

AIM Certification at the First UU Church of Rochester, MN

In 2011, before our congregation was awarded the AIM certification in 2018, our church held a social justice empowerment workshop. A disability task force formed as a result. Members included parents of children living with disabilities, individuals experiencing a disability and professionals serving the disability community. While congregants living with a disability face physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory barriers, often the most significant attitudes and behaviors of those around are some of the worst obstacles. Our goal was to address the culture within our congregation, creating lasting change to intentionally include and accommodate people with disabilities – both apparent and non-apparent. The ultimate task was to help congregants see that people with disabilities positively affect and enhance diversity and inclusion in congregational life. The AIM process was a natural extension of this work, deepening our efforts, providing us with a toolbox of ideas, methods, and options to reach systemic change within all aspects of congregational life. Failure was not in our vocabulary!

While addressing each component of this certification, though daunting at times, we soon realized that its purpose was not checking off the box and assuming we were done. Rather, we needed to consistently, gradually, chip away to make attitudinal changes that would stick, beginning with building a social ramp – not just a wheelchair one. This meant educating congregants through forums, newsletters, and workshops, about disability etiquette, using Identity First Language, encouraging congregants of all ages to model appropriate interactions and communications. It meant more than clearing physical pathways.

We found that many families were looking for a church home where their children who have a disability feel welcome. Much time and efforts were devoted to RE teacher and youth leader training to include kids with disabilities more fully in congregational life. Adding children's

books to the church library, featuring kids with disabilities as typical, was a valuable and simple resource for the classroom toolbox. In a church service designed to broaden understanding, the siblings of children with disabilities were invited to share personal stories about their family relationships. The purpose was to remind congregants that family members living with a person with a disability often have countless stressors in their lives. As a caring congregation, these families should not be forgotten.

For us, the AIM program served as a launching point from which to extend efforts beyond our church walls. It was important for our congregants to understand the disability history of our own community and the gradual changes that have occurred to build a more inclusive town. From presenting a service about people institutionalized at the state hospital, to a presentation of inclusive community services that have grown and established over the years, church members began to understand how the past impacts us, and how the present provides hope and change if we are aware and engaged. By keeping congregants abreast of upcoming legislation that directly impacted folks in the disability arena, we provided them the advocacy tools –whether, petition, personal letters, email messages, etc. to be the voice and advocates of those who often go unheard.

There are many more examples, and our work is an ongoing journey. Our faith community is on its way toward fully embracing people with disabilities as partners in our shared ministry. What has given us an incredible foundation will carry over as our congregation is now in discernment about our future – whether to stay in our existing location or build new. Our church family is growing and our 50 plus year old building has outlived its usefulness, and any future possibilities includes what we have learned and gathered over the years. Having the stamp of approval – being officially certified as an AIM congregation, has established a standard that cannot be left behind.

Thank you to the AIM program which helped make our church a healthier community, to grow and become a place where everybody belongs, and everybody serves.

Gail Bishop