



SHINE, GOD'S PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY GIFTED IN MIND AND BODY

We are a church accessible to all



“I praise you, for I am fearfully
and wonderfully made.”

— *Psalm 139:14*

LIGHT A CANDLE

Generous and Loving God,
You created all in your image.
We are grateful you make all your children beautiful.
Thank you.

Generous and Loving God,
You give to all wonderful gifts to share.
Teach us to be both followers and leaders,
innovators and keepers of tradition,
shining stars and quiet reflectors.
Please guide us to be the best
we can be for all your church.

Generous and Loving God,
You show us the way to be whole and holy.
We are grateful and willing to risk everything
to include all your people in your Good News.
Amen.

IN SILENCE, PRAYERFULLY REFLECT on what it means to be made in God's image.

- » What are distinctive gifts that you bring to the church?
- » What does it mean to be a “whole and holy person”?
- » What is your personal experience with disabilities?

A SHINING MOMENT

The day is July 26, 1990. Imagine joining with a large crowd of disability advocates gathered under the summer's sun at the Rose Garden of the White House. On this day, you celebrate the signing of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) into law. One of our UCC pastors, Harold Wilke, has been asked to pray at the event. Recognized worldwide for his activism and advocacy for those with disabilities, he was the first to chair the UCC's Advisory Committee on the Church and the Handicapped in 1977. He was a profound witness to what is best about who we are and what we do.

Now the important day has come — from days of advocacy to a day of action. Wilke prays the following powerful prayer, but what reduces the crowd to laughter and tears of joy is the moment President George H. W. Bush signs the great civil rights act and hands the pen to Harold Wilke. Harold, a strong man — who is armless and ever so comfortable in his own skin — takes the pen with his toes and utters a hearty “God Bless.” These are the words that Wilke offered to God on that momentous day:

*The festivals of the religious year
show forth new meanings for access and liberation:
In the glory of Easter – the stone rolled away –
we see the barrier removed.
In the wonder of Pentecost the message is heard
understood, and seen by all.
In the liberation of Passover the message is:
“Let My People Go!” and the parting of the Red Sea.
In the joy of Advent, God embodies divinity in human
form.
Yet for many persons today –
who are blind or deaf or have mental retardation
or who are in wheelchairs –
the barriers still remain.
The stone is still in place.
The waters are not parted, the way not opened.*



Harold Wilke (back left) looks on as President George Bush signs the Americans with Disabilities Act into law.

*The words cannot be heard.
The flame of the Spirit's tongues cannot be seen,
the message not understood.
Proclaiming the message in all languages for today
means using technology or larger print
for people with visual disabilities,
signing or special sound systems for persons
with hearing disabilities,
image, color, and drama for
people with cognitive disabilities,
architectural access for
people with physical disabilities or who are getting older.
Let the stone be rolled away!
Let the glorious message be proclaimed truly, in all
languages
So all may hear and understand!¹*



“FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE UCC UNTIL NOW, we have come to know that an extravagant welcome honoring the fullness of God’s image in the lives of those the world sees as limited and handicapped, disturbed, or disturbing also requires a conversion of heart.”

— *John H. Thomas, general minister and president, United Church of Christ*

OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT

Since the creation of the United Church of Christ, the denomination has engaged in dialogue with the major social issues of the day. By the mid 1970s, persons with disabilities and their allies advocated a commitment for the church to become accessible and inclusive — as Christ envisioned. Wounded soldiers were returning from Vietnam. Good medical care saved lives, but many were now disabled. People with developmental disabilities and mental illness were no longer always removed from society. People who had been born with disabilities refused to be ignored. Increasingly, it was evident that such people were usually not welcome in our churches, unable to enter the buildings, and, if recognized, were seen as objects of ministry rather than as vital members of congregations.

Leadership for becoming “a church accessible to all” emerged from people in the UCC who themselves had a disability. The Reverend Dr. Harold Wilke, the first executive of the Council for Church and Ministry (the predecessor of today’s Local Church Ministries’ Parish Life and Leadership Ministry), developed an inter-faith religious organization called the Caring Community. The organization assisted congregations to welcome those who had been alienated by the church — including, but not exclusively, persons with disabilities. Wilke, who was born without arms, was raised to believe that he would live a full life. He and his family challenged educational systems throughout college, seminary, and graduate school. He served as a local

pastor, a chaplain during World War II, and an administrator before heading a UCC national instrumentality.

Another leader is the Reverend Virginia Kreyer who was born with cerebral palsy. She, too, was raised to live to her full potential. A graduate from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, she established a task force for exceptional people in the Metropolitan Association of the New York Conference of the UCC. The task force brought a resolution to the New York Conference and then to the eleventh General Synod in 1977.

The resolution passed and the church committed to: (1) recognize the distinguished contributions persons with disabilities are making to society (2) be aware of the suffering of persons with disabilities due to rejection and insufficient support (3) be aware of the wealth of new understandings about societal attitudes to persons with disabilities (4) observe that a direct result of our high-risk technological society is increasing the number of persons with disabilities, and (5) affirm a positive attitude and behavioral response to persons with disabilities.

Over the years, other General Synods have taken other actions. Resolutions have called for justice for persons with mental illness and brain disorders; affirmed the calling of clergy with disabilities; expressed continuing support for the American Disabilities Act; and, as recently as 2005, renewed the commitment to wholeness in Christ and to becoming a church accessible to all.²

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

All UCC congregations can become accessible. To become welcoming and inclusive of persons with disabilities is much more than having proper ramps and elevators — although they are really important! Full inclusion is a spiritual attitude as well. It is about education. It is about striving to make church inviting to all people. It is about overcoming fear, and about taking risks. Full inclusion of people with disabilities in a congregation means that all people will share their gifts. Inclusion requires trusting God's presence in the lives of all God's people. From person to person, gifts vary — yet all are needed and celebrated.

As a local congregation, reflect on questions as these:

- » In what ways does God profoundly speak through the gifts of persons with disabilities?

- » If your church was completely accessible to all, what difference would it make?
- » What ways is your church already welcoming to people with disabilities?
- » What barriers exist to true inclusion of persons with disabilities in your church?

Share with the wider UCC your discoveries and hopes for a church accessible to all. Go online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions> and complete these questions:

- » What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a church accessible to all?
- » What hope does your congregation have for the wider UCC's future as a church accessible to all?

¹ Harold Wilke, "Signs of Liberation and Access," *Any Body, Everybody, Christ's Body: A Congregational Guide for Becoming Accessible to All*, edited by Jo Claire Hartsig, available online at <www.uccdm.org/A2A/anybody.pdf>.

² For texts of General Synod resolutions related to disabilities, visit <www.uccdm.org/menu.html>.

*This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Margaret Slater, minister for diversity and inclusion, Parish Life and Leadership Ministry, Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio. For more information on accessibility ministries visit online <www.uccdm.org> and "What Matters" at <www.uccvitality.org>. See also *Any Body, Everybody, Christ's Body*. This congregational study guide provides theological background and hands-on tools for all age groups. It can be found at <[uccdm.org](http://www.uccdm.org)>. For more information call 866.822.8224, extension 3838.*