Disabilities Pandemic

Sarah Lund
Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice

My father, Herbert Henry Griffith, grew up in rural Missouri and attended children’s Sunday school at the little white clapboard church just down the dirt road from the family farmhouse. He grew up to work in veterinary medicine. After a successful career, my father experienced severe mental illness combined with other physical illnesses that disabled him, leaving him homeless. In 2007, my father died in a care facility for poor people with disabilities. We were told by the staff that our father was a popular resident because of his knack for storytelling, and earned the nickname Santa because of the close resemblance.

I think about my father now as I read heartbreaking stories of people with disabilities who are living in care facilities during the pandemic. My father was just one of the one billion people in the world living with disabilities. Often the marginalized of the marginalized, people with disabilities experience barriers to education, healthcare, income opportunities and participation in society. Globally, people with disabilities experience the highest rate of poverty, violence, and abuse. This was all true before the pandemic and now these injustices are amplified. In April, leaders of the UCC Disabilities Ministries Board and the UCC Mental Health Network shared with me their experiences of the pandemic in this webinar.

People living in care facilities, like the one my father died in, are experiencing a high percentage of Covid-19 deaths. When people with disabilities do access healthcare, they often face discrimination as medical professionals determine who gets life saving treatment based on age or perceived quality of life. Another tragic impact of the pandemic is the higher rates of domestic violence experienced by women and girls with disabilities.

May is Mental Health Awareness month and a reminder that many disabilities are invisible. The United Church of Christ’s historic commitment to advocate for disabilities and mental health justice, as highlighted by our support of the Americans With Disabilities Act signed 30 years ago this summer, calls us to take prophetic action today. We call for elected officials to center people with disabilities in the efforts of pandemic response and recovery. This means creating accessible public health information, providing access to hygiene measures, and removing barriers to healthcare.
Building a just world for all includes those with disabilities and mental illnesses. The gospel reminds us that when we care for the most vulnerable in the pandemic, we are caring for Christ, the One who is God with us. The United Nation Secretary-General António Guterres said, “When we secure the rights of people with disabilities, we are investing in our common future.”

As we hear stories from the margins, may we be moved not with pity but into action. Join the movement for disabilities and mental health justice in this election season through the United Church of Christ “Our Faith, Our Vote” and the American Association of People with Disabilities summit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Sarah Lund is the Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice for the Health and Wholeness Advocacy Ministries for the United Church of Christ.