

AAIDD Interest Network Annual Plan & Yearly Report

Planning and reporting on Interest Network activities designed to fulfil their purpose.
(See the AAIDD *Interest Networks Leadership Manual* for the purpose of the Interest Networks.)

Interest Network: Religion & Spirituality

Lead Contact Person(s):

Keith Dow, kdow@karis.org (2025–2026)

Sarah McKenney, smckenney@stonebelt.org (Vice-President)

Next Scheduled Election & Leadership Position(s) that will be Open for Nomination:

June 2026, Vice-President (Co-Chair)

2024-2025 Report

For the year that **just ended** (July 1-June 30), indicate objectives met, activities completed, and funds used. In addition, please note if/how any activities enhanced diversity, equity, inclusion, or justice.

Webinars and Training

In Spring 2025, the Interest Network released an on-demand webinar series titled *Seasons of Grief*, produced in partnership with Disability Belongs and sponsored by Karis Disability Services and Heritage Christian Services. The series included five short modules focused on disability-informed and spiritually-grounded approaches to grief, including:

1. *Grief 101: Understanding Grief and Loss* – with Jess Jankowski, LCSW
2. *Rituals and Remembrance* – with Tammy Bassar, Shelly Christensen, Diane Sturmer
3. *Neurodiversity and Grief* – with Rev. Bill Gaventa
4. *Reframing Hope* – with Keith Dow and Sarah McKenney
5. *Grief Rituals and Traditions* – an interfaith panel exploring accessible mourning practices

All videos were made publicly available via our website, social media, and on Disability Belong's site with downloadable transcripts, captioning, and American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation.

Chaplaincy Certification (Legacy Program)

In 2024–2025, Ed Johnston successfully completed the Network's legacy chaplaincy-oriented Spiritual Support Professional Certification. His application demonstrated a holistic and respectful approach to spiritual support, particularly in end-of-life care, team collaboration, and supporting people across spiritual traditions. While this original certification program is now sunsetting, its insights are informing our current redesign for broader accessibility and relevance.

DSP Education and Support

The 2025 *Seasons of Grief* webinar series served as a foundational resource toward the Interest Network's ongoing commitment to DSP education and support. The series is intended to inform a broader initiative to equip DSPs with spiritual care competencies, both in supporting the faith lives of people with I/DD and in attending to their own grief and resilience.

In 2024–2025, the steering committee developed a plan for a Religion & Spirituality Certification geared toward DSPs and agency staff. This framework draws on existing content from the Stone Belt Spiritual

Due August 1, 2025

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Engagement Coach program and our archived webinars, supplemented by new exercises and comprehension questions. This certification is designed to be both accessible and practically oriented for use in service agency settings.

Re-Launch of Mass Newsletter

After several years of inactivity, the Interest Network successfully relaunched its newsletter in Spring 2025. Sent to a subscriber list of over 610 people, the newsletter has become a vital tool for communication, outreach, and sharing resources across the Network's growing audience. It helps expand the reach of AAIDD and invite others into membership.

CQL Collaboration

Our partnership with the Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL) continued in 2024–2025 with significant developments. CQL served as one of the sponsors for our 2025 Forum at the AAIDD Annual Meeting, alongside Makom and the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

We also began collaborating on a joint article and accompanying webinar for Fall 2025, focusing on non-traditional forms of spirituality and inclusive spiritual supports. The article, currently in development, will be co-authored by representatives from the AAIDD Religion and Spirituality Interest Network, Accord MN, and Camphill. Each contributor will bring a distinct perspective: organizational, personal, and provider.

The article (approx. 2,000 words) and the corresponding October/November 2025 webinar will explore spirituality from these three angles. Our Network is contributing a 500-word introductory section and 15 minutes of webinar content, including participation in a Q&A. This collaboration deepens our commitment to shaping inclusive spiritual supports in dialogue with national accreditation and advocacy organizations.

Monthly Meetings

The Interest Network met monthly throughout the 2024–2025 year, typically gathering on the third Wednesday of each month via Zoom. Attendance averaged 10–11 participants per meeting, with steady engagement from both long-time members and newer contributors. Discussions focused on planning ongoing initiatives, including the webinar series, certification development, and CQL collaboration. The consistent rhythm of these meetings supported strong working group coordination and a shared sense of direction.

The Network maintained several working groups focused on key initiatives such as the webinar series, CQL collaboration, communication and promotional outreach. These groups enabled more focused planning and leveraged the strengths of members between full committee gatherings.

Meetings also served as spaces for mutual learning, with members regularly sharing books, podcasts, and tools related to disability, spirituality, and community life. This practice fostered a culture of curiosity, collegiality, and ongoing formation.

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Annual Events

The 2025 Annual Forum, titled *Spirituality and the Health and Wellness of People with IDD*, was held on June 23, 2025, at the Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. The Forum was co-sponsored by CQL, Makom, and NADSP and featured a mix of in-person and virtual attendance, with over 20 participants in total.

Highlights included:

- Presentation of the *Reimagining Spirituality Leadership Award* to Rev. Dr. Sarah McKenney, Spiritual Support and Volunteer Coordinator at Stone Belt Arc, recognizing her pioneering work in the Spiritual Engagement Coach program.
- A keynote address by Dr. Christina Puchalski, Director of the GW Institute for Spirituality and Health, exploring intersections of spirituality and clinical care.
- A panel discussion moderated by Deborah Fisher featuring Erik Carter, David Ervin, Bill Gaventa, and Rev. Dr. McKenney on applying spiritual insights to the IDD community.

The annual Business Meeting followed immediately after the Forum and was conducted in a hybrid format to accommodate the virtual participation of both the President and Vice-President.

A group dinner was held later that evening at Ted's Montana Grill, with six registered for informal conversation and connection.

Scholarship/Support for Self-Advocates

No self-advocate scholarship was awarded in 2024–2025. However, the Network plans to develop and launch an application process to support self-advocate participation in the 2026 Annual Meeting and related activities.

2025-2026 Plan: Goals, Objectives, Activities, and Strategies

For the **coming year** (July 1-June 30), describe the planned objectives, activities, and proposed expenditure of funds. In addition, please note if/how any activities will address diversity, equity, inclusion, or justice.

The Religion and Spirituality Interest Network will continue to build on its momentum from 2024–2025 through the following initiatives:

1. Continue to Broaden and Deepen Engagement

We will maintain the short-format, accessible webinar approach with a new series likely focusing on spirituality as a dimension of holistic health and a social determinant of health. Newsletter communications will continue to reach our 610+ subscribers, and promotional tools—including a conference handout or brochure for the 2026 Annual Meeting—will support wider awareness and recruitment.

As part of these engagement efforts, we will also begin identifying spiritual support leaders—such as chaplains and spiritual care providers—currently working within service agencies. Our aim is to offer connection, encouragement, and shared learning opportunities. This outreach will help us better understand who is doing this work in the field, support their efforts, and learn from their practice in turn.

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2. Invite Diverse Participation

We continue to be committed to expanding beyond our current Christian and Jewish base to include people from a broader range of traditions, including those who are spiritual but not religious. It is hoped that partnering with CQL on non-traditional forms of spirituality will help with this initiative. We will also launch an application process to support self-advocate participation at the 2026 Annual Meeting, possibly focusing on self-advocacy groups close to the Annual Meeting

3. Enhance DSP Education and Support

Building on the Seasons of Grief series, we will develop additional training content and reflection exercises to support DSPs both in their work and in processing grief and meaning themselves.

4. Develop Religion & Spirituality Certification

We will build on our prior certification efforts and library of resources to develop an accessible and contextually sensitive Religion & Spirituality Certification. This new framework will draw from previous materials, webinar content, and structured exercises, with AI-supported transcript analysis helping to identify key themes, gaps, and opportunities in the learning design. Insights from providers like Stone Belt will continue to inform its relevance and accessibility.

5. Continue CQL Collaboration

We will finalize and publish our co-authored article on non-traditional spirituality in collaboration with CQL, Accord, and Camphill. The accompanying webinar will take place in October or November 2025.

6. Annual Forum and Leadership Award Planning

Planning is already underway for the 2026 Forum and Reimagining Spirituality Leadership Award. This year, we aim to increase clarity and transparency around the nomination process, ensuring the award reflects a wide range of contributions to spiritual support and inclusion. A call for nominations and early promotion will begin in late 2025. Planning is already underway for the 2026 Forum and award. A call for nominations and early promotion will begin in late 2025.

7. Budget/Support Considerations

We intend to allocate funds toward the new self-advocate support application, accessibility accommodations for webinars (e.g., ASL, CART), and further promotional outreach.

This strategic direction reinforces our commitment to equity, inclusion, and the flourishing of spiritual lives across the disability community. We seek to serve not only as a convening space but as a catalyst for systems and cultural change within service provision and faith communities.