SPECIAL FOCUS

Have you ever wondered what it would be like, as a father or mother, to look forward with eager expectation to the birth of a baby, and then to learn that the little one is. . . handicapped?

Dave and Bonnie Moelker, of our Hope Church in Grand Rapids, know all about that from painful experience. In the moving account which follows, they tell us their story — from the initial sub-conscious suppression of fears, through the struggle of coming to know and accept the truth, to the eventual grace of contentment, in the knowledge that an "impaired" child is very really a good gift from God Himself. A "necessary member of the body of Christ" they see Kristi to be — necessary for her parents, her siblings, her friends. . . . This reader has found it to be even so. We trust you will too.

"Physically Impaired": A Gift of God

Dave and Bonnie Moelker

To the reader:

With sixteen years of our daughter's life to reflect on, we have no little difficulty in choosing which events best paint a complete picture of parenting a handicapped child. No less difficult was the task of including some of her feelings. We hope that what has evolved here, while only a small part of what could be written, will give some insights into an experience which is not unique to us, but which has occurred many times over, to a greater or lesser degree, in many Christian families. ■□■

That day in March dawned brightly: snow had made all things new the night before. The air had turned cold again after what seemed to be the end of winter. The day had proceeded as usual. A young husband had gone to work, perhaps wondering if he could earn enough money to make the payment on the new house. . . or maybe wondering if the coming of his first child would strain the budget beyond its limits. What will life be like if it's a boy?

The hopes, the dreams, the unknown of a new life! A new

life in the care of a new mother and father!

Can all of this really be happening? It seems we were just in high school. . . a girl and a boy who had known each other from the second grade; whose names were next to each other in the teacher's record book; who were even seated together at the same desk by a favorite teacher in Junior High; who had lockered together in #103 for part of high school and who attended the same church, catechism class, and young people's society. Two, we were, whose backgrounds and experiences were so much the same, and who knew only the other as a date throughout the dating years and throughout their courtship. God had fused two lives into one without their fully realizing it was taking place.

And one of the reasons for it all was that bright day late in March. . . but also for the days and years to follow. They would need the quiet strength, the look that said it all, the heart that could read the other's heart, to be able to bear all things, endure all things, and hope all things.

The busy pace of the afternoon was interrupted by the intercom telling the whole shop that a call was waiting. The voice on the line told the young husband that "It's time. The doctor says we had better go." After an "Alright, I'll be right there," I made a hasty run from one place of employment to another. We had just found out that babies don't care much whether or not mothers are still working.

After a quick trip home for the suitcase, the hospital was twenty minutes away. Settled in the labor room, we began to reflect on all those parenting classes.

Time the contractions.

Breathe right.

Check the pocket for phone numbers and dimes for calls to relatives and friends.

It'll probably only take a few short hours. Wonder if it will be a boy. Athlete or scholar? Or a girl? Will she be beautiful and popular? Will it look like me or you?

Try to get some sleep. Another contraction? I'll get the watch. Why, it's early morning now. Didn't think it would take twelve hours! They're close now. We must be almost there. You're taking her in? This is it.

"Mr. Moelker, the doctor says you may wait in the father's waiting room now." This isn't the way they told us in the class. But it's the first time. . . and who can tell?

After a bewildering wait, I hear the doctor call into the father's waiting room, "Congratulations! Would you like to see your daughter? We're taking her to the nursery to warm her up. She's a little cool right now. Cute

little girl."

Later, standing outside the nursery, I see the doctor's concerned expression as nothing more than observation. She watched as the baby jerked her body, arched her little back, and made another small screech. Without taking her eyes from the crib, she told me of the events of the last hour.

The hurried exit from the labor room was because the baby's heart rate had suddenly increased dramatically. Then came a forceps delivery. (Only later would we learn that this was called fetal distress.) As the baby dropped into position, a short umbilical cord wrapped three times around her neck, had deprived her of oxygen for a short time. The result of this was newborn convulsions. "Your pediatrician has been called and you should get some sleep." Still not suspecting the gravity of the situation, we welcomed the doctor's advice.

The pocket where the dimes had been was empty as a tired first-time father slid beneath the covers. Long and weary had been the night. Now to get some rest, and then back to the hospital.

The anxious look that met a young father that early afternoon was noted with an unsuspecting glance. The pediatrician was still there and now dropped back into the room with both of the little girl's parents. "She isn't acting just right and we'll run some further tests to see if we can pinpoint anything. She has been given a relaxant and the convulsions have stopped. The next 24 hours will be important. I'll be checking periodically just in case I'm needed."

Convulsions? What does he mean? The implications of it were subconsciously suppressed. Relaxant? The next 24 hours will be important? Is she going to die? What's wrong? With stunned silence, our minds raced. What does he mean?

These types of questions were to be for many months to come. It would take time to learn the full nature of the problem. But it would also take many months to come to grips with the idea itself.

The date was March 31, 1972. It also happened that the day was Good Friday — the day long ago which for the early New Testament church had been a day of questions, a day of fear, a day of dreams that were clouded by stunning events. . . but a day which from God's point of reckoning was a day of good things. Death and hell and the curse were forever defeated, making us full victors and recipients of the benefits of Christ's suffering and death. In retrospect we look back, and for us it is seeing in this event of the birth of a handicapped child, God doing

a work, not only in our lives, but also in the life of His church. We, too, like the disciples, had expected one thing and were given another. We were filled with questions; experienced a time of fear; saw a day of dreams that were clouded. But, again, God's perspective is so very different from ours. This member of the body of Christ was necessary at this time, on this day, at this place. Needful for her parents. Needful for a brother and sisters, though yet to be born, whose lives would be affected by this event. Also needful for relatives, for friends, for a congregation, a denomination, ministers, teachers, and fellow students. Her life, for her and for us, is a living testimony of grace, contentment, strength in weakness, a path of struggle and of happiness in the "small things in life."

With the arrival home from the hospital comes the realities of first-time parenting. No longer do nurses respond to call buttons for changes, bathings, and even late-night feedings. Mother is now given her first taste of broken sleep, crying babies, and calls to mother's mother with "what should I do now?" But there were no cries that first night home. No starts from sound sleep to recall dreamily that you are a parent now. Just night air filled with a young mother's wonderment as to why her baby is so quiet. Is this normal? She seems too sleepy even to swallow. "Kristina, wake up! Swallow the formula." Thoughts began to race. "Calm down. She's alright. Just won't wake up." The Creator's gift of intuition tells her mother to watch these signs and take note. But each night the same scenario. No cries. Forced feedings. And that daily dose of phenobarbital.

The light was bright to our just opened eyes. What time is it? The mind aches as it asks. She has to eat. Let's try for an ounce. "You snap her feet to make her swallow, and I'll talk to her." More spills than goes down. How long has it been? I have to work tomorrow. "Kristina, swallow! Please? There! She did it. Wish she'd wake up. We've never even heard her cry!"

A county health nurse who would come to the house gave us some hints, showed us some tricks that might help her eat.

Baptism had come and gone. Our relatives had gathered for the occasion. Still there lingered questions as to the nature of the problem. What could be done? And what can we do to help? God gave His grace. Our ignorance about the gravity of the problem was the vehicle which He used to give that grace, and it was measured by a young couple's determination to press on.

The doctor leaned back in his

chair and lit his cigar and looked across his desk at the young couple. We were there for the regular monthly visit, and it was late afternoon. We wanted to hear together just what the doctor would say. With so many questions, we always hoped to have some of the uncertainty of the situation taken away. Specific labels were never given, and we found ourselves living in the hope that anytime now they would say, "Everything looks alright now." The late night sessions of "two on one" (two parents, one sleepy baby), forcing down formula, then rice cereal, seemed to be wearing on us. If only she would cry, it would be music to our ears. At one of our earlier visits to the doctor, we had carried out a pre-determined plan of action. We wondered if the sedative, phenobarbital, could be discontinued. Did we dare ask? With the courage of two, we asked. "Okay. But if she has another convulsion, you'd better call me right away."

The doctor's response destroyed the thin coating on that fear of ours. The hope of our youth had buried it under the rapid succession of all the recent events. "Yes, we want to stop it. It's so hard to feed her. We can't go on this way. And we haven't really heard her cry."

The smoke drifted around the doctor's head as he still leaned back and pondered our next question. "Is it called Cerebral Palsy?" We finally used the newly-learned words.

"I think that's a wastebasket term. It's brain damage if you want to name it. It happens sometimes during birth. It's caused by a lack of oxygen. But if you want to call it Cerebral Palsy, you may."

The mother held her baby tightly. The air was cold on the drive home. But the car's heater felt good. "But she looks fine. Brain damage? How can it be? No one has ever said that before. Will if affect her learning? Her sight? Her walking?" With questions following questions, we withdrew into our thoughts. The possibilities, the ramifications, seemed endless. Little did we realize the point we had reached. There in the car on the way home, we were made fit vessels to receive God's grace even more. Stripped of earthly pride and hope, alone with our first child that afternoon, feeling only emptiness, we were ready to be filled.

At first, we were able to carry the baby quite easily. In fact, carrying did two things for us. First, it was easy. Simply pick her up and go. She could be included nicely in almost all activities. When one of us grew tired, the other could take over. Since she needed to be propped up by a "corner seat" to sit and play with

toys on the floor, and restrained so that she would not "flop around" in her car seat, carrying was by far one of the easiest things to do. No muss. No fuss.

The second thing carrying did for her parents was that it allowed them to move about without being noticed. Nothing looked different. Thousands of people carried their children about. In public, everything is normal. As she grew older, there was an occasional look from people if they got too close, but nothing that presented a "problem."

At church gatherings, fellow church members, suspecting that the stories they had heard could be true, began asking questions. Always questioning. Always meaning well. Hardly knowing that the answers they received were painfully torn from hearts that wanted them to remain buried there because each time the file was opened there were still unanswered questions. There were still pages that were missing, and pages that, as it were, had only a couple of lines written on them yet. "Yes, she is doing better. No, we're not sure about how she'll be as time goes on. They say it's something called Cerebral Palsy or C.P." Fellow saints, because they are just that, were always understanding, supportive, and compassionate. They are that way by no "accident." It is really God giving us in our storms that often face us on the sea of life a safe harbor from the swelling sea within and without.

Eventually, infants, handicapped or not, begin to grow. Carrying is more difficult now and the stroller or umbroller is used more often and for greater periods. A small child being transported this way still appears like any other, though, and we can still get lost in the crowd.

Time was beginning to show what areas of our daughter's brain were damaged at birth. What are called the "fine" and "gross" motor functions were involved. Her speech was also showing impairment, but her parents were mostly aware of her ability to learn. Watching for signs of growth became our delight. What a warm feeling of accomplishment we felt when she pointed to body parts on command. . . and even to Grandma's glasses on the table.

Kristi's formal education began early in her life. From the first "infant parent program" in a local public school district, she advanced to being classified a Physically and Otherwise Health Impaired (or P.O.H.I.). As a POHI student, she was in a special classroom in a regular school. There she was able to receive physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy, as well as pursue as close as possible

a normal load. Though it grieved her parents to send her to a non-Christian school, there seemed to be no other option. In the first few years, this arrangement brought nothing to be concerned with. However, as time went on, we as well as our daughter became more aware of the stark contrast between our own schools and the schools of the public domain. While academically the teachers were very good, there were always the differences in background that nag at you at every turn. It began to grieve us when a holiday season would arrive. School life went from one celebration to the next: starting with Halloween and ending with Easter. There was the keeping Kris home rather than sending her to school with a costume on Halloween. . . or the dilemma of sending her without one and going through the long explanation of why – which we did, seemingly time and time again.

There were many times when faith had to utter her voice. Each time, though, strengthened by God to each circumstance, we were also given words to speak. We both recall the time, during a parent group which we were a part of in the early days of Kristi's life, when we had opportunity to express how we were able to accept her handicap. One of the parents there was quick to show her own bitterness, and she placed blame on the doctor. When Kristi's mother was asked to speak, she told of the truth of a sovereign God who providentially controls all things so that they work together for our good, though it is not always plain to see why. This view to them was labeled as fatalism, not faith. They saw it as pacifism in a world of "you must place the blame." Much of our coming to grips with our situation came about by our having to exercise the knowledge and truths we had been taught from the time we ourselves were little.

Then came the day when we realized that Kristi's learning ability was being held down by her school situation. It seemed that she was ready to learn, but she was not stimulated to do so in the school situation. The teacher's time was demanded by more needy students, leaving little or no time for one who wanted more. While being faced unconsciously with the choice of physical or mental growth, we were beginning consciously to make the choice for her mental and spiritual growth.

The question loomed before us. Frustration grew into anger toward a system which was holding down a healthy mind.

As at any parent/teacher conference, POHI parents/teachers have a lot to discuss. Having seen the P.T. and the O.T. and the

speech therapist, we were on our way to see Kristi's homeroom teacher. We had mustered our courage that night after much thought about it, but the idea still seemed like a "long shot." Would this teacher be receptive or not? Would she be offended? Did we dare get out of step in a school system in which they were marching to a different drum?

"My wife and I have been thinking lately about Kristi's progress academically. It seems she is falling behind. Well, we were thinking that maybe... well, maybe our own Christian school might be able to give her more academically." Our hand was played. Relieved that we had spoken what was on our minds, we were ready for a look of surprise and probably a defense of past performance. "Oh, yes." Her eyes lit up. "That would be great!" This teacher was throwing up her arms in delight! "I'd been hoping to try to tell you that, but I can't turn people out of our program here. I haven't been able to give Kris all she needs. I think she can do far more. I'll help all I can."

Sometimes when the Lord opens a door, He knocks it off its hinges! Our prayers that our daughter would have a sound mind and the ability to learn were still being answered – this time beyond our wildest dream. She would be a student in our own school.

Being in our own school proved to be an exercise in ingenuity. Kristi had been tested by our 4th grade teacher and her former teacher, and she was found to be functioning at the 4th grade level. The school board and administrator were always willing to cooperate from day one. Though we approached the Board with a lengthy document expressing our desire to send her, they needed little convincing. Some questions remained from a practical standpoint; but always there was a workable solution to be found. "Playing it by ear" became the watchword for her parents as well as staff and School Board.

On her first day at her new school experience, she was ready with a typewriter with a special guard over the keys, an extra set of plugs on the wall in the room, a wheelchair, and a roller-type walker. Transportation to school each day was via neighbor school-secretary. We discovered very really what teacher-parent communication/cooperation meant, far more than the average "normal" situation would require. In retrospect, we see how much extra effort was put forth by fellow students and teachers alike. We stand amazed at how the members of the Body of Christ actually do care for one another. Without that care, Kristi's school-

life at our own school would have been impossible.

Having one member of the family in a wheelchair can create some interesting situations and problems. With each phase of growing, parents of a handicapped child must re-adapt life styles, overcome hangups, and reach new levels of acceptance. When you first learn of the problems, as we did at Kristi's birth, there begins the groping, the ever-searching for help. Sometimes that help is hard to become accustomed to. Take for example the wheelchair. The early use of strollers and such must sooner or later give way to wheelchair use. But just obtaining one and using it would be easy except for the fact that by doing so you are faced with publicly accepting and acknowledging the fact that your daughter is unable to walk. Then there are the stares. With smooth vinyl and shining stainless steel, the wheelchair is hard to hide in a crowd. Small children, usually, would stare the longest. But some adults could outdo even them.

In crowded rooms, there is the danger of bumping into everyone's ankles and heels. There is the seemingly constant "Excuse me," the "I'm sorry," or "Pardon me." The looking for ramps becomes second nature. And where none happens to be, you begin to size up those stairs as a mountain climber studies the next peak. Many times total strangers will lend a welcome hand. There are still many things that can make going about in a wheelchair difficult, but building codes have allowed for much easier access in the past few years. The chair has been to such places as the top of the Sears Tower; Tiger Stadium in Detroit; Washington, D.C.; the Smithsonian Institute; the Vulcan Monument in Birmingham, Alabama; numerous state parks; young people's hayrides; class trips; subway; Lake Michigan piers; Marshall Space Center; museums; the Atlantic Ocean; Mackinac Island; Sault Ste. Marie boat trip; and a pontoon boat on Silver Lake. It has waited on shore while its user has gone tubing with her dad behind Uncle Ray's boat on Lake Leelanau. There must come the time when the wheelchair as a liability becomes the asset to new adventures.

There were times when frustration gave way to pure joy, as when a handicapped daughter speaks first words and then sentences. We became more and more aware of the fact that learning abilities were present in force. There were also times when two weary parents would sit force-feeding a sleepy baby. There were times when countless hours were spent by a young father adapting and modifying all sorts of things in hope that his

daughter would be able to use them "normally." There were times when patience was put to the test by those trying to understand Kristi's speech, as well as by Kristi herself in having to repeat something just once more for them. Maybe that is how best to understand the handicapped and their troubles, their experience coping, the social difficulties they encounter. Then perhaps, understanding, we as parents and others close to the situation will gain insights and be able to look for ways to improve their situation or to give advice.

Put yourself for a moment into the body of someone like our daughter. You may find that even the thought of movement may be tiring – knowing that to do anything takes work and at times special planning. Your eye can see a task to be performed, the brain gives the proper command, but the hand that is sent to do the task misses its mark. All concentration is now focused and the hand comes nearer and nearer still. Every inch it travels accurately is triumph, for the object is almost in grasp. There, contact. "No hand, don't squeeze so hard," the mind signals, "now more... now less" – too late, the page of the new Sunday School Bible is now wrinkled. But, at least it is turned. Now it's time to eat. "I've been sitting here since school got out. That's been two hours now. My legs! They're stiff. They usually are that way, but now they need to be stretched and they hardly cooperate. There. We're off. Move the feet. Move the walker. Um... supper looks good. Yes, Lord, do bless this food. I do need the strength."

Eating is accomplished best with a tool called a "spork" – half fork, half spoon. The same eye, brain, and hand control is needed as with our Bible page... but now figure in one sharp spork and one tender mouth. If the arm is laid on the table, the tool can be filled, and if the mouth is brought closer: "There, hand, tip the spork; no, not that far. It'll all fall off! But I'll try again. Maybe this time.... There, supper is finished. Better clean up. That slice of bread with jelly on it sure squashed easily, even though I did my best. Those old fingers just weren't cooperating.... Time to leave for catechism? We'd better hurry? Seems I'm always last. Dad, be careful with me on those church basement steps. I know, you've done this many times. But if my foot should not respond on cue or you should lose your balance (I'm not the little girl I used to be) we'll both fall down the stairs like Mom and I did that time at home.... There, home again. Just a little more typing and the homework will be

finished. Sure glad this machine has a guard over the keys or it would be impossible to 'write' at all. Special friends of mine, one of whom is in heaven awaiting his perfect body, once bought me a computer which helps me a lot too. Some of these new inventions make new things possible for someone with physical difficulties."

When it's time for bed, the teeth present one of the last challenges of the day. This time, added to the hand, eye, and mouth coordination is the dimension of standing, holding, and balancing by a bathroom sink. A helping hand is usually needed and welcome.

"Ahhhh. . . relax." No effort to sleeping. The body can relax and, in the bliss of unconsciousness, strength is restored.

For the child of God who is handicapped, the problems, struggles, and frustrations of this life are small when compared to the glory which shall be revealed in them. The new heavens and earth for them will be far more glorious than for those who know not their kinds of struggles. For the present, too, they are blessed far greater than we often realize. While life takes its ever-quickening pace and carries us along with it, a handicapped person has time to reflect. Has time to commune with God as most of us cannot. The earthly goals, the enjoyment of this world's pleasures, and the accumulation of its treasures mean far, far less to them, partly because they are dependent rather than independent. But also, God has chosen to reveal His power in the handicapped child in a special way. We may see patience manifested in their lives. We see in them how we who have our full strength should live each day out of the hand of God. These members of Christ's body are necessary for these reasons, we believe, but also so that the other members of the body may exercise more care for these seemingly weaker members. Then God will be glorified fully through their presence in His church.

Rev. John Heys once wrote this regarding our exceptional children: "What is more, we are given such children — and by we it must be understood that they are the children of the whole congregation, the whole church of God — so that we may have the opportunity of exerting exceptional efforts, and of performing spiritual works of unusual intensity to train them in the fear of God's name. These are efforts which we do not perform on our other children. And for our exceptional efforts we receive a reward of grace in the day of Christ, which would not be ours had we not been given these children.

"Yes, in that light we can be

thankful for having been given from God the gift of exceptional patience and submission to God's will. We learn to trust Him more fully for our salvation, looking to the day when they, as well as we, are completely delivered from the curse by the cross and return to our Lord Jesus Christ."

Kristi is now enrolled at Covenant Christian High School, Walker, Michigan, where she is mainstreamed as a tenth grader. With joy she is pursuing her studies in hopes of continuing her education at a college level.

FEATURE

The Moelkers, in the preceding article, made reference to "mainstreaming." The idea there is of course that the particular handicapped student finds it possible to attend "regular" classes in a "regular" school. Kristi could do that. Students with other kinds of impairment, however, are not able to function in the "main stream." Something "special" must therefore be provided for these "special" children. In the article that follows, Deane Wassink, a teacher at our Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, tells about what the Board of the Society for Protestant Reformed Special Education (of which he is a member) is doing to make provision for that. Do you know what an EMI room is? Heritage has one. To learn all about it, from a man who has long had an interest in Special Ed, read on.

Protestant Reformed Special Education

Deane Wassink

Covenant children come in every shape, size, and ability. We have in our midst a number of children who are not able to handle everything in a regular classroom. In the past, these children have not been able to function in our schools. They have had to go to the public school system for their education. Now we have begun to help these children in our own schools.

Our Christian school system as a whole stands on the principle that