



A Call for the Church to Disability Justice

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Thirty-three years ago on July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. This historic civil rights law protects the rights of people with disabilities and helps break down barriers to increase inclusion and accessibility. Disability justice is part of the United Church of Christ's mission to build a just world for all.

Born with Cerebral Palsy, Virginia Kreyer experienced a call from God to ministry and answered that call. She graduated from Union Theological Seminary and was ordained by the American Baptist Church, but their local churches would not call her to be a pastor. Then in 1967, Virginia joined Garden City UCC in New York and found a home in the UCC. She began organizing a committee concerned with issues around disability and the church. Working together, they brought a resolution to the New York Conference and then took it to the General Synod. The founding of the UCC Disabilities Ministries was inspired by this resolution from the 11th General Synod in 1977.

This was a transformative moment for both Virginia and the UCC. Soon after, she joined the national staff supporting local churches to become accessible and welcoming for people with disabilities. In 2007, Virginia was honored by the Antoinette Brown Society and her legacy is memorialized through the [Virginia Kreyer Endowed Scholarship Fund for persons with disabilities called to authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ](#).

Virginia wrote, "Cannot we, persons with disabilities, nondisabilities, people of color, and persons from different cultures, compare our lives to a patchwork quilt? Each one of us is a unique human being. No two of us are exactly alike. For instance, no two people have the same fingerprints. And we all have abilities and disabilities. Some people's disabilities are very visible, while other people have invisible disabilities that we may

never know about unless we are told. These may be mental, emotional, or physical. Each one of us has strengths of one form or another that we need to put to use for our own fulfillment, for the good of others, and to the glory of God.”

The Rev. Dr. Harold Wilke, UCC minister and disability activist, was present when President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. One of the areas included in the ADA is for employers to provide reasonable accommodation and adjustments to the job or work environment that enable the person to perform their job.

Although religious organizations are exempt from complying with the ADA, in 1995 the UCC adopted a resolution calling upon the UCC to be [Accessible to All \(A2A\)](#). This resolution called for the church at all levels to be morally bound by the spirit of the ADA. In addition, “Accessible to All” was added to the vision statement of the United Church of Christ.

As we reflect on the UCC’s commitment to disability justice, what does it look like for the church to make reasonable accommodations for its authorized ministers? How can congregations support pastors and institutions support chaplains with physical and mental health disabilities? As we navigate the continuing impacts of the pandemic, including the increase in people living with disabilities, what does this mean for us as a church?

As the UCC, we choose love even when the law says we don’t have to. Loving our neighbors with disabilities is not part of the ADA, but it is part of the FCA, “following Christ’s actions.” Jesus acted with love, especially towards people experiencing oppression and discrimination.

Love expands inclusion. Love widens the welcome. Love makes the table bigger. Love opens the doors wider. Love is a ramp into the heart of the divine. Love is an elevator to the highest realms of the holy. Love embodies all minds and bodies. Love rolls down like justice. Love celebrates disabilities as part of the body of Christ.

At the 34th General Synod, the UCC Disabilities Ministries announced its newest scholarship fund: The [Fannie Lou Hamer Scholarship Fund for Disabled Theologians of Color](#) supports disabled theologians of color in reaching their educational goals and engaging in theological work. By supporting these theologians, this scholarship will enrich the church through increased awareness of the intersections of race and disability in theology. This is good news to celebrate on this 33rd anniversary of the ADA. May the church reclaim our calling to share the love of God, the compassion of Christ, and the inclusivity of the Spirit with all bodies and

minds in our beloved community.

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