

*Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles....Isaiah 40:31 [nrsv]*

# Wings

A FAITHLETTER FOR, BY AND ABOUT  
UNITED METHODISTS WITH DISABILITIES

Fall 2000—Vol. 11 Issue 2 No. 42

to spend too much or change too much?

True accessibility is also a matter of theological perspective, of seeing those of us who are disabled not as either cursed or sanctified by God but as called, as all members of Christ's body are called, to be instruments of God's will using our varied spiritual gifts in his service.

When I was a little girl of about 10, I decided to read the Bible straight through from beginning to end (I was truly a different child). My mother pointed out to me one verse in the New Testament that she said all "real" Methodists believed: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* [John 3:16 KJV].

God loved the *world*—not just the rich but also the poor, not just the Anglo but also the Latino, not just the able-bodied and the able-minded but also the physically and mentally limited. In return God expects us to love each other and to carry out

together what Paul calls "*the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their*

*trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us*" [2 Corinthians 5:18-19 NRSV].

The question then is not how much accessibility can the church afford to provide, but rather, can the church afford to deny anyone full accessibility to membership in Christ's Body? Without its full complement of members, the body, the church, is in itself disabled, seeing with only one eye, hearing with only one ear, limping along on only one leg. The church becomes whole in the same way that each of its members becomes whole—in the saving, reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ.

In that saving, reconciling love we learn that we are all different and all the same, that we give to each other and receive from each other, and that most of all we help each other as members to grow into the full maturity of faith in the Body of Christ.



## FROM WHERE I SIT By Jo D'Archangelis

*(Editor's Note: The following is a pared-down version of a lay sermon given at the United Methodist Church of Calexico, Calif., on Disability Awareness Sunday, November 1994.)*

At the church in Corinth during Paul's time, there seems to have been a dispute going on as to which of the "spiritual gifts" was most revealing of the Holy Spirit or most necessary to the church's ministry. Paul, whose chief task at times seems to have been settling arguments and mediating between factions in the early church, cuts to the heart of the matter. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he says that even though there are many gifts, they are all given by one God through one Holy Spirit, and that's what's important.

The church, Paul goes on to say, is the Body of Christ and each Christian a member of that Body: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit* [1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NRSV].

Carrying this analogy to a logical absurdity, Paul asks, Can the eye say that because it isn't an ear, the body doesn't need it? Can the hand say that because it isn't the head, it is of no use to the body? Of course not. Likewise, no member can doubt his or her importance to the church.

Every gift from God, and by extension everybody who is God-gifted, is necessary to the life of the church. Since we are all God-gifted, we are all necessary to the life of the church, no matter how different we may appear. Blind, deaf, mute, on crutches or in braces, in wheelchairs, slow in thought

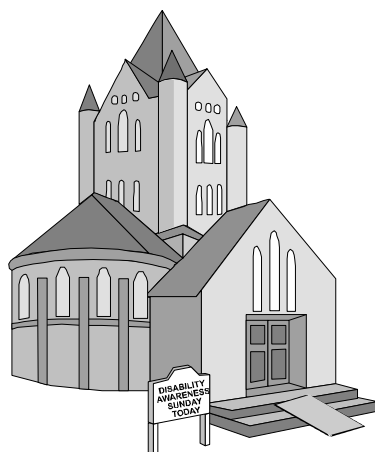
or speech, non-disabled, temporarily able-bodied, or pre-disabled—in whatever condition we are or by whatever politically correct or incorrect name we are called, we are all essential to the church's ministry

**The question then is not how much accessibility can the church afford to provide, but rather, can the church afford to deny anyone full accessibility to membership in Christ's Body?**

of manifesting God's love and grace to the world.

The United Methodist Church calls itself an "inclusive" church. Although it's debatable how inclusive the church really is, at least the value of diversity within the church is generally recognized. To those of us who are disabled, inclusiveness translates into the word *accessibility*—physical, social, psychological, and spiritual accessibility. The problem is, while it's easy to pay lip service to something like accessibility, putting it into action can be a whole other thing.

It's not just a matter of the church changing steps into ramps—it's a matter of adopting new attitudes; of asking, How can we minister more effectively to each other? instead of asking, How can we help these poor unfortunate creatures without having



## Does Your Church Celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday?



## OUR READERS ON WINGS AND OTHER THINGS

*(Editor's Note: Readers' communications published in Wings are subject to alteration in regard to grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, length, and the whims of the editor.)*

### SHAYA AND JOHN WESLEY

As one pastor who has used the story of Shaya on Easter morning this year, I found your analysis of it a bit harsh [Wings, Summer 2000].

As you mention in your column, "I really have problems with [the father's] emphasis on perfection." Perfection is an interesting theological concept. John Wesley wrote about Christian Perfection but not so eloquently as to be persuasive.

As I have struggled with this idea for some time, I think what Wesley meant to say was: We all need to be moving toward Christian Perfection. This perfection is actually achievable in moments when we offer ourselves in selfless, God-like love. But it is not sustainable for long; we are too human and too selfish. Even the vanity of feeling good about an act of selfless love steals the moment from us. But "We are going on to perfection" is still one of the strongest statements of the Methodist Church.

In the story, the boys on the field in one brief selfless moment share the joy of playing baseball with Shaya. Do they manipulate the play? Sure. Do they enjoy helping Shaya? Yes! Is it good clean fun that they can all enjoy? Yep. Is it perfection? Yes.

The story the father told was his way of grasping at the blessings of his

son's condition. Does he have a lot more work to do? Sure, without doubt. But it is his story and his growth and that is not a bad thing.

Rev. Steve Petty  
St. Andrew's by the Sea UMC  
San Clemente, California  
RevSteveP@aol.com

### DISABILITY NO BIG DEAL

For most of my experience in the South, disability is a *non-issue* because there are disabled members of most church families. We have granies with walkers, grandpas with wheelchairs, mommas with retarded children, mentally disabled brothers, alcoholic sons, nursing home saints, terminally ill, blind, deaf, crippled and pregnant. It's not that big a deal. I have yet to see a sign, policy, or practice in any church that says "No walkers, wheelchairs, or retarded members of your family."

Disability becoming a significant issue for United Methodists does not seem to be a logical possibility because all UMs and their family members become disabled in time and that usually *before* they lose influence over the affairs of the local church.

The disabled are all members of the church I serve! Even the retarded because they were baptized as children, received communion, and made decisions to receive Christ through confession of faith. Two of the retarded members are adult relatives of present or former members of the church. One is in an adult Sunday school class by

choice and the other in the youth class by choice. One is a member of the UMM and helps serve and pray at the men's prayer breakfast and the other more involved with youth activities. They are made to feel welcome because they are there and related to other members. They are included in terms of what they are willing to contribute.

We have done the same with the deaf. The deaf now teach the youth how to sign. Not because of any program but because a deaf young adult was a member of a church family and received into membership, and the younger youth wanted to know how to sign. Now she is part of our youth program because she was a member and wanted to give something others wanted. No special program or ministry—just a willingness to take the membership vows seriously.\*

Rev. John Warrenner  
Palmyra Road UMC  
Albany, Georgia  
jwarrene@ucmpage.org

### A PECULIAR COMPLIMENT

Have you ever had it said to you as a peculiar kind of compliment, "When I think I have it bad, I think of you and my problems seem like nothing"? I even had an old boyfriend who was going through a divorce call me and say, "I just needed to talk to someone who has it worse than me right now."

Are people really so insensitive that they believe it is proper to use the sufferings of others as some kind of endorphin for themselves? Sure, I have my share of suffering, but I also feel that that is not the totality of who I am. I love to laugh and joke with people. I'm also capable of offering comfort to another—not by sharing that I have it worse than they and so their problems are of no consequence but by showing that I care for them. Yes, their problems are bad and I want them to feel free to share them with me. But if I look upon the suffering of another as something to make me feel better about myself, that's being rather sick.

Jesus suffered more than any of us can ever know. If we need to compare our sufferings with someone else's in order to feel that are problems are not really so bad, then we should compare ourselves to him and not insult our disabled brothers and sisters!

Rev. Dr. Susan Lemly  
Capistrano Beach, California  
RevDoc45@aol.com

\*Originally posted on the Cal-Pac e-mail group list.



A non-official, non-profit quarterly newsletter published for, by and about United Methodist adults with disabling conditions

FOUNDER/EDITOR COMPUTER LAYOUT  
GRAPHIC DESIGN Jo D'Archangelis

**CORRESPONDENCE** Send all correspondence—including original writings, items from other sources, and changes of address—to Jo D'Archangelis, Editor, at **Mailing Address** 592 West Ammunition Road, Apt. 1 Fallbrook, CA 92028 **Telephone/Fax** [760] 723-2668 (please call before faxing) **E-Mail** JODARLIS@aol.com

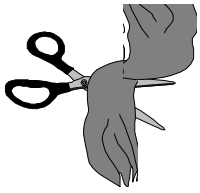
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## UM QUADRIPLAGIC GIFTS HER CROWNING GLORY TO OTHERS

By Terra Temple

**N**ine years ago, Berta Dickerson had the accident that changed her life. In the months that followed, she and her family received an outpouring of love, prayer, and financial assistance that helped them through that difficult time. So when Dickerson learned a few months ago that she could help others, the 43-year-old quadriplegic responded immediately. She cut her hair.

"My hair was too long to manage with the chair," said Dickerson, a member of East Dyersburg [Tenn.] United Methodist Church. "It was down between me and the chair. I wanted to get 6 inches cut off, but I didn't want to throw it away."

She remembered hearing about a place that makes wigs using donated hair—Locks of Love, a non-profit organization that provides hair-pieces for financially disadvantaged children...suffering from long-term medical hair loss [Ed.: See below right for more information].

However, when Dickerson learned the organization accepts a minimum 10 inches of hair, she had to think about it. "I took a month to decide, because I didn't want it short," she said. "I had always gotten compliments on my hair—how healthy it was, its color, its length."

In April she took the plunge. She and her husband, Earl, pastor of the Dyersburg church, visited her hairstylist. "Earl held the ruler, and they cut off a

foot," she said. "He told me that a week later. I didn't want it short, and I got it 2 inches shorter [than I thought I would]."

Dickerson had the accident that left her paralyzed on Jan. 1, 1991, when her family lived in western Kentucky. Several months earlier, Dickerson had accepted the Lord into her life, and her faith proved instrumental in helping

**"In that moment God replayed in Earl's mind the oath he had taken on our wedding day...in sickness and in health...for as long as you both shall live."**

her deal with her injury. Though Dickerson had been a preacher's wife since 1985, it was in name only. "I wouldn't attend Sunday school and made all kinds of excuses to skip church," she said. "My family didn't go to church (when I was growing up)."

She and Earl had met in June, 1984, when she was a licensed practical nurse at Methodist Central Hospital in Memphis, and they were married the following year. Six months later, her daughter, Kari, from a previous marriage came to live with them in Benton, Ky., where Earl was pastor of Pleasant Grove United Methodist Church. Using work and nursing school as excuses, Berta still wouldn't attend church. But after she got her degree and her job changed, the excuses ran out. She began attending more, and in April, 1990, "I accepted the Lord."

"On January 1, 1991, Satan had enough. He wanted us stopped," she add-

-ed. She and Kari, who was 10 at the time, were on their way to meet with Dickerson's prayer group. They were 2-1/2 miles from home. "We were talking, and I missed my turn. I decided to take the next road even though I wasn't familiar with it," Dickerson said. "Suddenly, as we topped a hill, there was a stop sign. I couldn't stop. We went under the trailer of an 18-wheeler..."

The car was so compressed, no one checked for survivors until Dickerson's cousin arrived on the scene. Both Dickerson and Kari were still alive. Kari had cuts that required stitches; Dickerson's neck was broken. In the weeks that followed, Dickerson's neurosurgeon told her husband that, if she lived, she "would be brain-damaged, venti-lator-dependent, and bedridden for life—a vegetable..." Dickerson wrote in her testimony.

"He offered some simple things that could be 'not' done so I would die, quickly and pain-free. In that moment God replayed in Earl's mind the oath he had taken on our wedding day... 'in sickness and in health...for as long as you both shall live.'"

Dickerson said her first memory after the accident was of being in the hospital, and her younger sister, Bobbi, telling her it "would be OK, that God said I would walk again"... In 1992 they learned her spinal cord was still intact but was swollen at the injury site, not severed or shriveled like [sic] they thought.

"We believe God's going to heal me," Dickerson said. In the months and years that have followed, with the care

(CROWNING continued on page 4)

## JOURNEY



As a bird  
struggles through a storm  
then soars on calmer breezes,  
so joy can come to us  
from sorrow given to our God.  
Not a surface-skimming happiness  
vanishing in the gloom,  
not a rigid explanation of the dark,  
joy rests deep within  
as we sense  
Christ travels through the tumult  
with us,  
holds up our weary wings,  
and rejoices with us  
as we rise  
toward home.

— Roberta Porter —

From *Alive Now* [November/December 1999]

- **LOCKS OF LOVE** is a non-profit, Florida-based organization that provides custom-made, vacuum-cap hairpieces to children under 18 who have long-term hair loss due to a medical condition. Begun in 1997, the organization has already helped about 200 children throughout the United States. It accepts hair of any color from males and females of all ages and races.
- Since most of the children it helps are girls who want long hair, minimum donations of 10 inches are requested. Donors arrange their clean, dry hair in a ponytail or braid before cutting (wigs, falls, or synthetic hair are not accepted). The hair bundle is then put into a plastic bag and mailed to the organization. It takes 12 donated pony-tails/braids and 4 months of assembly to make a single hairpiece.
- Locks of Love provides children with the hairpieces and their subsequent maintenance either free of charge or on a sliding scale based on the ability of those responsible for the children to pay. On the commercial market, the same type of custom hairpiece would start at \$3,000.
- For more information about Locks of Love, call [888] 896-1588 or visit [www.locksoflove.org](http://www.locksoflove.org) on the World Wide Web.

## CHURCH ATTITUDES By Gloria Maxson

*(Editor's Note: Wheelchair-borne with the effects of both polio and arthritis, Gloria Maxson referred to herself "as one of America's...disabled or 'sickened-class' citizens" who found the attitudes of the Church towards people with disabilities "subtle and entrenched." Here she categorizes the attitudes she encountered—attitudes she saw as changing "slowly." She wrote this 23 years ago.)*

**OUTRIGHT REJECTION:** The disabled are seated in the back; we are objects of pained and evasive glances; we are victimized by the assumption that we are inept and unable to "do" anything on a committee. In short, the word "INVALID" is mispronounced "inVALid." We need to be known as "valids." When a church member purrs, "I didn't call you, dear, because I wasn't sure you'd feel up to the job," perhaps she is being "kind," but I snarl in my best Mae West voice: "Well, call me up sometimes and ask me, baby—give me the fun of saying No!" We need to develop what Alex Comfort advises for the aged: "Bloody-mindedness"—the spunk to raise hell in order to reveal heaven.

**OVERACCEPTANCE:** When we enter some churches, avid members swarm over us like a plague of locusts, proud of having a resident wreck or token kook to show off their vast liberalism. They betray the "brave little soldier" type of patronage in assuming that we are all unnaturally heroic, with special dispensation for bearing our crosses. We cannot cry out in pain and despair, for we are their "inspiration"—another alienating concept.

**SANCTIMONIOUSNESS AND PIOUS TIRADES:** We have all writhed under the hideous exhortations of the judgmental, who insist that "You don't need that surgery; you need the Savior." Or, "If you had real faith, you'd rise right up out of that chair." To such I send a reference to Matthew 4:5-7, where Satan tempts Jesus to cast himself down on the rocks, claiming God will preserve him, and Jesus refuses to put God to a foolish test. Harsh attitudes add to the burden of the handicapped and make a wheelchair a badge of shame, implying that we lack the courage to rehabilitate ourselves.

**LACK OF OUTREACH:** My church preference is nondenominational, but of all the churches I called for grassroots grace and home help, Jehovah's Witnesses were the only ones to respond. I believe that all churches should offer this same grassroots grace to the handicapped: the one-to-one caring of the truly Christlike community. The Witnesses are doing a basic and important work in society, though they are a much-maligned and misunderstood group.


From the "Speaking Out" column in the September 21, 1977, issue of *Christian Century*

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*(CROWNING continued from page 3)*

 of her family and rehabilitation, Dickerson has become stronger and is able to do things for herself for hours at a time. After an aide comes in to prepare her for the day, she writes on her laptop computer, reads a book or talks on the telephone with the help of her life-line—a stick on the end of her right-hand splint.

"God's really done a work on me," Dickerson said. "I was a new Christian when I had the wreck, and now I'm more able to support him. I love to tell people how good God is. Our lives are normal..." So cutting her hair to donate it to a child was nothing for her. "Hair always grows back," she said. "After going through something that traumatic, doing something for others is a real plus...We were \$330,000 in debt, and it was paid off in a few months because people's love, finances and prayer brought us through."

From a June 29, 2000, United Methodist News Service story published under the title, "United Methodist Donates Once-Long Hair To Help Others," and adapted from a longer story in the Dyersburg, Tenn., *State Gazette*. Temple is features editor of the newspaper.

GOD OF GRACE,  
FIND THE CRACKS  
IN OUR LIVES  
AND ALLOW  
YOUR GRACE  
TO SEEP IN  
UNTIL WE  
BECOME ANOINTED  
WITH GRACE.  
AMEN

*Alive Now* [March/April 1996]



"A Faithletter For United Methodists With Disabilities  
and Those Who Care About Them"

Fallbrook United Methodist Church  
1844 Winterhaven Road  
Fallbrook, CA 92028

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