

A father's delight

By Jennifer McClure

The girl screamed and cried, not wanting to get off the last school bus for special-needs passengers. Nothing the aides said could convince her to budge. Finally an aide resorted to carrying her off. Once on the sidewalk, she spotted a familiar face — Ben Hittenberger.

Tears flowing steadily, the girl walked over and stood directly in front of Ben. Though loud noises and emotional distress can be unsettling for him, Ben simply reached out his arms and hugged her. Standing next to Ben, Jeff Hittenberger watched as the girl relaxed and stopped crying in his son's embrace.

It was the first day at Newhart Middle School in Mission Viejo, Calif., for both Ben and the girl. Jeff had wondered how his son, who has Down syndrome and autism, would handle the transition to middle school and how he'd react in this kind of situation.

"Ben has taught me that it is through inadequacy that God's power is expressed," Jeff says.

Jeff, Christine and Brianne Hittenberger agree — though Ben's language and social skills are limited, he exemplifies God's love every day.

"I love and adore Ben," says 13-year-old sister Brianne. "He's possibly the sweetest guy I've ever met."

Jeff and Christine Hittenberger had been married two years when they welcomed their firstborn into the world. It had been a



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healthy pregnancy, and at birth Ben seemed fine.

But four months later, Ben was diagnosed with Down syndrome.

"I felt like a truck had run over me," says Christine. "I was so overwhelmed with everything. We had to die to our own ideas, our own expectations and our own perceptions of what his life might be."

Not only did they have to let go of their expectations for Ben's future but also for their own. Having both grown up in Assemblies of God missionary families — Jeff in Haiti and Christine in Africa — they thought it very possible they too might live and work internationally.

"Once Ben was born, we realized we needed to be in a place where he could receive the special education services not available in most other nations," Jeff says. "So it really changed the trajectory of our lives."

Christine, turning her attention to Ben's needs, left her teaching career for early intervention therapy sessions with Ben. Jeff

continued working full time as a high school history teacher in Santa Ana, Calif., while working on his doctoral dissertation through the University of Southern California.

Twenty-one months after Ben was born, Christine gave birth to Brianne. To help make ends meet in their southern California setting, Jeff began teaching evening classes at local colleges.

For his first two years, Ben had been progressing well developmentally, but shortly after Brianne was born, he regressed suddenly. Soon after, he was diagnosed with autism, a condition some experts believe affects as many as 10 percent of the estimated 350,000 persons with Down syndrome in the United States.

"Other people see Ben's condition as a tragedy, but it's not," Christine says. "We live in this broken world, and we're just as disabled as Ben is. It's just that we can pull off looking normal and Ben can't."

Living expenses, the stress of raising two young children, Jeff's two jobs and Christine's countless

hours of therapy sessions with Ben began to take a toll. The weight of it all, Jeff says, was monumental and reached a breaking point when Ben was 3.

"We often say our first marriage ended in failure," Jeff says. "Fortunately God gave us a new start, largely by helping me realize I was going to have to think really differently about my life."

This different way of thinking included curtailing his workaholic tendencies and focusing more on Christine, Ben and Brianne. In doing so, Jeff realized his identity had been closely tied to his accomplishments and dreams.

"I wanted to do great things for God," Jeff says. "But I realized that my identity had to have a stronger foundation than my achievements, and that stronger foundation ultimately is God's love."

Jeff and Christine say they know God has entrusted them with the gifts of Ben and Brianne. For Jeff in particular, who now serves as director of graduate studies at Evangel University, those relationships have greatly impacted his understanding of God's love for us as our Heavenly Father.

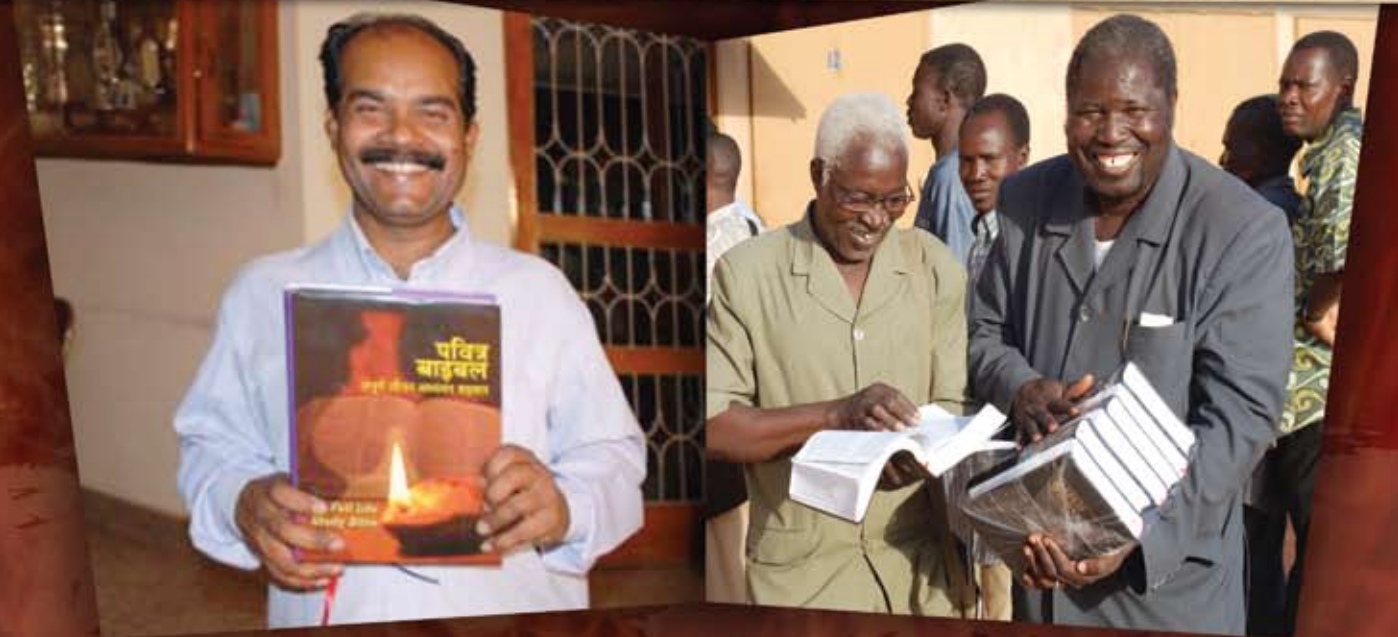
"The profound father-child bond I've experienced with Ben and Brianne has helped me understand at a much deeper level the way God feels about all of us," Jeff says. "In Ben's powerlessness, God's love and power are expressed. Our kids need us to say what the Father said of Jesus: 'You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" **tpe**

JENNIFER McCLURE is assistant editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and blogs at *Going Up?* (jmcclure.agblogger.org).

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Ben, Christine, Jeff and Brianne Hittenberger

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