



## THE FANNIE LOU HAMER SCHOLARSHIP FUND FOR DISABLED THEOLOGIAN OF COLOR

*A new scholarship offering from  
UCC Disabilities Ministries*

The United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries (UCCDM) board is delighted to announce the creation of a new scholarship fund: the Fannie Lou Hamer Scholarship Fund for Disabled Theologians of Color. This endowed scholarship will assist those who identify as people of color with disabilities in pursuing theological study at any level. By creating greater access to theological education, we hope that scholarship recipients will enrich the church through their engagement with disability, race, and theology.

### **Why a Scholarship for Disabled Theologians of Color?**

The UCCDM believes that theology can be a tool for liberation. Just as oppressive theologies have contributed to the marginalization of Historically Underrepresented Groups, so also theology can be the bedrock for liberation movements, including for those marginalized due to race or disability. Many civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., drew heavily on biblical imagery and Christian theology as part of their struggle for racial justice. Black liberation theologians including Dr. James Cone and womanist theologians including Dr. Delores Williams developed theologies that centered Black experiences, forcing white theologians to confront their racism, and allowing Black people of faith to connect their religion more concretely with their daily experiences of race and racism. While the disability rights movement has frequently been less grounded in faith, many activists, theologians, and spiritual leaders have and continue to draw upon theology in order to make their case for disability inclusion. In particular, Nancy Eiesland, author of *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, argued that a liberation theology of

disability would reshape the church's entire orientation toward disability, calling it into greater justice and access.

However, liberation theology can only be liberating if it includes the most marginalized, especially those who find themselves at the intersection of multiple oppressive systems. While disability theology and other liberation theologies have been informed by one another, the field of disability theology has often been dominated by white voices, keeping it from reaching its liberatory potential.

We believe that the church needs the theological contributions of disabled people of color. Liberation theology done at the intersections of multiple marginalization can often speak to liberation for all, even as it draws on the particulars of identity. Additionally, we know that people of color with disabilities often face particularly steep barriers to accessing higher education, including financial ones. The UCCDM believes that these theologians and potential theologians deserve support in their educational goals, and that the church as a whole will be improved by their work.

### **Who was Fannie Lou Hamer, and Why Is This Scholarship Named for Her?**

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977) was an African American voting rights activist, community organizer, and civil rights leader. The daughter of Mississippi sharecroppers, Hamer was a strong advocate for racial and economic justice. She helped to organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which aimed to challenge the all-white Democratic Party in the state, and helped found the Freedom Farm Collective, a community organizing group seeking to promote economic independence for African American farmers. Hamer's civil rights activism put her life in danger multiple times, as members of the police, the KKK, and white leaders in many organizations sought to silence her and keep her from advocating for the right to vote. Nevertheless, Hamer worked throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, advocating for freedom for all, especially African-Americans and women.

Hamer's faith informed her activism. Raised by a Baptist preacher, Hamer had an extensive knowledge of the Bible, especially those sections that focused on justice and freedom. Biblical references and imagery often featured in her speeches, and her faith served as an important touchstone in the hardships she faced.

Fannie Lou Hamer also lived with disabilities. She contracted polio as a child, and experienced related symptoms all her life. In 1961, Hamer was subjected to a hysterectomy without her consent while receiving surgery to remove a uterine tumor, as part of a Mississippi state policy of racist sterilization. This eugenic procedure caused lasting health problems. Additionally, in 1963, Hamer and several other civil rights activists were arrested on flimsy charges, and brutally beaten by police. Following the beating, Hamer lived the rest of her life with a blood clot behind her eye, kidney damage, and a limp. She lived in poor health for the last few years of her life, and died at fifty-nine from complications associated with breast cancer and hypertension.

Hamer's life illustrates the brutal linkage that often exists between racism and disability. When sick with polio, Hamer was made to continue working in the fields as a sharecropper with her family, and did so for years while living with post-polio syndrome. Her other disabilities were direct results of racist attempts to control and terrorize her. Though she did not publicly identify as a person with a disability, Hamer saw these experiences as integral parts of her fight for racial and economic justice. She fought for a world where all could be free: free to vote, free from violent assault, free to access safe and consensual health care, free to work without exploitation. Hamer demonstrates both the persistent strength of many Black disabled activists, and also the necessity of supporting such activists. Hamer may have officially died of breast cancer and hypertension, but as many writers have noted, it is more accurate to say she died of being a Black, poor, disabled woman in mid 20th-century America. What further gifts might she have given the world, had she lived longer?

In a speech in Harlem in 1964, Hamer said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired," expressing both her impatience at the pace of change in the United States, and how constant racism and the fight against it had very literally made her both sick and tired. This same quote was later engraved on her tombstone. This is a sentiment commonly expressed in one form or another by people with disabilities, people of color, and disabled people of color. These communities are fed up with oppression, and that oppression is causing exhaustion and illness.

This scholarship hopes to support those who are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Those who, like Hamer, live at the intersection of racism and ableism. Those who incorporate theology and religion into their struggle for justice. We seek to recognize the importance of the work done by these theologians, and to ease some of the burden they face.

### **Who Is Eligible to Apply?**

- Applicants must be disabled persons/persons with disabilities of color pursuing theological education.
- This includes theological education on any level, from undergraduate work to doctoral studies. Applicants do not need to be pursuing ordained ministry, and they don't need to have prior theological study.
- Applicants must have a demonstrated interest in and capacity for theological work at the intersections of race and disability.
- Candidates should be interested in theology at the intersections of race and disability, and have ideas of what they would like to study, but they may or may not have engaged in previous theological study or work. Applicants can demonstrate their interest in and capacity for theological study through personal statements, letters of recommendation, and links to previous work if available.
- Priority will be given to applicants who are members of a UCC local church, or have a connection to a UCC setting (for example, enrollment at a UCC seminary or letter of recommendation from a

UCC pastor), but applications from candidates not meeting this criterion will still be considered.

- We believe that the theological work supported by this scholarship will benefit the church universal, whether it is done by members of the UCC, or theologians from other traditions. While applicants with a UCC connection will be given priority, the scholarship is open to disabled people of color outside the UCC as well.

### **How Much is the Scholarship Award?**

The Fannie Lou Hamer Scholarship Fund is an endowed scholarship. This means that contributions to the fund are invested, and the amount available to distribute each year depends on the interest accrued. The scholarship committee will then distribute available funds among qualified applicants. Thus, there is no set amount for each award, and awards will vary from year to year. In general however, this scholarship is not intended to fully cover the costs of higher education, but can help reduce the financial burden on the student.

### **How and When Can I Apply?**

Applications for the Fannie Lou Hamer scholarship will open on December 1, 2023, and close on March 1, 2024. The application will be administered by UCC Justice and Local Church Ministries, and will be listed on the UCC Scholarships and Grants page:

<https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-we-give/scholarships-grants/>.

The application will include questions about your identity and interest in theology, your current and previous coursework, and the school you will be attending. Letters of recommendation, transcripts, and information about financial need may also be required.

Applications will be reviewed by the UCCDM scholarship committee, and decisions will be made by the end of May 2024.

## **How Can I Donate to the Fannie Lou Hamer Scholarship Fund?**

If you are attending General Synod 34, you can contribute during the offering at Closing Worship on Tuesday, July 4.

You can donate at the following link:

<https://support.ucc.org/disabilities-ministries>, or by texting UCCFLH to 41444.

You can also mail a check payable to the United Church of Christ, PO BOX 71957 Cleveland, OH 44194. Please note "Fannie Lou Hamer Fund" in the memo section on your check.

## **Does the UCCDM Offer Other Scholarships?**

Yes! The UCCDM oversees the Rev. Virginia Kreyer Endowed Scholarship for Theological Education and the Harold H. Wilke Scholarship. The Kreyer scholarship is available to people with disabilities pursuing authorized ministry in the UCC, and the Wilke scholarship is available to people with disabilities and those who work within the disability community. Both open on December 1, 2023. For more information and applications, please visit the UCC Ministry Education Scholarships page: <https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-we-give/scholarships-grants/ministry-education-scholarships/>.

## **How Can I Find Out More about the UCCDM?**

UCC Disabilities Ministries (UCCDM) envisions a world in which all people are included in the fullness of life because they are created in the image of God. We believe that all people deserve welcome, access, and belonging, and that their many markers of identity, including race and disability, are part of the beautiful diversity of the body of Christ. Our mission is to help all settings of the church to become Accessible to All.

For further information about UCCDM, please visit us at [www.uccdm.org](http://www.uccdm.org), or on our Facebook page.