

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): Chair: Sarah McKenney, smckenney@stonebelt.org Vice-Chair: Tamara Besser, TamaraBesser@jcfs.org Outgoing Chair: Keith Dow, kdow@karis.org	
Next Scheduled Election & Leadership Position(s) that will be Open for Nomination: June 2027, Chair and Vice-Chair	
2025-2026 Yearly Report: Activity Highlights 1. Newsletter, Website, and Social Media Engagement After a successful relaunch in Spring 2025, our newsletter has become our primary communication vehicle, growing to over 610 subscribers. This platform, along with our Facebook page and LinkedIn profile , has allowed us to effectively share resources, announce award winners, promote fundraising initiatives, and coordinate attendance for our webinar series. 2. Webinars & Collaborative Partnerships We significantly expanded our reach through co-hosted educational events: a. Faith Inclusion Network (Nov 5, 2025): Co-hosted the webinar Images of God: Through the Lens of Disability , a 60-minute session exploring practical, theologically grounded ways to widen participation in worship and spiritual life, grounded in the lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities. The session was co-presented with Lorie (Kingston, ON) and Raeel (Hamilton, ON) — two participants in the project who spoke from their own experience of faith, belonging, and what it means to be seen and heard in the church. b. Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL) (Dec 3, 2025): Collaborated on resources regarding non-traditional spirituality. Tammy Besser and Dr. Sharon Coutyryer from the network presented during the webinar Non-Traditional Spirituality: Putting It Into Practice , complemented by a published article Tammy Besser contributed to that expands the conceptualization of spiritual support beyond institutional religion. c. Faith and Culture Network (May 14, 2026): Hosted “Stop Talking About Supporting Spirituality. Start Doing Something!” in partnership with The Centre for Civic Religious Literacy and several BC-based organizations. This session focused on moving from conversation to practical action within the developmental services sector. 3. Leadership Awards & Recognition a. 2025 Recipient: Rev. Dr. Sarah McKenney (June 19, 2025), honored for her pioneering "Spiritual Engagement Coach" program at Stone Belt Arc.	

Due July 31, 2026

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- b. **2026 Recipient:** [Joohi Tahir](#) (June 22, 2026), Co-Founder of MUHSEN, recognized for 18 years of advancing accessibility for Muslims with disabilities.

4. Scholarship & Fundraising

- a. **Self-Advocate Scholarship:** Announced [a \\$500 scholarship](#) on March 11, 2026, to assist a self-advocate in attending the AAIDD Annual National Conference. We didn't have any applicants this year.
- b. **Creative Arts Interest Network Collaboration:** Partnered with the Creative Arts Interest Network to fund a conference scholarship for self-advocate Emma, with our Network contributing \$198 plus a \$50 lunch ticket to complete the funding package.
- c. **Martha Perske Prints Fundraiser:** Re-engaged this fundraiser in April 2026. This initiative sold original prints by Martha Perske to support the Network's operational needs and ongoing projects.

5. DSP Education & Certification

We have continued to develop our "Religion & Spirituality Certification" framework. By leveraging previous webinar content and resources, we are creating a contextually sensitive model that addresses the needs of DSPs. This work aims to provide the practical "how-to" guidance that providers frequently request regarding professional spiritual support. Members of Heritage Christian services have engaged with the material, and we presented a certificate to Mary Barkey from Karis Disability Services, the first person to complete the material in its entirety. Mary noted: "Self-directed learning is always available; however, having someone at the other end brings an enrichment, accountability for completion, and a sense of support." This feedback highlights the ongoing need for learning partnership to ensure the certification serves as a robust formation process.

2026-2027 Plan: Goals, Objectives, Activities, and Strategies

For the **coming year** (July 1-June 30), describe the planned objectives, activities, and proposed expenditure of funds.

1. Continue to Broaden and Deepen Engagement

- a. We will maintain the short-format, accessible webinar approach. This year, we may create webinars, but instead of a series format, we will respond to necessary topics and needs. Since we have a large library of webinars and topics, our hope is to focus on responding to current needs.
- b. Secondly, we plan to pull from our current webinar library to make short videos/clips to recirculate those via social media to increase engagement. Alongside this goal we will continue to explore and work on a partnership with [My Quillo](#) app to get some of these videos onto that accessible platform for people with I/DD.
- c. We will continue our newsletter communications to 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.

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- d. As part of these engagement efforts, we will also continue to identify 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.

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. In 2026 we have launched an application process to support self-advocate participation and plan to more broadly publicize this next year while focusing on self-advocacy groups close to the Annual Meeting

3. **Enhance DSP Education and Support**

Create and share resources, tools, and possibly mini-webinars to educate, equip, and support DSPs and service providers on HOW to provide spiritual engagement support. A study found that DSPs and service providers seem to agree that spiritual health is important, but they struggle with knowing which questions they can/can't ask professionally, logistical questions, and ensuring they have support from their supervisors and leaders. So we hope to begin responding to this need by providing education, resources, etc.

4. **Develop Religion & Spirituality Certification**

In 2026 we built on our prior certification efforts and library of resources to develop an accessible and contextually sensitive Religion & Spirituality Certification. This year, we hope to continue building on this, make improvements, advertise and encourage people to complete the certification, and reassess to drive continued improvement.

5. **Continue CQL Collaboration**

We plan to continue our CQL Collaboration and engage in projects together where they fit.

6. **Annual Forum and Leadership Award Planning**

Planning is already underway for the 2027 Forum and award. A call for nominations and early promotion will begin in late 2026.

7. **Budget/Support Considerations**

We intend to continue 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.