

Statement of Solidarity by the Religious Community Around Employment of People with Disabilities

Twenty years ago, with bipartisan support in Congress and broad endorsements from the civil rights, faith and labor communities, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), calling for the “shameful wall of exclusion” to come tumbling down. Today, our country is much more accessible and welcoming of people with a wide variety of disabilities and chronic health conditions than it was in 1990.

Nonetheless, based on all of the available data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it is a shameful fact that the law mandating equal access to employment for people with disabilities has failed to result in an increase in employment. Two-thirds of Americans with disabilities who want to work are unemployed or underemployed. That number has not changed since the ADA’s passage. This is a shameful situation which we in the religious community feel compelled to address.

Americans of many faiths, from congregations, seminaries and religious organizations believe strongly that work brings dignity, self respect and responsibility and that lack of employment is demoralizing, socially isolating and wasteful of a person’s abilities. Title I of the ADA, the employment provisions, was enacted with the intent of removing barriers to employment for people with disabilities and of protecting disabled workers from discrimination.

Although the ADA provides important protections for workers with disabilities and has helped carve out a place for disability as part of overall efforts to improve workplace diversity, the rate of progress on employment for adults with disabilities in the United States has been disappointingly slow. The religious community must speak out decisively and take action so that people with disabilities can live out the American dream of having a productive life, contributing to the betterment of our society.

Religious organizations signing onto this Statement of Solidarity fully understand that all people share a common humanity and that not having a job does irreparable harm to a person's self-esteem and makes it more difficult for someone to realize his or her potential. Understanding that poverty so often accompanies disability, and that a lack of employment may mean that adequate food, housing and medical care are not attainable, the undersigned religious organizations,

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denominations and faith groups commit to working within our organizations and with other groups to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities:

- We support new initiatives which will result in hiring more federal employees with disabilities and in strengthened requirements that federal contractors engage in affirmative action for hiring and advancing qualified Americans with disabilities;
- We urge all religious organizations, denominations and faith groups to draw attention to the abilities of people with disabilities and their right to be recruited, hired, promoted and retained at all levels of work;
- We urge all religious organizations, denominations and faith groups to hire qualified people with disabilities as ordained leaders, religious educators, musical directors, communicators, administrators, support staff, technical support and maintenance workers;
- We urge congregations to offer support to members and visitors with disabilities who are out of work, including moral support, specific advice and training, supervised volunteer opportunities and introductions to those who make hiring decisions;
- And, during the month of October, we will promote National Disability Employment Awareness Month within our own religious organizations, denominations and faith groups so that people with disabilities are understood to want what all people want - the dignity, value and worth which comes from holding a job.

With the aim of employing more qualified people with disabilities and making America work better for everyone, the undersigned religious organizations, denominations and faith groups pledge to promote the full employment and participation of people with disabilities and we encourage every American to join this cause.