

# WITNESS for JUSTICE

A weekly commentary from  
the United Church of Christ

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## Reading Changes LIVES!

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My grandmother used to say, “Being blessed by God is wonderful, but being a blessing to others because God blessed you is more important.” While I was not raised in a household where attending Sunday morning worship was highly valued, it was still important to my parents that they raise children who understood that service to those less fortunate was an essential part of being a good, responsible, and educated person. Because of this, I began tutoring students in reading and math skills when I was twelve years old. It was something I enjoyed and had the temperament to do.

Approximately 30 million adults in the United States can’t read. They can’t understand their own prescription bottle, figure out a bus schedule, or even order off a menu – actions which many of us take for granted. The consequences of this silent epidemic are profound. There is a 66 percent chance that a person who cannot read at a proficient level by the 4th grade will end up on welfare or in jail. Approximately 85 percent of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate.

Understanding the importance of this issue, in 2012 the United Church of Christ began developing an all-church initiative to bring awareness to the challenge of multigenerational low literacy levels. The program was appropriately called “Reading Changes Lives”.

This robust campaign launched in the fall of 2014 with an “all-church read” of the book, *Hot Dogs and Hamburgers: Unlocking Life’s Potential by Inspiring Literacy at Any Age*, written by Rob Shindler. The next step on the journey occurred on March 4, 2015. It was a day of dialog on social media where people shared how they were addressing illiteracy in their communities. Finally, on June 29, 2015, the campaign culminated with a daylong training for adult literacy tutors and a school supply drive during the

God is still speaking,  
**UNITED CHURCH**  
OF CHRIST



UCC General Synod in Cleveland, OH. All together UCC members stuffed 1,000 backpacks with school supplies that will be given to local elementary school students and donated enough additional supplies to fill another 1,500 backpacks.

During the training, Rob Shindler shared the inspirational story of his son who had been labeled severely disabled, an experience that ultimately lead him to identify his call as a tutor. “You can teach someone to read in less than 2 and ½ days,” Shindler said. “All it takes is one hour a week for 52 weeks.”

Recently, I began tutoring adult students who want to take the GED test. Fortunately, there are staff and teachers’ guides onsite to assist when I’m unsure about the subject material. I’m learning much from my students, as I hope they are learning from me. Those values instilled and embodied in my childhood household continue to shape me in adulthood.

You can learn more about literacy volunteering in your community by visiting [literacydirectory.org](http://literacydirectory.org). I hope you too will join this campaign to help change lives through reading.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Bentley de Bardelaben is Executive for Administration and Communications.*

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