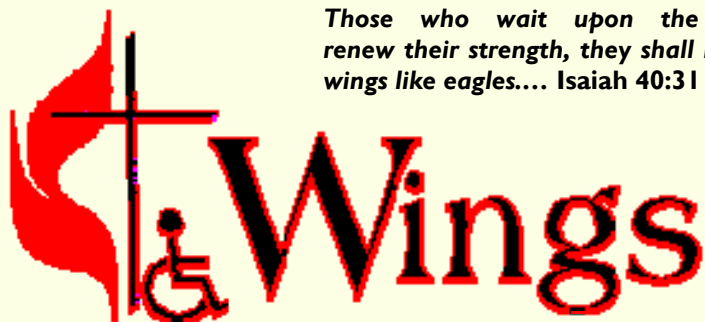


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.... Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)



**A FAITHLETTER FOR UNITED METHODISTS WITH  
DISABILITIES AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM**  
Fall 2006 — Vol. 17 Issue 2 No. 66

## FROM WHERE I SIT: LIGHT-FINGERED METHODISTS AND WANDERING CHAIR COVERS By Jo D'Archangelis

In 2004 the California-Pacific Conference Committee On Disability Concerns instituted a reserved seating program for Annual Conference. Committee members put together 50 denim chair covers to be placed on the backs of seats in the huge university chapel where delegates assemble for four days each June. The covers, embellished with the handicap symbol, clearly indicate that the seats in question are to be reserved for those delegates with disabilities, both visible and invisible.

This year as in previous years, the covers—down to 43—were handed out at the beginning of Annual Conference to those delegates requesting them. Unlike previous years, each cover was assigned a number and the delegate checking out the cover was asked to write his or her name beside the number. A good way, or so it was thought, to cut down on the mysterious disappearance of covers during Conference.

Some 31 delegates signed out the chair covers and placed them on the backs of those seats in the most convenient and easy-to-access locations for their particular needs. For all of them it meant not

having to expend limited time and energy as well as not having to be unceremoniously parked in the aisles or in the rear of the chapel. The delegates left the covers on the back of the chairs in the confident expectation that those seats would always be available to them from

one meeting to the next.

Imagine their surprise when many of them returned to their “reserved” seats the next day to find them unreservedly filled by other people. Not only, it turned out, had more of the covers mysteriously disappeared (8 of them

altogether), but many of them had just as mysteriously transmigrated coming to rest on chairs in locations totally inaccessible to those who were disabled.

An unexpected gust of wind, a sign of the Holy Spirit perhaps? Not likely. One delegate reported she had even securely pinned the cover to the back of the chair; yet somehow the cover had become unpinned overnight and wandered off never to be seen again. The delegate did, however, come upon another stray cover and, being a conscientious soul,

**RESERVED FOR  
PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITIES UNLESS  
SOMEONE ELSE GETS  
HERE FIRST**



turned it in at the end of Conference.

Committee members are at their wits' end. They have tried roping off seats and posting “reserved” signs to no avail. It is felt that either the reserved seating program will have to be discontinued or a deposit required for the use of the covers. But a deposit only deals with the problem of replacing missing covers; the problem of people sitting where they darn well please without regard for others cannot be dealt with so easily.

Is something like a “disability sensitivity training session” for the clergy and lay members of Annual Conference in order? I'm not sure. A program to increase sensitivity can be helpful where there is ignorance. But disregarding clearly marked reserved seats and purloining covers for one's own use goes beyond ignorance.

A clergy member of the Conference who uses a wheelchair puts it this way: “The underlying issues are common courtesy and respect for the person, rights, and property of others. If I were a disabled lay member of Annual Conference and received the kind of treatment I too have witnessed, I would never return.”

The growing lack of common courtesy and respect for others in secular society is rightfully lamented. It is doubly saddening when one sees the same kinds of attitudes and behaviors flagrantly displayed in a convocation of what should be “good Methodists all.” Old John Wesley must be fairly whirling.

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## ONLINE DISABILITY MINISTRY RESOURCES

### \*STRENGTHENING LOVE AND INCLUSION

Strengthening support for children and adults with disabilities makes your [faith] community more loving for all because it sensitizes people to respond to the real needs of all people. Spiritual communities collaborating with each other share successes and ideas that save energy and resources.

One in five families includes a person who faces barriers that prevent them from participating in a faith community because of a disability. Disability can be present at birth, or result from illness, age, trauma, or accident. Families dealing with disability need faith communities where members show their love by responding to the special needs of all other members. A "welcoming spiritual com-

munity" is one that allows long-time members to remain active as they age, and one that attracts and retains new families because members make their congregation accessible to all.

Check out the University of Maryland website [www.communityconnections.umd.edu](http://www.communityconnections.umd.edu) for lists of newsletters and resources providing easy, inexpensive ways to welcome people with disabilities into your spiritual community, and to create a sense of belonging for everyone that is so essential to religious communities.

### \*BRIDGE BUILDERS

Bridge Builders is a ministry designed to identify and break down barriers that keep people with disabilities and their families from being able to fully participate in their spiritual community.

Located in Columbus, Ohio, this ministry works with other spiritual communities seeking to include children and families living with disabilities in church programs and events.

Their programs include inclusive and special Children's Ministry classes, classes for teens and young adults with specific special needs, "Buddy Connections" (teens and adults trained to support one or two children during specific activities and services), children's healing and hope services, friendship and interaction outreach to community residential programs, and a baking ministry designed to use home-baked goods (primarily cookies) to support short-term outreaches in local communities such as homeless camps, children's hospitals, and group homes.

For more information, visit their website at [www.bridgebuilders.4mg.com/](http://www.bridgebuilders.4mg.com/) or [www.vineyardscolumbus.org/ministries/bridge\\_builders/](http://www.vineyardscolumbus.org/ministries/bridge_builders/).

### \*DISABILITY CONCERNS

This organization, founded by the Christian Reformed Church, helps congregations establish disability ministries in various churches. They support congregations as they eliminate barriers to participation of people with disabilities, assist people with disabilities and their families in expressing their spiritual needs and offering their spiritual gifts, and provide information on disability resources and services, such as consulting services and disability ministry workshops.

They plan jointly with a church, a group of churches, or an organization of church leaders, etc. to conduct workshops that train people to organize disability ministries, whether they be respite programs or support groups of various types. Support groups may be for people with a specific disability or group of disabilities (developmental, emotional, mental, physical, sensory), or they may be support groups for parents or siblings of people with such disabilities. For more information, go to [www.crcna.org/pages/disability.cfm](http://www.crcna.org/pages/disability.cfm).

From the University of Maryland website [www.communityconnections.umd.edu](http://www.communityconnections.umd.edu).



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

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**WINGS ONLINE** Four issues of *Wings*—Fall 2002, Winter 2003, Spring 2003, and Summer 2003—in their entirety may be accessed at [www.cal-pac-ccdm.org/](http://www.cal-pac-ccdm.org/). Selected articles from back issues of *Wings* 1995-98 may be accessed at [www.mariposa-ministry.org](http://www.mariposa-ministry.org).

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## UNITED METHODIST CREATES JOBS PROGRAM FOR DISABLED YOUTHS

By John Gordon

Preparing a résumé, tracking down leads, and getting ready for interviews can make searching for a job a challenge for anyone. The process can be even more challenging for the 53-million Americans with disabilities.

"They're falling through the cracks when they graduate from high school," said Debby Puckette, who saw that firsthand with her own family. She founded Real

Jobs For Youth in Longview, Texas, providing training and encouragement for young people with disabilities and becoming an advocate for employers to hire them.

Puckette relied on her faith as a United Methodist to start the non-profit organization two years ago, trying to fill a gap left by other agencies. She works with students and former students ages 14 to 29. "The average age that goes to these (other) agencies is 30," she said....

Puckette, who has two sons, is a member of First United Methodist Church in Longview....She began the operation on a shoestring—working on a kitchen table in donated office space. She later moved the office to a community center and then into a building owned by the East Texas Council of Governments, which administers the grant that provides most of her funding. The grant helps with training as well as transportation—a big need for many workers with disabilities.

Puckette's program is serving a dozen youths....She started by helping her younger son, Mark, 20, who has autism. After months of searching, he landed a part-time job at a department store's national distribution center. "I was very scared," he said. "I worked hard to find a job." Mark saved enough money to buy a car. He is putting his earnings into a savings account in hopes of attending an art school in Georgia and getting a bachelor's degree.

But Debby Puckette knows a job means more than a paycheck. It means a "rise in self-confidence, the willingness to go ahead and risk the other things that they might want to try," she said. "You have that dream—well, go for it."

**A job means a "rise in self-confidence, the willingness to go ahead and risk the other things that they might want to try. You have that dream—well, go for it." — Debby Puckette —**

Her young clients face such obstacles as learning disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, mental retardation, autism and cerebral palsy. Sometimes employers make special accommodations, such as providing large-type computer monitors or ramps. Employers can receive tax credits for hiring workers with disabilities. But Puckette said her clients are not asking for favors or "pity jobs." "A business is going to hire you because they need you in that position, just like anyone else," she said....

Real Jobs made a major difference in the life of Toni Phillips, 23, of Longview. Phillips dropped out of school in 10th grade because a learning disability made it difficult for her to pass a geometry

course. "I was just at home, watching TV, relaxing on the couch and not really doing anything with my life," Phillips said. Now she works two part-time jobs—at a telemarketing company and a local newspaper—while attending adult literacy courses and working toward her high-school equivalency degree.

"It made me a better person," Phillips said. "I'm able to help out around the house, to buy the things that we need,

[like] groceries. I'm definitely happier." She is also taking courses to become a nursing assistant. Her dream is to turn her love for scary movies into a

profession by becoming a movie writer and director...."I'm able to take one step at a time, day by day, to reaching my dreams," she said.

Puckette is not afraid to knock on doors to help her clients reach their dreams...."I feel very, very passionately that, yes, all people have value," she said. Puckett believes Real Jobs is a program that can be duplicated in any city across the country. "It makes good business sense to hire someone with a disability," she said. "And it's good for the community. It's a win-win situation."

**Abridged from *Jobs Program Helps Fill Gaps For Youths With Disabilities*, United Methodist News Service (Feb. 2, 2004).**

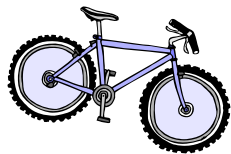
## AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

By Mattie J. T. Stepanek

When the playground is  
Roaring with kids  
When the sky is  
Thundering with sunshine  
When the atmosphere is  
Electrified with glee

Then is when we know  
For sure that life is  
Thriving  
Reverberating  
Exhilarating  
It is good, indeed.

**Copyright © Mattie J. T. Stepanek. From *Celebrate Through Heartsongs*, Hyperion/VSP (2002). Stepanek, who lived with a rare neuromuscular disease, wrote this poem when he was nine years old. He died at the age of thirteen.**



## FREE WHEELCHAIR MISSION PROVIDES GIFT OF MOBILITY

**W**arren Root never realized until recently how fortunate it was that their daughter Susan had been born in the United States. Susan, now 46 years old and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at the age of three. "She has faced many challenges and surgeries during her life," Root said from his home in Lake Forest, Calif., "But she always had medical help available."

It was only after meeting a "remarkable man" named Don Schoendorfer, president and CEO of Free Wheelchair Mission, that Root learned how "very limited and grueling" the lives of children and adults with disabilities in Third World countries can be without access to even something as basic as wheelchairs.

Several years ago, Schoendorfer was traveling in Morocco when he saw a woman with paralyzed legs struggling to pull herself across a road on her stomach. An MIT mechanical engineer working

in the medical field, he knew he wanted to do something someday to help people like her, but he wasn't sure what or when. Then in 1998 he was led "on a mission from God" to invest his time, education, experience, and money into designing a wheelchair. The project nearly led him into bankruptcy, but he says, "I realized it was not me doing this work—I was being driven."

By the year 2000, Schoendorfer had fashioned 100 of his unique wheelchairs, and in 2001 his home church, Mariners Church in Irvine, Calif., sent him on a medical mission trip to India where he gave his first wheelchair away to a young boy with cerebral palsy. A few months later, he created Free Wheelchair Mission, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Costa Mesa, Calif., that provides "the transforming gift of mobility to the physically disabled poor in developing countries."

Since then, FWM has sent more than 130,000 wheelchairs *free of charge* to

people in over 57 countries (including 5000 in Iraq). The wheelchairs are shipped in cargo containers in lots of 550 easy-to-assemble kits. Each wheelchair costs only \$44.40 to produce and deliver. Voluntary donations fund everything with just a 5% administrative cost.

Schoendorfer's goal is to produce 20-million wheelchairs by the year 2010, about 1/5 of the total needed to meet the needs of poor people with mobility impairments throughout the world. FWM received \$1.6 million in donations in 2005; the expectation is for at least \$4-million in donations this year.

Root, himself an engineer, finds the wheelchair to be "ingeniously structured, very and cost-effective." Schoendorfer's design begins with a molded plastic patio chair, two 24-inch mountain bike wheels with inflatable tires and an especially strengthened wheelchair hub, and two 8-inch castors. These items plus a simple footrest are bolted to a single-piece, steel conduit frame. All the pieces are easily mass-produced at low-cost.

FWM has contracted with two plants in Shanghai to assemble the wheelchair kits and has partnered with several charitable organizations overseas to distribute the kits where needed. A set of simple tools provided with each 20 kits and at least one local worker trained in their use are all that's needed to turn a set of components into a functioning wheelchair.

FWM has been featured in articles in *The Readers Digest* and the *Los Angeles Times* and, most recently, was featured on NBC Nightly News. On a somewhat smaller scale, Root has made it his own "mission" in life to spread the word about FWM to the United Methodist Church through personal appeals in letters and church talks. "My prayer," he says, "is for the United Methodist Church to make the Free Wheelchair Mission one of their major Outreach programs."

For more information or to make a donation, visit the Free Wheelchair Mission website at [www.freewheelchairmission.org](http://www.freewheelchairmission.org).



### A REAL CHALLENGE By Ruben Cabrera

*[God] giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Isaiah 40: 29 [KJV]*

**M**y personal motto during most of my working career was, "I like a challenge." After I left the military at the age of 21 and started a family, the challenges came and went. When I reached what many consider to be mid-life, a new challenge appeared. I was accused of drinking on the job because my speech became slurred. My right leg would drag occasionally as I walked, I would get writer's cramp after only a few sentences. These unexplainable changes in my physical abilities sent me to the doctor.

"You have Parkinson's Disease," the neurologist said to me. I was sorry I had ever uttered the words, "I like a challenge." A challenge used to be working to be among the top salespeople in my company; today it's a challenge to button my clothes, tie my shoes, and stand without losing my balance.

With the help of God, I am able to meet and overcome daily challenges. The medication I take helps me through part of the day, but it is prayer that keeps me going. Each night I thank God for getting me through the day without a disaster. Each morning I pray to God to help me through another day. And God does.

From *The Upper Room* (May/June 1999)

## SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS OFFER ONLINE DEAF MINISTRY

The first Seventh-day Adventist deaf congregation was organized in Atlanta, Ga., on April 9, 2005, as the Southern Deaf Fellowship of Seventh-day Adventists. Through the Internet, this church hopes to minister to the approximately 150,000 deaf and hearing-impaired people in the Atlanta metropolitan area, as well as deaf people throughout the Southern Union and around the world....

The non-internet congregation meets in the youth chapel of the Atlanta North church with Pastor Jeff Jordan, who was born deaf, as their spiritual leader. Melissa Jordan, Jeff's wife, is a professional signer and translator....

Pastor Jordan stated, "History was made when all eight conference presidents [in the Southern Union] voted to allow the deaf living anywhere in the Southern Union to join the deaf church and send their tithes and offerings to the Georgia-Cumberland Conference to support the Southern Deaf Fellowship...."

"I am thrilled that our Internet-based ministry is in operation to reach the deaf in the Southern Union territory," he said. "People are able to watch the sermons in sign language. All they need is a high speed internet connection."

Other interactive services for members of the Deaf Fellowship will be offered as the technology becomes available. The Southern Deaf Fellowship of Seventh-day Adventists may be accessed at [www.onlinedeaffellowship.org](http://www.onlinedeaffellowship.org).

**Abridged from the News Archives of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.**



## "VENTURE" MEANS ADVENTURE FOR DISABLED SCOUTS By Jan Snider

Venture Crew 1777 of New Windsor, Md., is not like most Scout troops. Its members range from age 20 to 53 and include both men and women. And all have a physical or mental disability.

The troop is sponsored by Pipe Creek United Methodist Church, a congregation with fewer than 10 active members. "It's a faith issue," says the Rev. Holly Slaugh, describing the church's commitment to the crew.

It takes a little faith and a great deal of effort. Chartered under the Boy Scouts of America, these Venturers are breaking down barriers and challenging traditional views of scouting in Maryland and beyond. "Some of the things that Boy Scouts do I wasn't capable of doing because of my disabilities," explains 20-year-old Paul Curfman of New Windsor, a member of Pipe Creek.

At age 6, Curfman suffered liver and bone marrow failure. A resulting stroke left him permanently disabled but not helpless. By age 18, Curfman had earned Eagle Scout. He petitioned the Boy Scouts of America to form a Venture Crew for special needs people like him—regardless of age. Despite ongoing health issues, Curfman is dedicated to seeing this effort succeed.

The Venture program is an outreach of Boy Scouts that typically extends scouting opportunities to young men and women between ages 14 and 20. Venture Crews today are diverse and

dynamic, and Curfman's group of five men and two women is among the most unusual.

Consider members Donald and Kelly Chepko, both in their 50s. "I like to achieve things that I've never been able to achieve before," Donald says. "I'm that kind of person." His wife never imagined she could be part of a scouting group. "This is all new to me, but we have a good time doing it," she says.

Community outreach is part of the Venture Crew mission. The group recently collected 839 pounds of food for a community food bank. It also began doing puppet shows for local community organizations, thanks to an old box of puppets found at the church.

Requests for puppet shows far outnumber the Venturers' ability to perform because "traveling for the crew is extremely difficult," according to Wayne Curfman, Paul's father and committee chairman of Venture Crew 1777. "We have members who are in wheelchairs, and we are a very rural community." But crew members are committed to the shows. "They are used to receiving help from others, but this is a way for them to give back," Curfman says....

Because its community has no organized transportation for wheelchair-bound [sic] citizens, the group hopes to acquire a bus with a wheelchair lift.

**Slightly abridged from United Methodist News Service (April 13, 2005). Snider is a freelance producer for UMNS in Nashville.**

### *I Am Disabled And...*

LORD, I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through the prayers of my community and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way feel ashamed but will boldly declare who I am so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

**Affirmation #18 based on Philippians 1:18-20 (NRSV) by Ken Tittle, Mariposa Ministry, and Mariposa On-Line.**



# NOUWEN AWARD: WOUNDED HEALERS IN A WOUNDED WORLD

The 2006 Henri Nouwen Award was presented to Rev. Ronald Vredevelde, chaplain at Mt. Pleasant Center, a Michigan residential treatment facility. Given annually in honor of professor, pastor, and author Henri J. M. Nouwen by the Religion and Spirituality Division of the AAMR (now the AAIDD), the award acknowledges "individuals who reflect a 'Nouwen style' of compassion, commitment, and dedication to ministry and servanthood that values and esteems people with developmental disabilities."

Author of *Expressing Faith in Jesus: Church Membership for People with Cognitive Impairments*, Vredevelde is also chaplain and coordinator of the Association for Interfaith Ministries which, in conjunction with Friendship Ministries, is dedicated to "valuing the spiritual gifts of people with developmental disabilities and enabling spiritual growth in cooperation

with [faith] communities."

Vredevelde in his acceptance speech spoke these words:

"An important part of my ministry is a ministry presence: reflecting the love of God to others and noticing their reflection of God's love back to me. In my relationships with individuals, I have the privilege of hearing the stories, incidents of life that are so important to the individual but might seem trivial to some people. These meaningful encounters are the heart of ministry....

"The world we live in is a broken hurting world, obvious in the continued warfare in Iraq and hurricane disasters. The brokenness is also seen in the places we serve, both in the persons with mental impairments and their caregivers. We are the wounded healers who walk through that wounded world. May God's blessing continue to guide and strengthen us in the wonder of our ministries. May God continue to bless us through people with mental impairments as they remind us of God's goodness and love."

Based on "Ronald Vredevelde Wins Henri Nouwen Award," extras, the newsletter of Friendship Ministries (Fall 2006).

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