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*Caring*  
Relationships

*Helping People  
with Mental Impairments  
Understand God's Gift of Sexuality*

Ronald C. Vredeveld

# *Caring* Relationships

*Helping People  
with Mental Impairments  
Understand God's Gift of Sexuality*

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CRC Publications  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Preface

Since assuming my administrative role with Friendship Ministries four years ago, I have received numerous phone calls from teachers and pastors asking about the topics included in this book. Often I too was puzzled about how to answer certain questions about sexuality or to whom I should look for advice. Everything I found was written for caregivers and from a very secular point of view.

The concept that sexuality is a gift from God—given to people with mental impairments just as it is to everyone else—was never mentioned in the materials. That’s the focus of Ron Vredeveld’s ministry. For more than twenty years, Ron has served as coordinator of ministry for the Association of Interfaith Ministry, a program for people with mental impairments. Because of his wealth of experience, Ron is one of those people I use as a mentor for knotty questions. About ten years ago, Ron wrote a paper about the topic of sexuality and people with mental impairments, and it helped to formulate my role as a Friendship teacher. The guiding principles that Ron outlined in his paper and that serve as a foundation for this book have helped me in dealing with students who need my caring relationship to develop a healthy sense of their own sexuality.

It is my hope that you will find biblically based answers to your own questions in this book and that you will be challenged to build caring relationships with people with mental impairments to enrich both your life and theirs.

—Nella Uitvlugt  
Executive Director,  
Friendship Ministries

# Introduction

When I was asked to write this guidebook about helping people with mental impairments understand God's gift of sexuality, I was honored. As I began to think about this task, I realized I was overwhelmed. About that same time, the book *Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters with Intellectual Disabilities* (Karin Melberg Schwier and Dave Hingsburger, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2000) came in the mail. Inspired by the authors' expertise, yet recognizing a need for a Christian perspective, my task became more specific.

## Suggested Resource

Although not written from a Christian perspective, Schwier and Hingsburger's book *Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters with Intellectual Disabilities* is full of valuable insights and helpful information for parents and others who offer love and guidance to people with mental impairments. Copies are available from CRC Publications (1-800-333-8300 or [www.crcpublications.org](http://www.crcpublications.org)).

It is my intent in this book to direct those of you in caring relationships with people with mental impairments to the work of experts like Schwier and Hingsburger and then to guide you through the process of dealing with difficult questions about sexuality from a biblical perspective. I've targeted my thinking toward four key groups of people who can meet this challenge, and I want to begin with an encouraging word to each of these groups.

## To Parents and Siblings

You were, and may still be, the initial caregivers for your family member. Over the years, you have likely dealt with numerous changes in attitudes, caregiving practices, legal rights, and so on. As you cope with issues of sexuality and marriage, I ask you to find people in your faith community or within the community at large who can support you, listen to your concerns, and help you face these challenging changes. I encourage you to read Schwier and Hingsburger's book, drawing from the experience of other families who face similar challenges.

## To Christian Care Providers

You serve in a variety of settings with an equal array of responsibilities. In our changing society, you face sexuality-related issues that may demand changes in the way you provide care, that may challenge your understanding

of Christian morality, and that may fill you with fear for the future. I ask you to value and respect the people you serve as you help them face their questions about sexuality and relationships, particularly marriage. May you continue to be guided by your faith in God and by your love for those in your care.

### **To Those in Teaching Ministry**

If you're involved in a teaching ministry like Friendship Ministries, undoubtedly you've experienced God's blessing on your relationship with a person with mental impairments. Most likely your purpose in getting involved was to enrich the spiritual life of your friend. You probably never expected the questions and challenges about relationships, sexual behavior, and morality. I ask you to stay with your friend so that he or she can continue to experience God's love through you. You will make a difference in this person's life.

### **To Pastors and Those in Pastoral Care**

You are the spiritual leaders of your faith community, a community that includes persons with mental impairments. You have the responsibility to love and honor these people and to respect them in the same way you do the rest of the members of your faith community. Your pastoral care can be enhanced by working with parents, caregivers, and those in teaching ministry who have experience and expertise working with people with mental impairments. I ask you to team together so that within your faith community persons with mental impairments who have questions about sexuality or who face personal struggles will receive spiritual direction that communicates the love of God.

It has been my observation and experience that, regardless of our role or relationship, helping a person with mental impairments understand God's gift of sexuality is a challenge. It's a challenge we need not face alone, and that is why this book is offered as a helping hand.

—Ronald C. Vredeveld  
Coordinator of Ministry,  
Interfaith Ministries



# Real-Life Questions

People with mental impairments and the people who love them have questions about sexuality, marriage, and morality. Hundreds of stories could be told, but let me share just three real-life situations that illustrate some of the key questions that prompted the writing of this guidebook.

## Personal Stories

### *Could It Be Rape?*

Joan, a Friendship Ministries leader, was concerned about Susan, one of the members of the group with whom she had developed a strong relationship over the past year. Susan had told Joan some time ago that Tom, another member of the group, had done something that she did not want to talk about. Joan didn't want to think that anything could be wrong, but she continued to ask Susan about what was going on in her life. One evening when Susan was leaving the Friendship meeting, Susan told Joan that she wanted to talk to her alone. Susan told Joan that Tom had "touched her, poked her, and hurt her." Joan was quite sure that Susan had been raped, but she wasn't sure what to do.

### *Will You Marry Us?*

Bill and Janelle participated in a weekly Bible study for people with mental impairments held at Pastor Bob's church and regularly attended worship services. Over the years, Pastor Bob had gotten to know them well, yet he was surprised when Bill and Janelle asked him to marry them. Questions flew through his mind: What should he say or do? Should he contact their parents? What about premarital counseling? Does the state even allow them to get married?

### *What About Living Together?*

Nancy and Peter, residents of a group home, had become special friends. Most of the other residents and the staff called them "sweethearts." Nancy and Peter talked a lot about having their own apartment, and one of the caregivers had encouraged the idea since the two got along so well. Peter really loved Nancy, but he thought they could only live together if they were married. Nancy wasn't sure. To whom could they talk? Whom could they trust to give them good advice?

Each of these three scenarios is different, but they are equally complex. How would you respond to them? What guidance would you give? How would you deal with the confusing, even contradictory, information that you would

gather? Our answers must take into account our beliefs about who and how people can agree to be sexually intimate, our understanding of the individual personalities and life situations of those involved, and our ability and willingness to navigate the complex landscape of moral decision-making.

## **Shaping a Christian Response**

When people with mental impairments experience love and acceptance in their faith community as part of the body of Christ, they will bring their challenging real-life questions to those who have celebrated God's goodness with them. As they come with these questions, we are reminded of how we face new issues and struggles in our own lives. We talk with a friend, with a person who cares deeply about us, or with our pastor. The support we receive enables us to find some answers and decide what to do. It gives us the courage to walk on. These caring relationships are reminders of the love of God, our caring parent.

Your reflection on the information and perspective presented in the following chapters will enable you to care and guide more effectively as you help people with mental impairments shape their own Christian response to the questions they ask. Chapter 2 offers a biblical perspective on sexuality while chapter 3 reflects on the dimensions of caring relationships within a faith community. Chapter 4 deals with the issue of sexual abuse. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on relationships with family and other significant people and within marriage. The final chapter provides a model for the support a faith community can offer a married couple who have mental impairments.

Together, let's shape a Christian response to the real-life questions surrounding sexuality and people with mental impairments.