



Ableism, theology, and some rooftop friends

Diana Ventura

Author of *Our Fractured Wholeness*, public health researcher at Harvard, adjunct professor of practical theology at Boston University, and former ecumenical resident at DDH

October 17, 2022
DDH Monday Forum

I first arrived at Chicago to study disability theology in the wake of Nancy Eiesland's 1994 book, *The Disabled God*. My return to DDH is part of my life-long journey to overcome the obstacles of disability and ableism.

When I was a child, my doctors told my parents to throw me away in an institution, that I would not amount to anything. Those doctors said that I probably would not walk, talk, or be able to attend school. My parents did not listen to the narrative of ableism. Instead, my mother mainstreamed me into a swimming class when I was four years old. In so doing, she was taking important action against ableism. In the swimming class, all the other children made big white mountains of splash, while my small disabled feet made only small dunes of unbroken water. That was when I realized I differed from everyone else.

Only later did I learn that I had cerebral palsy and that meant when my brain sends messages to my muscles to move, the messages get confused and my movements are awkward and jerky. It takes complete concentration to move through places that are almost entirely designed for and by able-bodied people. I have to negotiate the cracks and unevenness of brick sidewalks and endure the strain of stairs on my knees.

DDH should be proud of its recent renovations that allow me to walk up and through the front door easily and comfortably. The elimination of a few steps and the installation of a ramp preserves my dignity, and that of others.

In *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone writes of the existential absurdity that people of color encounter when the white dominated culture deems them subhuman. Similarly, people with disabilities experience an almighty *no* when they are regarded to be worth less than others, if not entirely worthless.

Thirty-two years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), only fifteen percent of people with disabilities are employed, meaning that eighty-five percent are unemployed. Imagine what it would mean for your life if you had never been employed. Such discrimination is not restricted to employment. It begins far earlier.

I was not allowed to attend public school as a young child. Instead, I went to the *Industrial*

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Letter from the dean

Gather around the fire, we have some good stories to tell.

The first Monday dinner of the year was shared at tables on the backyard patio. Flames danced from the firepit on that chilly evening, while new and returning students gathered around. These pages allow you to gather with them, as it were.

The next Monday, alumna Lee Hull Moses preached for DDH's opening chapel on "Tears and Laughter." She told a story of her son playing at the beach, throwing himself into an ocean wave, being carried through the wave victoriously, but then being knocked sideways by another wave. "We are going to get clobbered sometimes when we take on the whole ocean. The water will wash over us and there will be those moments when it could go either way," she observed.

Her message spoke to the students and their quest to prepare for ministry, teaching, and leadership. Pouring one's heart and mind into a sermon, a dissertation, a struggling congregation, a community hungry for change, is immersive and often daunting work. They seek their vocations whole-heartedly and often courageously.

"My becoming a theologian is a story of someone who pursued her dream unceasingly," former ecumenical student Diana Ventura recalls. "It is true I had many nay-sayers. But I had count-

less others who supported me, encouraged me, and loved me as I fought to realize my dream." Now a practical theologian and public health researcher, she returned to DDH twenty years after her MDiv graduation to speak about ableism and theology.

Diana tells of the exemplary accompaniment of her colleague, Elizabeth Palmer (who is now a senior editor at *The Christian Century*). Similarly, Dolores Highbaugh's mentorship has had a profound effect on generations of House Scholars who are now church leaders. The Richard and Dolores Highbaugh Fund, announced in the last *Bulletin*, celebrates the Highbaughs' remarkable lives and service. Donors to this fund are listed as part of the Annual Report for the fiscal year that ended in June. By listing the names of donors, we can only begin to acknowledge what such accompaniment has meant.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to say thank you to the DDH Board of Trustees and to Divinity School Dean Jim Robinson who have made it possible for me to take a sabbatical leave during this academic year. I am especially grateful for DDH Administrator Daette Lambert, who is functioning as chief of staff during my absence, and other staff members whose care and expertise allow the work of DDH to advance with aplomb.

With gratitude, Kristine A. Culp, *Dean*



Journey to Karlsruhe: A journey to justice, reconciliation, and unity

Disciples seminarians and recent graduates attended the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, along with other Disciples leaders.



The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches convened in Karlsruhe, Germany, from August 31 to September 8. With the theme, "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity," the Assembly worshipped and deliberated together, built relationships, and shared global concerns—climate change, indigenous persons' rights, economic justice, and for just peace in areas of conflict. Many voices including indigenous people, young people, and persons with disabilities, "emphatically called on the WCC to work together and include more people at the table in order to tackle these difficult challenges."

A motif of "encounter" permeated the gathering, palpable not only in the joys of seeing confessional family, but also in the strain caused by the division between Christians. Theological differences were complicated by the chasms of war and its effects on Europe.

In attendance were some five thousand participants from the 352 member churches.

Disciples participants from the US and Canada, Mexico, Congo, and Australia included a good DDH contingent.

Week of Compassion sponsored a group of Disciples seminarians to meet Christians from diverse communions and places and to experience global ecumenical work. House Scholar Alexa Dava observed, "In a time when words like 'reconciliation,' 'unity,' and 'justice' lose their meaning, I crave examples of Christians sincerely putting these values to work in their geopolitical contexts. Being here, I'm inspired to lay more claim to my faith as I consider the kind of pastor I want to be."

House Scholar Justin Carlson attended a panel hosted by Rainbow Pilgrims of Faith, a group making space for LGBTQIA+ Christians at the Assembly. Justin looked for "moments of radical honesty" during the week, reflecting that, "Honesty with one's self requires encounter with other selves."



REPORT FROM THE 11TH ASSEMBLY OF THE WCC

2022 graduate Ross Allen and alumnus Jack Veatch attended the Assembly as participants of the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI), an initiative for young theologians from across the world to learn from established, international theologians—and each other.

One highlight of the Assembly for the DDH contingent was to reconnect with Heike Springhart, formerly dean of the



Theologische Studienhaus (TSH) at the University of Heidelberg. She is now the Bishop of Baden, a Landeskirche in the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD), with its seat in Karlsruhe. She welcomed Disciples representatives to celebrate and participate in the Sunday worship service, and she was a generous dialogue partner with the seminarians.

The Assembly produced important statements and elected a Central Committee, including Terri Hord Owens, to continue its work. There will be many reverberations from this exceptional gathering. For their part, DDH student attendees encountered others in the rich complexities of their identities. They hope that future ecumenical encounters will further a global pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity. ✚

Top, bottom, and upper right photos: Paul Jeffrey/WCC



Andrew Packman (2009) writes that “the Monday Night Dinner table has been extended to South Minneapolis,” where he and Sarah Rohde and their sons moved recently.

We are saddened at the death of **Claudia Grant**, on August 10 in Indianapolis, and extend sympathy to **Brian Grant** (1964). They had recently celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. She was 79. Claudia Grant shattered glass ceilings and built community, including in 1987, when she was called as Deputy General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).



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2022–23 Disciples Divinity House Scholars

Fourteen students have been named Disciples Divinity House Scholars. Two additional individuals have been named the inaugural Theological Education Leadership Fellows.

Scholarship funds have been increased in recent years, allowing for the creation of several new scholarships that honor individuals, extend legacies of ministry and thought, and prepare for innovative leadership. Named House scholarships include tuition, housing support, and a stipend of \$11,000. These awards allow the scholars to delve into their studies—without taking on significant debt.

NEW SCHOLARS

Oreon E. Scott Entering Scholar Morganne Talley is a first-year MDiv student. She graduated with honors from the University of Lynchburg with a major in Religious Studies. Morganne received the Allen B. Stanger Award for commitment toward preparation for ministry and the Virgil V. Hinds Award for demonstrating a high level of academic achievement. Throughout her studies, she worked with alumna Stephanie McLemore in the University of Lynchburg’s Office of Spiritual Life.

Kate Myers is a first-year Masters student at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. She has been awarded free housing at DDH during her studies. Kate grew up at First Christian Church in Bloomington, Indiana, and served as a Disciples Peace Fellowship intern in 2021.

Luther Young, a visiting PhD student in Sociology from The Ohio State University,



New Scholars: Kate Myers, Morganne Talley, and Luther Young

is conducting field research this year on Black churches in Chicago. On November 7, he led a Monday forum on his research titled, “Sexuality and the Church: Lessons from Black Parishioners.” Luther is an ordained Disciples minister and the moderator of Alliance Q. He has been awarded free housing at DDH during his research.

CONTINUING SCHOLARS

Rachel Abdoler, a PhD candidate and recipient of the *Barbara and Clark Williamson Scholarship*, is writing her dissertation on the hermeneutical strategies of thirteenth-century Christian theological texts written in Arabic against a backdrop of Christian and Islamic polemical writing.

The *W. Barnett Blakemore Scholarship* for ecumenical vision and academic achievement

has been awarded to **Justin Carlson**, a second-year MDiv student, who attended the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Church in Karlsruhe, Germany, with additional support from the *William Daniel Cobb Alumni/ae Scholarship*. Justin also serves as DDH’s head resident.

Third-year MDiv student **Alexa Dava** has been awarded the *Dr. Geunhee and Mrs. Guensoon Yu Scholarship* which recognizes high promise for innovative pastoral and intellectual leadership, especially in multicultural contexts. She also received additional support from the *William Daniel Cobb Alumni/ae Scholarship* to learn about Christianity in multicultural contexts at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

The *Rolland and Laura Frances Sheafor Scholarship* remembers a DDH trustee and founding president of the Christian Church Foundation. It was awarded to **Kerrigan Greene**, a third-year MDiv student. Kerrigan interned at Green Faith this summer, working as an archivist for the multifaith coalition.

Marissa Ilnitzki is the recipient of the *Martin Family Scholarship*, which celebrates leadership, congregations, and women in ministry. In her second year of the MDiv program, her field placement is Gilead Church.

Charlie Platt, a second-year MDiv, began his field work at the University of Chicago Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and Chicago Lights as the *William N. Weaver Scholar*, named in tribute to a beloved alumnus who served as dean of students at the Divinity School.

After his field work at Root and Branch Church last year, **Danny Sanchez** entered his third year of the MDiv program as the *Drum and Tenant Scholar*, a scholarship created by Katherine Dey in remembrance of dear friends.



The *Henry Barton Robison Scholarship* has been awarded to **Luke Soderstrom**, a PhD student in theology. He completed his doctoral exams last year and is

now preparing to submit his dissertation proposal.



Second-year Scholars: Justin Carlson, Marissa Ilnitzki, and Charlie Platt

PhD candidate **Virginia White** has received the *Edward Scribner Ames Scholarship* for high academic achievement. She is writing a dissertation on “Reckoning with Social Evil: Performativity as a Foundation for Re-envisioning Lament and Laughter as Moral Practices.” Virginia is DDH’s House Council President.

Landon Wilcox and **Hiatt Allen** are joint recipients of the *M. Ray and Phyllis Schultz Scholarship* as they finish their studies. Landon is preparing for chaplaincy in the US Navy and anticipates receiving his MDiv degree in December. Hiatt is writing his senior ministry thesis on the role of church camps in faith formation while finishing a MDiv/ Master of Public Policy dual degree.

Two individuals are serving as the inaugural Theological Education Leadership Fellows this year. **Lijia Xie** has been named the *Bernard F. and Annie Mae Cooke Fellow*. He studies theology and is particularly interested in dynamics of self-formation and conscience, as well as theological discourse and fluency in community. **Benny VanDerburgh** is the *M. Elizabeth Dey Fellow*. Benny received his MDiv from the Divinity School in June as a House Scholar, and is seeking ordination in the UCC.

ADDITIONAL RECOGNITION

Central Woodward Christian Church has selected **Alexa Dava** and **Justin Carlson** as recipients of the Edgar DeWitt Jones Scholarship.

Alexa Dava is a recipient of the Walker Ministerial Scholarship, administered by Brite Divinity School. It recognizes promise in preaching and ministry.

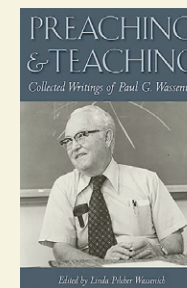
Morganne Talley has received a Phillips Legacy Foundation Award. ✚

Daisy Machado (1989), Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary, was honored with the AAR’s American Lectureship on the History of Religion, for which she delivered four lectures.

Congratulations to **Jack Veatch** (2016) and **Aneesah Ettress** (2018) who were married in the Chapel of the Holy Grail on October 15.



Texas Christian University Press has published *Preaching and Teaching: The Collected Writings of Paul G. Wassenich*, edited by Linda Pilcher Wassenich. The late **Paul Wassenich** (1936) held the Bible Chair at the University of Texas-Austin, helped establish University Christian Church in Austin, and became a beloved professor at TCU.





Congratulations to Walter and **Teresa Hord Owens** (1999) on the birth of Zachary Charles Owens, their first grandchild. He arrived on November 4. Baby, mom and dad, and grandparents are all doing well. The week before, and in her role as General Minister and President, Rev. Hord Owens was at DDH to discuss “The Covenant Project” with students.

Jonathan Cahill (2015) and Kristina Walter are living in Budapest, Hungary, for the year. Kristina is on sabbatical and Jonathan is on a leave from Hospice of the Western Reserve.

2022 graduate **Ross Allen** (2019) has been called as the accepted term minister of South Acton Congregational Church in Massachusetts.

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On “Becoming”

Theological Education Leadership Fellow Lijia Xie has been working with the chapel planning committee. The students have developed a theme for this year’s chapel services.



This fall, Lijia Xie has been helping the House community to organize activities and envision new programming, while also meeting with students individually to help them discern their larger educational and vocational goals. He gathered a committee to lead planning for this year’s chapel services. He elaborates the theme below:

“Becoming” emerged as a theme when students reflected on their ongoing sense of liminality and change in this season. It was also an apt gesture to the 2021 sculpture by Richard Hunt of the same name in the courtyard. Though we have resumed Monday night programs in-person, the dinners are still shared upstairs in the better-ventilated common room, as we await new ventilation, which will make it safer and therefore possible to eat together again in the downstairs dining room. In many other arenas, too, like public life and political

discourse, there is a sense that we are also on the cusp of great possibility, for which we wait in both trepidation and eagerness.

In many ways, the theme reflects both the certain challenge of Christian life, and the potential glory of discipleship and Christian formation. Though we remain in the wilderness between this world and the next, we remain in it together, learning from and helping one another as we respond to God’s ongoing revelation and participate in God’s unlimited grace.

I’m excited to walk alongside students as they contemplate their individual callings, and I hope to be able to empower them with the tools and skills necessary to manifest new realities of justice and inclusivity about which we had once only dared to dream. For it is truly through each of their lives and work that the next chapter in the story of this house, this community, will be written. ❖

Jack Veatch joins DDH staff

As the new Director of Student and External Relations, Veatch hopes to nurture relationships that foster excellence.

Jack Veatch brings contagious energy and skills in student relations to a new staff position, effective November 1. Since August, he has been a part-time assistant administrator. Currently he is assisting Daette Lambert in leading the House during the dean’s 2022–23 sabbatical.

“I am thankful for the House for many reasons,” he said. “I met lifelong friends here, I first felt that I could be a scholar here, I met my wife, Aneesah Ettress, here, and we recently got married in this chapel.” After receiving his MDiv in 2019 from the University of Chicago Divinity School as a Disciples Divinity House Scholar, Jack was ordained in the Ohio Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He studied at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Bossey, Switzerland. Recently, he served as the minister of

Evergreen Christian Church in Colorado and as the vice moderator of the Central Rocky Mountain Region.

“My vision is that folks will feel the same gratitude towards this place that I do. When the scholarship produced is so insightful, the relationships so deep, the growth so profound, and the support and care is so tangible—how can they help but feel a similar gratitude?” ❖



Diana Ventura responds to panelists Mark Lambert, Emily Griffith, and Luke Soderstrom.

Dialogue on disability

This fall, an author and former ecumenical resident picked up a conversation about stigma, ableism, and theology that she had started at DDH twenty years before.

In 2002, ecumenical resident Diana Ventura presented her senior ministry project at DDH. Incorporating self-narrative and interviews, she offered a fresh theological approach to disability. Her 2010 book, *Our Fractured Wholeness*, emerged from that thesis. On October 17, she came full circle, returning to DDH to speak at a Monday forum. Her remarks are included in this *Bulletin*. A public theologian and public health researcher, she earned her PhD from Boston University School of Theology and is Head of Standardization for the Center for Biostatistics in AIDS Research at Harvard University.

In the intervening years, the courtyard and first floor have been transformed for accessibility and welcome. A ramp built into the landscape and a redesigned bathroom better accommodate a range of mobility, and new lighting brightens the common room and chapel for those with low vision.

Luke Soderstrom was a MA student and president of the House Council when the idea to focus on first-floor accessibility emerged. Now he is a PhD student in Theology who is exploring how eighteenth-century Moravian Pietists made novel use of bodily difference and malleability in their theology.

Recent graduates Mark Lambert and Emily Griffith have also expanded the conversation about stigma, ableism, and theology at the Disciples Divinity House. The three talked

about their work at a panel on October 17, to which Diana Ventura responded.

Soderstrom spoke about Count von Zinzendorf’s focus on the wounded body of Christ, particularly how his interpretive strategies addressed embodied difference and “generated affective ties across inhumane borders.” Excerpts from the presentations by Lambert and Griffith follow below.

Mad compassion

Mad spiritual care involves holding some of our own realities loosely so that we might join the perspective of those we serve.

Emily Griffith, MDiv alumna and Chaplain Resident at Rush Memorial Hospitals

Excerpted from the Disability Dialogue, October 17, 2022



Madness is an umbrella term used to describe anyone diagnosed as “mentally ill” by mental health professionals, anyone labeled “crazy” by those around them, or

anyone who recognizes their own mind as unruly. In societies where we pride ourselves on sanity and reason, we often think of madness as something that is dangerous, painful, and wrong. We cringe at the man talking to himself on the street corner, we pity elderly people with dementia, and we institutionalize or incarcerate people whose madness we fear. Although madness can be these things, it can also be many other things. Madness can be

Current House Scholar **Hiatt Allen** has been elected as co-moderator of the Youth and Young Adult Commission. He is completing his senior ministry project on Disciples camp programs—and, yes, that chalice is engineered in Lego pieces.



Pastor, ecumenical leader, and former DDH trustee, **Albert M. Pennybacker**, died October 27 in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. He was 91. He had a preaching career of thirty-five years including as Senior Minister of University Christian Church in Fort Worth, Texas. He became a trustee of the Disciples Divinity House in 1965, continuing into the 1980s. From 1993–99, he was an associate general secretary of the National Council of Churches.





Doug Collins (2013) is a 2022 recipient of Eureka College’s Outstanding New Alumni award. He is the Senior Minister of First Christian Church in Tacoma, Washington.



Joel Brown (2014), now at work as the new President of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, is pictured with one of his predecessors, Peter Morgan. Congratulations to **Erin James-Brown**, who has accepted a call to become the minister of the neighboring Bethany Memorial Church.

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euphoric and deeply spiritual. It can sustain us when reason does not. Madness is neither wholly good nor bad.

Early in her career as a physical therapist, my mom worked with an elderly woman named Patty, who lived in a nursing home and needed physical therapy every day. Apparently, my mom reminded her so much of her daughter that she believed my mom was her child. She would call my mom by her daughter’s name and greet her with loving excitement, and my mom would do what she was taught to do in PT school by “reorienting the patient.” Each day my mom would explain to Patty that she was not her daughter, and each day she would watch Patty struggle to come to terms with this reality. She would become upset and distressed as her daughter claimed to be someone else, and then come to the sad realization that she was not spending the hour with her child. This was difficult to witness, and it also made therapy more difficult. Eventually my mom stopped reorienting Patty. She would respond to her daughter’s name and call Patty “Mom.” Patty would talk to my mom about her life in the nursing home and tell her stories from when she was younger. My mom started looking forward to spending an hour each day with this sweet woman, and therapy went much more smoothly.

My mom never met Patty’s real daughter, who was unable to visit or not in the habit of visiting her mom. My mom realized that she was doing something else important in addition to physical therapy by allowing Patty to see her daughter every day. Instead of clinging fiercely to the material reality that she was not, in fact, Patty’s daughter, my mom adopted Patty’s reality for a while, and connecting under those assumptions became a meaningful experience for them both.

I am training to become a chaplain, and, specifically, to work with mad folks. Mad ministry may look a lot like what my mom did very naturally when she worked with Patty. Often-

times, “crazy” is a label that provides us with a safe distance from others’ reality. If someone is “raving” about how they’ve been wronged, that distance alleviates our responsibility to take them seriously or do anything about it.

Mad spiritual care calls us to draw close to madness at the expense of our own comfort and to recognize the limits of our own understanding. It involves holding some of our own realities loosely so that we might join the perspective of those we serve. We can learn to share the burden of being in relationship by accepting the difficulties and delights of connecting with mad and disabled individuals in a way that allows radical acceptance and compassion. ❖

Can the leper speak?

Theology and the church must reckon with the recurring malpractice whereby sufferers of stigmatic illness such as leprosy are maligned as involuntary, permanent “citizens of that other place.”

Mark M. Lambert, Divinity School Teaching Fellow and DDH Faculty Fellow

Excerpted from the Disability Dialogue, October 17, 2022



“Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick,” Susan Sontag observed. “Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or

later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.” As a fundamental feature of finite corporeality, the experience of illness becomes a necessary interlocutor of theology.

Christianity has a long, fraught yet thoughtful, engagement with leprosy. Francis of Assisi himself and the Franciscan tradition incorporated leprosy and care for leprosy into their theological foundations. Perhaps the most striking example comes from Bonaventure’s portrayal of Francis meeting a leper unexpectedly, overcoming his horror, and then dismounting from his horse to kiss the leper and give him money. Remounting his horse, Francis finds that the leper has vanished into the open plain. Francis praises God and embarks on his vocation.



What I want to focus on is what is not there. Once the leprosy sufferer fulfills his function, he is simply evacuated from the text. We have no name. The leprosy sufferer never speaks. We don’t even learn if he wanted to be embraced, let alone kissed, by this eccentric Italian.

So, what do we do with that as theologians several centuries removed? Simone Weil writes: “The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it IS a miracle.” How do we better attune ourselves to the sufferer? How do we attune ourselves to those who have been othered or reduced to bodily limitations? How do we let those who have been othered speak for themselves? Can the leper speak?

The Belgian Catholic priest, Father Damien, born Joseph De Veuster, was a traveling priest on the Hawaiian Islands before volunteering for relocation to the leper settlement on the island of Molokai. One of the most revealing Native Hawaiian names for leprosy was *ma’i ho’oka’awale ‘ohana*, the sickness that separates family, denoted the disease by its painful social consequences—and the cruel fabrication of limits. Surrounded by steep cliffs and treacherous ocean, a remote peninsula on the island served as a natural prison and soon gained the reputation of a living tomb.

Father Damien landed at Molokai on May 10, 1873. Encountering an overwhelming state of suffering, he blessed the dying, embraced the sick, administered what remedies he could, ate with the sick, and shared his pipe with them. He wrote to his brother, “I make myself however, a leper with lepers; when I preach my phrase is: we other lepers.”

For a dozen years, Damien was fearless of contracting the disease. But he began to show unmistakable signs of having contracted leprosy and, on March 30, 1886, the priest formally became known as Admission #2886. Soon

ABOVE Father Damien founded two orphanages in the leper settlement on the island of Molokai. The Hawaiian name for leprosy, which means the sickness that separates family, denoted the disease by its painful social consequences.

there was no visible contrast between him and his acolytes, his voice became raspy and compromised, and the Mass was now consecrated and handled by leprous hands. Three years later, the so-called “Leper Priest” succumbed to the disease.

Between Father Damien’s liturgical addition of “we lepers” and the vivid example of the Mass by leprosy sufferers for leprosy sufferers, there is much to unpack. The voices of the leprosy sufferers are included in this space.

In the shadows of the cliffs of Molokai, a leprous, exiled priest administered the broken body of the executed Lord to leprous exiles—meals with the refuse and discarded of society that pronounced an unambiguous “No!” to the hegemonic powers that would consider their lives as “hopeless causes.” The politics of eucharistic performance is a response to God’s initiative and desire to create community with us, and as such, becomes an ethical affront to powers of exclusion. Molokai’s eucharistic environment was arrayed as a meal of liberation, of real self-giving.

Inasmuch as solidarity involves a disposition or interpretative inclination, it entails recognition of the humanity of the “other” as human, in addition to according value to the other in his or her otherness without attempting to subject that otherness to a more comfortable form. Through Damien’s invocation of “we lepers” during the celebration of the Eucharist, he makes a theological, prayerful, social, and practical assertion that reorients the oppressed and marginalized order of Molokai as an expression of the mystical body of Christ. ❖

Directed by **Yvonne Gilmore** (2001) and **Sandhya Jha** (2001; trustee), *Living Justice: An Antiracist Practicum* begins its third year with a focus on the arts and justice. The learning lab is funded by a grant from the Oreon E. Scott Foundation with additional support from DDH.



This fall, **Bill Wright** (1995), Jessica Barr, and their son Silas are in Strasbourg, France. Bill is working on a book, *The Reasonable Protestant’s Guide to Mysticism*. In spring 2023, he will be a Dean’s Scholar at Virginia Theological Seminary.



Ellie Leech (2019) and **Burton Guion** (2016) got engaged on a rainy day in November.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Current Scholar **Kerrigan Greene** has started the Soup Club at the Divinity School—a gathering space both for anybody in the LGBTQIA+ “alphabet soup” and people who love soup.



Garry Sparks (2001) and **April Lewton** (Trustee; 2003) are in Incheon, Korea, this fall while Garry is teaching in George Mason University’s Korea program and April is on sabbatical leave from the National Benevolent Association. They have explored Incheon and Seoul, as well as historic sites and Buddhist temples along the east coast of South Korea.



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Ventura

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School for Crippled Children in Boston. But it did not teach its students: it had us pass our days wandering the halls. In 1972, when I was in the third grade, Massachusetts passed Chapter 766, a new education law for people with disabilities which finally enabled me to attend public school. The Massachusetts law was used to create the Federal law PL94-142 that allows people with disabilities to attend school and receive accommodations to help them succeed. The lack of a solid early education made learning in public school difficult for me. Many teachers did not believe in me, but fortunately some did. That and my own determination made me work relentlessly to learn and grow as a student and now scholar. By the time I applied to the University of Chicago, I had overcome many obstacles and deficits.

My becoming a theologian is a story of someone who pursued her dream unceasingly. It is true I had many nay-sayers. But I had countless others who supported me, encouraged me, and loved me as I fought to realize my dream. In gratitude for the support, I have always risen to the occasion, and continue to fulfill the vision of who I have always wanted to be: a writer, a theologian, a person of God who leads others to truth.

All roads in my theological career lead back to Disciples Divinity House. I arrived in Chicago with great theological ideas, but still struggling with the mechanics of writing. My MDiv colleague and friend, Elizabeth Palmer, provided critically important editorial help, not with my ideas but with my sentences, correcting all the forgotten commas, dangling participles and prepositions, split infinitives, and so on. No one had ever taught me how to write. Elizabeth made up for that. What she did for me stands as an example of how to offer a person

support and break the shackles of an “-ism.” Now, as an adjunct professor at Boston University—where my PhD advisor was Claire Wolfteich, also a former DDH resident—I provide my students with similar support.

Even though I had supporters like Elizabeth who would not allow me to conceive of myself as “less-than,” that does not mean I didn’t internalize ableism. When my foot hit an obstacle on a sidewalk and I fell, I would cry out to God: “Why are you making me live this way?” I would be angry and hate myself for having a disability—as if I were the one to blame!

That changed when I encountered the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich in my studies. Julian tells us that God is with us in the humblest of our needs. In the Long Text of her *Showings*, chapter 6, Julian refers to quotidian needs of daily digestion. Julian goes even further to say that God is in our humblest of needs and this is the highest form of prayer.

With Julian, I now began to say, “God, you are with me when I fall on the ground, dirty and humiliated—and this is the highest form of prayer.” Moment by moment, day after day, and week after week, by inviting God into the aspects of disability I hated the most, I began to know myself and my disability as good and beautiful. Knowing this theological truth broke the shackles of some of my internalized ableism.

I had struggled with the idea that my disability of cerebral palsy resulted from my own individual sin. I remember walking circles in the DDH chapel—like walking a labyrinth between the pews. Around and around I went, questioning, muttering to myself, crying deep emotional tears, wondering what I had done. Concerned and moved, I asked God why God had created me for such an embodied struggle. I did not want a disabled God: I wanted an all-powerful God who could and would heal my

disability and take away all my daily struggles so that I could walk and move fluidly in an able-bodied world.

Our attitudes about disability are driven by an inherited tradition that implicitly views Jesus as able-bodied and normal, and that wrongly equates having perfect bodies, minds, and spirits with being in right relationship with God. But consider the healing stories in the Bible: there was likely much healing that had to happen before people found themselves in the presence of Jesus asking to be healed. Indeed, I have been healed of knee and hip issues brought on by years of enduring life with cerebral palsy. The healing came in collaboration with God, through my effort to initiate every available healing remedy—including exercising every day for the past four years—and mixed with contemplative prayer. Of course, there are ailments that have no remedy, and thankfully Jesus accompanies us in the pain of those ailments. We believe in Jesus, who shared in our complete human experience, and suffered the scars and trauma of the crucifixion. This is not the disabled God, but the incarnate Jesus Christ who took on himself all the vulnerabilities and limitations of being human.

Jesus is the restorer of human dignity in the healing stories. We see this in the gospel story of the man whose friends lower him on his pallet through the roof to Jesus. Even before he reached Jesus, the man had already experienced healing, thanks to his committed friends who knew his worth and did not ignore him.

Like lowering a friend down through the roof, fighting ableism is difficult. It takes commitment from able-bodied people. I imagine that this man’s friends were struggling, sweating, and swearing to get him up onto the roof even before lowering him down inside the

house. I imagine that in the middle of these acrobatics, they wondered whether their efforts were worth it. I know what the man on the pallet was feeling, because I have received lots of help in humiliating situations. As his friends hoisted him up, I imagine the man worried that this was all too much effort, what sort of harm might come of this effort, and whether he would end up on the ground, more hurt than ever. Yet because of his faith and the faith of his friends and supporters, the paralyzed man on the pallet does meet Jesus. Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven.” When the crowd presses Jesus on the source of his power, Jesus revises his statement and says, “Arise and walk, take your pallet and go home!” The crowd sought to exclude the man, to call him “less than” and “worth less,” but he walks out of the place with his head held high, his dignity restored through his encounter with Jesus and through the confidence and care of his friends.

To make progress in breaking the oppression of ableism, we must attend to the needs of those with disabilities and the most vulnerable among us. Many people with hidden disabilities do not disclose their conditions for fear of the stigma such disclosure will elicit. This is all the more reason why we, like the rooftop friends, should respond with compassion and with faith, hope, and love. As Jesus did, and as the new ramp to the Disciples Divinity House has done for me, in doing so we will be preserving the dignity of every human being, including those with disabilities. ✦

Dr. Ventura is available to speak with or foster conversation in your community. Contact her at diana@dianaventura.com.



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Colton Lott (2015; trustee) and Kelsey Cobbs were married in Oklahoma City on October 1.

Current House Scholar **Landon Wilcox**, center, was commissioned as a Chaplain Candidate Program Officer in the US Navy Chaplain Corps on September 19 in Virginia.



In January, former resident **John Knight** became the Sprigg Visiting Professor of Philosophical Theology and Ethics at Virginia Theological Seminary.



A Recognition of Generosity

The generosity of individuals and organizations helps to ensure the work of the Disciples Divinity House and the flourishing of its students. Between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022, gifts and grants received from 216 individuals, churches, and other organizations totaled \$400,719, with \$258,421 (64%) of that total directed for scholarship endowment and capital funds. Gifts for ongoing support totaled \$142,298, including \$34,253 given through the Disciples Mission Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).



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Ecumenical
journey
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