



The Digital Divide Is a Justice Issue

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I live in a suburb fifteen miles west of downtown Cleveland. Upon moving into my house, I noticed that the cellular service in the area is not that great, such that I require Wi-Fi access to use my cell phone at home. This need for internet access for cell phone use was one of the motivations for purchasing an internet plan for my home three months after moving in. I bought the highest tier of service and was glad I did when I began working from home daily because of office closings due to COVID-19. In the months working from home, internet access has been a challenge. The service has gone out during the day. The assumption is that I can then get on my cell phone to participate on calls. I cannot. Cell service is too weak.

My perspective—though emerging from a place where I can afford to pay for internet access, and have three computers, two tablets, smart televisions, and a host of internet dependent devices—has afforded me a glimpse into the widening digital divide and the need for internet access to be addressed as an emerging justice issue. My internet worries are at best an inconvenience, while for many, the lack of access to internet has far more serious consequences.

When they were closed as a result of the pandemic, schools around the world relied heavily on a variety of videoconferencing platforms to continue having classes daily. But few questions were asked about how children would attend in this new way. Laptops and internet access were requirements not all could meet. Some schools provided computers for their students, but in poorer communities this was not always possible. By current estimates, [two-thirds of the world's school age children do not have internet access.](#)

As the world continues to embrace digital technologies requiring internet access as a primary option for work, education, and living, there is a significant portion of the global community who will continue to fall behind because they will be unable to cross the widening digital divide and keep up with the digitally privileged. There is a call for closing this gap. Here in the United States and around the world, there is the recognition that not all have the ability to access social media at will or utilize search tools to satisfy every curious thought emerging in solace or from group conversations.

Most recently, the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) issued its position on "[net neutrality and broadband](#)" to stop the growth of the digital divide. NBCI made addressing the internet access gap a priority, noting the intersectionality of this issue with race in the United States: "This question breaks down to race simply because the income to purchase new technologies is not readily available to minorities based upon the perpetual unemployment that engulfs the African American community."

As more employers afford their staff the opportunity to work from home, those without internet access will be left behind, as will millions of students who are already vulnerable and on the margins because of poverty and other social indicators.

The United Church of Christ must add these concerns to the list of justice concerns priorities being addressed. The church has a part to play in ensuring equal access for all to quality, affordable internet. UCC Media Justice has been advocating for affordable internet for all. Their campaign [Love Your Neighbor: Get Them Internet](#) is an opportunity for churches to get involved in advocacy, awareness and education.

Closing the digital divide means the church will also need to evaluate and balance the requirements for participating in events, whether it be worship, meetings, or special events. There are many who are being excluded by the continued prioritization of virtual meetings as we emerge into post-pandemic realities that rely heavily on internet access for meaningful participation.

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