

Welcome

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are WELCOME here.

No matter how you arrived, no matter how dressed up or down you are,
you are WELCOME here.

Whether you rolled in on wheels, ran in on little feet, walked in or ambled in,
you are WELCOME here.

Whatever your abilities, whatever your resources,
you are WELCOME here.

No matter who you love,
you are WELCOME here.

We are a congregation that is with you on the journey.

Invocation

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;
bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind;
it has high standards
and the world needs vision.

Bring them with you,
and your joy
and your passion.

Bring your loving,
and your courage
and your conviction.

Bring your need for healing,
and your power to heal.

here is work to do
and you have all that you need to do it
right here in this room.

- Angela Herrera

Prayer and Meditation

disABILITY Prayer, by Tina Yows,

Let us pray for the vision impaired...

Who can only see differences in people...

Not who that person is inside...

Let us pray for the speech impaired...

Who can only speak with harsh and hurtful words,

Instead of kindness and understanding....

Let us pray for the mentally disturbed...

Who cannot seem to care for anyone that is any different from themselves,

Instead of at least trying to love everyone, "Different" or not....

Let us pray for the hearing impaired...

Who can only hear the unspoken words,

Instead of listening for what someone is trying to tell them...

Please... Help these people who truly have DISabilities

So that this world can become a better place For ALL of your children.....

Amen!

AIM Worship Service

Today's service is to introduce you to a new UU congregational program. At General Assembly this year we launched a new program jointly sponsored by the UUA and EqUUal Access – a UU organization working to enable the full engagement of people with disabilities in UU communities **and** the broader society. The full name is Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry, AIM for short.

Before describing the particulars of this program, I want to tell some stories about congregations and their inclusion or exclusion of people with disabilities.

Bar Mitzvah for a Young Man with Brain Injury

Rabbi Steven Engel of the Congregation of Reform Judaism in Orlando, Florida, said “A young man with a serious brain injury became a mitzvah in our sanctuary. As he chanted the prayers, read from the Torah, and spoke about what his religion and community meant to him, there was not a dry eye in the entire room. In his accomplishment, in his wisdom, in his smile, God was surely present for each and every person there. Out of the supposed imperfection came one of the most sacred moments for our congregation.”

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Exclusion of a Son from a Worship Service

A parent wrote that “she had worked hard to involve her son with autism in the worship life of the congregation. His noises became problematic, and she moved with him to the rear of the church, then into the lobby. There, she noticed that while his speech and sounds were not intelligible, they were mimicking the pattern and cadence of the litany and liturgy. It was then that a deacon came up and asked them to leave because of the ongoing disturbance. The irony was that the Scripture reading for the morning was about welcoming the stranger and those who are different.”

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Young Man with a Developmental Disability Ministers to Grandparents

Two young adults with Down syndrome trained to be ushers in a Catholic parish on the Jersey shore. After one Saturday afternoon Mass, the mother of the younger boy couldn't find him. . . . She finally found him talking earnestly to an elderly couple. It turned out that they had come to Mass that afternoon for the first time, searching for solace and answers, because their first grandchild had just been born – with Down syndrome. Think of the incredible ministry done by that young man on that afternoon.

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Inclusion of a Man with Mental Illness

[As related by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, printed with permission.]

Nate was maybe in his 30s. He would sit in the front row rubbing his legs and bobbing up and down during the worship service. He was a bit awkward, his voice loud; he would disappear from time to time.

One weekday Donna and I were at a bridge party for the senior members of the congregation. Mostly in their 80s. A nice suburban apartment, plenty of appetizers, serious card playing and light conversation until the hostess said, "I don't know how you put up with that young man fidgeting around all the service. It's just terrible." What happened then left me stunned. One person said, "You do know it's his medication that makes him do that." And a retired nurse, had spoken to him and knew what had been bothering him. And a former University president, said, "I was once institutionalized." And someone else said, "My son has bouts like that." I didn't say a word. My amazement turned to pride, and I knew why Nate had kept coming. It was not about sermons whether scholarly or entertaining. It was not about universalism or our professed theology in a Loving God. It was our lived theology, God made manifest in the love that surrounded that young man.

Man with Developmental Disability Joins the Congregation

[As related by Rev. Shawn Newton, printed with permission.]

In a new member ceremony, Matthew, a man with developmental disabilities, joined our congregation. "Matthew cried through the whole thing, as did most of the congregation (including the minister!). It's become a point of reference in the congregation – that we touched up against something – that place where we often fear to tread.

"We created a special ceremony for Matthew so that he could participate on his own terms:

We asked him if he would come and be with us all on Sundays? Sing songs with us?
Share your life with us?

He enthusiastically said “Yes!”

The church members promised to open their hearts to receive Matthew, to be changed by his presence, and to be willing to open our hearts to the gift of his ministry among them.

Today’s service is to introduce you to a new UU congregational study and action program. At General Assembly this year we launched a new program jointly sponsored by the UUA and EqUUal Access – a UU organization working to enable the full engagement of people with disabilities in UU communities **and** the broader society. The full name is Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry, AIM for short.

The AIM program is for congregations seeking to embrace disability as a dimension of human difference. AIM congregations welcome, embrace, integrate, and support people with disabilities and their families.

We gratefully acknowledge the influence of two UUA programs after which this program is patterned: the Welcoming Congregation Program and the Green Sanctuary Program, both of which have helped and supported the development of AIM. Similar to both of its forbearers, the true work of AIM is when a congregation engages deeply with what it means to live with a disability in our congregation and in our world.

The AIM program’s sacred challenge to congregations is to recognize the humanity and gifts of all people. It honors the importance of religious life in living with disabilities, and challenges each and all of us to build faith communities that can be a central source of support and action for all. AIM honors both the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the web that connects us all.

It addresses physical, mental and developmental disabilities.

In the early stages of AIM, a congregation conducts an assessment of accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in the congregation today. AIM always starts from where you are. Based on your self-assessment, you set priorities for where to focus your efforts. Then, the congregation submits an action plan describing worship, workshops, and projects that will help them address their priorities.

Next the congregation will have that plan reviewed by the AIM Coordinating Committee; upon approval, they will then implement the plan. When the plan has been implemented, the congregation applies to be recognized as an AIM Certified Congregation. The final step? Celebrate your achievement!

The rallying cry of the disability rights movement, going back to its early days, is “nothing about us without us.” The team a congregation puts together to lead the AIM process is an opportunity to model inclusive leadership.

The intent of the program is to meet each congregation where it is and move it forward at a reasonable pace. Every three years the congregation will conduct a re-assessment and report on its progress. Between assessments, continuing to work on other identified priorities may help to maintain formal recognition.

The process does not grade congregations; it moves a congregation forward, based on its unique resources, needs, and abilities.

Making a congregation accessible and inclusive is a continuous process. It is often difficult work, involving personal and culture change. And, after having put the hearts and spirits of the congregation into completing all the work it can, there will be new challenges ahead.

For the past four years, a team of us from EqUUal Access and the UUA has been working on this program. I have led this effort.

The program asks congregations to address several areas:

- Worship services that focus on disability, often having a member of the congregation speak about living with disability and the importance of a faith community's inclusion.
- Accessibility: adding handrails, new signage, printing accessible orders of service, training ushers, installing sound systems, and re-designing websites.
- Inclusion: changing attitudes and practices such that people with disabilities are welcomed into full participation in church activities. Actions may involve workshops, revising bylaws or training RE teachers.
- One of the requirements of the program is to have at least one project focusing on disability justice.
- There have been eight field test sites using this program for the past two years. We have learned a lot... and so have the congregations. Here's a quote from field test team member, Kate Warner, from Ann Arbor:
- "I feel that I have a chance to make a genuine contribution to the church through my membership on this team. Deciding to be inclusive is often thought of as for the benefit of a special population. But my experience tells me that it benefits the whole population."

The program materials are all available on the UUA's website. We invite you and your congregations to find out more about the program and its sacred challenge to live out our faith. You can learn more on the UUA and the EqUUal Access websites.

Most of the stories one hears about inclusion of people with disabilities in congregational life involve tears. Tears not only from the people being included, but from the people doing the including. What do those tears signify? Why were they shed? I believe it was because people in the congregation in a deeply heartfelt emotional way came to see themselves and their congregation in a new way. They were now a congregation that welcomed the stranger. Really welcomed them. And saw the beauty of the stranger's contributions to the congregation.

Bill Gaventa, a man who ministers to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, writes and lectures around the country, offering some clear, key messages about inclusion:ⁱ "It is not so much about 'special ministries' to 'special people,'" he says, "but about hospitality to the stranger, for in a so-called normal world, people with disabilities are so often the quintessential stranger, and our task as hosts is to be open to the messages and gifts from God that the stranger often bears. It's about helping all people feel safe in congregational sanctuaries, seeing people with disabilities with gifts who are also called to serve, learning to communicate God's word through all kinds of strategies."

"As interest in this intersection of faith, theology, and disability emerges and becomes more visible in many ways," said Gaventa, "my excitement about the intersections of theology, disability, and ministry is as strong as ever. . . . Seeking and building community has been my personal and my professional journey. The paradoxical question is, who has helped whom?"

We need to live out the challenge of our faith. Love is the central question we are trying to answer with our lives. How do I love my neighbor, America, the world, myself? We know Universalism is about love but so is Unitarianism because it is about our Oneness, God's oneness and our own.

So, I can say I know of no better way to think of our Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry certification work than being "about transforming our perception of the world" and learning how to live lives of love.

If any of you are interested in starting the AIM journey at MPUUC, let me know.

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Benediction

Before President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA 25 years ago this Sunday, July 26, a blessing was offered by the Reverend Harold H. Wilke, a United Church of Christ minister and longtime advocate for people with disabilities who was himself armless.

The inclusion of a blessing at the signing ceremony was suggested by Ginny Thornburgh, Former Director, Interfaith Initiative, AAPD. It is believed to be the only time a prayer has been part of a Presidential signing ceremony.

A Blessing
For the Presidential Signing
of the Americans with Disabilities Act
The White House - July 26, 1990

Exactly 25 years ago today!
The Reverend Harold H. Wilke

“Let my people go!” was your decree, oh God, commanding that all your children be freed from the bonds of slavery.

Today we celebrate the breaking of chains which have held back millions of Americans with disabilities.

Today we celebrate the granting to them of full citizenship and access to the Promised Land of work, service and community.

Bless our President as he signs the Americans with Disabilities Act and strengthen our resolve as we take up the task, knowing our work has just begun.

Bless the American people and move them to discard those old beliefs and attitudes that limit and diminish those among us with disabilities.

Our prayer is in your name, oh God, whom we call by many names: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful One; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of Rebecca and Sarah and Ruth; the Ground of all Being, the Infinite Source of Love and Light.

Amen.

The UU AIM program is part of the fall-out of the ADA. May it be a worthy successor!
May it be so.