

Dear Candidate,

You've read our materials about our church vision and mission. You're considering a calling to Third. I want to take just a moment and address an area that isn't readily seen in some of the documents you've read.

I want to talk about disability ministries at Third Reformed Church.

As you probably know, if we live long enough, we'll all encounter disability firsthand. And so "disability ministries" is really, simply, ministry to all of us. Third embodies that.

I share here the experience within the congregation of our first-grade son. Before he hit his due date, he had inherited or acquired a multitude of mostly invisible disabilities and medical complexities. We came to Third, in large part, for him.

The list for him is long. He was born four months early, a "preivable" miracle. That early birth caused him to be medically complex, with mild damage to the neuro-processing center of his brain not unlike cerebral palsy. Neurological differences also (and not surprisingly for a male born 17 weeks early) include ADHD and high functioning autism. Add to that a genetic disorder (Usher Syndrome) that is the leading cause of adult deafblindness, and a genetic kidney disorder, and he's got a lot going on.

What do we see at Third that draws us here, when other churches in the area have active disability ministries? Here our son isn't funneled into a special program. The caring isn't outsourced to a few people. At a past church this was the approach, and he felt it. He knew that he didn't belong and never would belong. His "intervener" (a title used for someone who helps a visually impaired and hard of hearing child to gain equal access to information) was about to graduate from college, and she was his only person. He'd be left, again, alone. He felt "other."

Kids here know he's a little peculiar. But it's a small community and they still know him. Some even really and genuinely like him for all his silliness and disruptions. He may not be able to talk about emotions readily, but he feels them, and he notices. He knows that he's got a pal or two here willing to play tag and explore the church with him. He knows it's ok to be himself. He knows he belongs. And as a result, his defenses are coming down. He's starting to feel loved and welcomed. He's starting to think church and God just might be for him. The technology implemented for the older folks in our congregation – the loop system for hearing aids and the TV in the library to stream the service – also make the church accessible to my child.

We used to be at a church with a program that allowed us to leave our son at Sunday School and have adult Sunday School with each other. Now, because there is no one else, his dad or I act as the "intervener" in Sunday School and there is no such respite. And yet we wouldn't trade it. We are known and loved here, and that makes a world of a difference.

The most attractive thing about Third isn't a program or a philosophy, it's that God is working in the people here, and that those people truly care.

Thanks for prayerfully considering our congregation.

With Warm Regards,

Laura McMullen