known as Special Education Ministry. Both were approved special workers with the Missouri and the Southern Baptist Sunday School departments and had led many conferences across the United States. They are parents of two sons, one of whom is both physically and mentally handicapped.

Sam Timbrook holds a B.A. degree from Southwest Baptist University and a Master of Counseling from Lincoln University in Missouri.

Helen Timbrook has a degree in elementary education from William Woods College in Missouri.