



### About the Author

The Rev. Mel Schlachter lives and hobbles mostly in Iowa City, Iowa. He has been retired two years from parish ministry and pastoral counseling. He plans not to retire anytime soon from environmental work and winemaking.

### About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication written by beneficiaries of The Church Pension Fund. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission.

# VINTAGE VOICE



## That's the Breaks

By the Rev. Mel Schlachter

A few days after I broke my foot last summer and adopted crutches and knee scooter as locomotion, I remembered Harold Wilke and gave him a posthumous nod of thanks. Harold and his wife lived two doors down from us in White Plains, New York, in the 1970s. Come to find out, he was one of America's most prominent crusaders for modifying public spaces to accommodate disabilities.

A United Church of Christ minister, Harold spent his time traveling the country and lobbying for cuts in curbs, ramps into buildings, and the like. He plowed a lot of the ground for the Americans with Disabilities Act. He came to his vocation naturally — he had been born without arms. A wine and cheese gathering took a leap forward when low-key Harold came in the home, took off his shoes and took a seat, then responded affirmatively to an offer of a glass of wine. Without drawing attention to himself he smoothly grasped the stem of the glass between the toes of one foot and lifted it to his mouth. Harold's wife shared with us that he had been able to change pinned diapers on his children years before, just with his feet.

For someone who adapted so well to prevailing physical circumstances, Harold Wilke, in the end, helped this country adapt to the prevailing needs of those struggling with steps, doors, traffic intersections, and myriad other common conditions in the public space. When he started ticking off those who would benefit from city sidewalks without curbs to step off of — elderly shuffling along, mothers and dads pushing baby carriages, folks in wheelchairs, on and on — it made us wonder why we had not cut the curbs a long time ago.

And now I am definitely grateful that such amenities are the norm. I used to think that automatic doors would atrophy American muscles. Now I am grateful. I used to grab the wide expanse of the handicapped toilet stall if no one around looked like they needed it. In the future I will put up with the narrow ones, having asked in my crutchy existence a fully fit guy occupying a big stall to make it quick. I am grateful for the handicapped parking places now that I have a three-month windshield hanger. And I am grateful for the people

who hold open self-closing doors for me, many who say, “I’ve been there, buddy.” There are so many folks saying this that I believe the slogan, “We are all temporarily abled.”

A second minister friend would call my situation an “AFGE,” an acronym for “Another ... Growth Experience.” I am, I hope, only a temporary resident of the realm that requires its inhabitants to spend a lot of mental energy figuring out how we are going to get from here to there and back again. It takes all the focus of a ballet dancer honing his or her moves. What if I sit down there but can’t get back up? Now that I’ve come all this way I see eight steps between me and the car. How? One of my favorite pubs has a zillion steps in back and no parking on a busy street in front. How?

At this writing I have at least two months to go for healing of my left, no-weight-on-it-whatsoever foot (I can still drive). For all the bother, my primary emotion about it all is not frustration (there’s enough of that) but *gratitude* — for Harold, for the 25-year-old Americans with Disabilities Act, for blue parking places not being abused 98% of the time, for the helpful people I encounter most every day. Who would have thought?



19 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
[www.cpg.org](http://www.cpg.org)