



Access & Inclusive Mission Handbook

Interview with the Rev Timothy H. Little, DMin, BCC
By Marcia A. Murphy, Moderator, PEIA AIM Network

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*Ubi caritas et amor,
Deus ibi est*

*Where charity and love are,
God is there*



As an advocate for disabled persons, Marcia A. Murphy of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church of Iowa City, IA, applied for and gained approval from the Presbytery of East Iowa [PEIA] leadership to officially establish the AIM Presbytery Network in 2014.

AIM stands for Access & Inclusive Mission.

Mission Statement

The focus of AIM is to increase disability awareness and inclusion for those with physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges; encouraging our religious and civic communities to be welcoming places for all!

The AIM Presbytery Network by the guidance of the Spirit will continue this valuable work so that:

- All are welcomed into the fellowship of God's community
- We can discern the unique needs of persons with disabilities and prepare to openly provide inclusion
- Break down the barriers
- Celebrate the unique gifts of all of God's children

Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable....

1Cor 12:22 NIV

Introduction

An interview conducted by Marcia A. Murphy with The Reverend Dr. Timothy H. Little, D. Min, [Doctor of Ministry]; BCC, [Board Certified Chaplain]; ACPE Supervisor [Association of Clinical Pastoral Education]; Retired Chaplain, Pastoral/Spiritual Counselor/Therapist. Rev. Little was born without sight in his right eye and only limited vision of 20/200 in his left eye. He lived his entire life with this visual impairment until 20 years ago when he also lost sight in his left eye making him totally blind. He is the founder of AIM [Access & Inclusive Mission] He resides in Sacramento, California.

Marcia A. Murphy is a writer and speaker <http://www.hopeforrecovery.com/> She is also the AIM Network Moderator of the PEIA [Presbytery of East Iowa].



Marcia: Rev. Little, could you please tell us a little about yourself? What is your background, your career and things that brought you to the point of starting an AIM committee at your church? What was it in your life that brought you to that?

Rev. Little: I will start with my background and what got me concerned for AIM work: My background starts with the fact that I was born too soon. I was very premature and therefore was a very tiny tot. While given a much more obnoxious name (Archibald Alexander Little, III) which was carrying on family traditions, I ended up mostly being called, Tiny Tim. And it wasn't until I was about 11 or 12 years old that I had a chance to pick my own name. That's when I picked Timothy. But in some sense being small, being tiny, having a struggle with health in early life was a big factor. I was the child of two physicians, two pediatricians, and obviously they and their community took very good care of me.

I did at birth and for most of my life have 20/200 vision in my left eye and nothing in my right eye. And I think that in many ways that, basically, set some things in motion: the fact that my parents were doctors, the fact that I didn't see well, and the fact that I was well cared for and, moreover, that I was in a family that valued education. I was really very much supported in my education and at one point, in the fourth grade, I was sent away to Perkins Institute School for the Blind in Watertown, near Boston, Massachusetts to learn how to use Braille. I don't know how to use Braille today, but I did for quite a while then. And I learned something, I think, by being at Perkins about how much effort went into helping persons with sight difficulty, to actually cope with the world in which we live in spite of the disability.

I'm sure that had a lot to do with the rest of the decisions I made growing up partly because I never saw myself as second class but I did understand myself as a person with a disability and that I needed to do those things which help to overcome that disability so that I could live as much a normal and marvelous life as possible. And I think that also had a lot to do with my attitude, as well as issues that I studied over time and the sense of my call into the ministry as opposed to—I might have been called to science if I followed my parent's group. My disability influenced the direction of my call into ministry and my sense of being able to participate in helping others with physical and subsequently, emotional disabilities.

I was much more aware, growing up, of persons with physical disabilities as opposed to persons with emotional or learning disabilities. I think that background had a lot to do with setting me on a path that included more than 40 years as a chaplain and, probably, as a person with concerns for helping religious communities reach out and be inclusive of those with disabilities. That's a long answer to your question, I think.

Marcia: Rev. Little, please continue with your story.

Rev. Little: I did much of my training at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and then with the CPE program at Boston State Hospital and Boston City Hospital. I knew that I wanted to be a chaplain in a mental health setting and I looked around the country and sent out my qualifications. I eventually chose, after several visits, to accept a call to the Mental Health Institute in Iowa. Now, I spent only about three years there in Iowa. My wife and I lived in Mt. Pleasant, a very small town and we were very much a part of the local church there and were concerned about social justice issues and my wife, Sandy, was an observer on the school board, and so forth. But then we received a call to the Georgia Mental Health Institute where I was for 18 years. Then in 1988, we came out to Sacramento, to the University of California Davis Medical Center to essentially start a clinical pastoral education program (chaplaincy program), there for USD Medical Center. It was when we were here in Sacramento, that after a while we became members of Westminster Presbyterian Church, one of the major downtown Presbyterian churches.

Very early on—I probably need to say—my wife, as an adolescent, got polio and throughout her life exceeded what her body could allow her to do and by the time we came out here to Sacramento she was using a power-chair. And that probably had something to do with our developing the AIM committee at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

The parking lot at Westminster was in the back of the church. The backdoor, which was the best way into the church, had four steps so her chair was not going to go in the back. We had to go around to the front and actually go past the front door to a side door that had a ramp up into a courtyard to allow her to go into the church. The committee very quickly talked and said, "Could we do something about putting a ramp down the back stairs?" They were not steep stairs; they were really very sloping stairs. But at first we spent a lot of time in deciding we couldn't do a ramp, it was going to cost a lot of money.

Finally, the AIM committee took a look at it and together with the pastor we put some boards down that allowed those steps to be traveled as a ramp. It was a little shaky but we found out we could in fact

build a ramp. It was not going to be quite satisfactory for the standards that are dictated by the rules regarding ramps but it was going to be pretty close. And it was very easy.

Sometime later our AIM committee saw that we needed to do something about an opener on the door from the ramp in front that opened into the sanctuary. And one of our people on the committee decided to make that a memorial contribution to honor her mother.

What I'm saying is, all sorts of projects began to develop including deciding to make some pew openings—shortening some pews—so that people in chairs could be close to family as opposed to having to sit up front or out back.

So the committee got formed to do some very practical kinds of things and began to discover more and more how to rearrange the bathrooms so they could be more accessible for people with wheelchairs. The committee began while looking for very practical answers to help the church find ways—without spending an arm and a leg—to change some things. And, finally, our elevator broke down and that took a good bit of money to fix, to make it work right. One of the things that that included was putting a phone inside the elevator so that if someone got stuck they could still phone out.

Marcia: *“Were there any attitudinal barriers to work on?”*

Rev. Little: It may be that the physical barriers are the easiest to address. I think the attitudinal issues are a little more difficult. I think there is a natural tendency on our part to respond in a certain way to persons who are different than ourselves, whether it's racial or ethnic, and certainly people with obvious disabilities, physical or emotional. There is a resistance, an unconscious tendency to not be quite comfortable with persons with disabilities and we need to work on overcoming that. How do we do that? By exposing ourselves to a lot of persons with disabilities, by welcoming folks, by going up to them and introducing ourselves—welcoming them as we would welcome anyone and to begin to ask them how can we best meet their needs? How can we best serve them? How can we best incorporate them into our life together as people trying to care for one another? And sometimes that's going to get us into some very difficult situations, but we need to stay with it and overcome some of our resistance and our unconscious tendency to pull away.

While I've talked about some very practical changes that the AIM committee sought to make for our congregation, i.e., to make it more accessible, the real issue is that people with disabling conditions often are experienced by members of the congregation, who don't share disabilities, as being “different.” And being different, we then tend to not be as welcoming to them. Now, nobody in the church is intentionally rejecting any person. But we all have a tendency to feel some degree of difficulty in reaching out to people who are very different from ourselves. And the more different they are, the more difficult it is for us to bridge the barrier. And often, our hesitation and uneasiness is hardly even known to us—we have to reflect very much to be able to break through our own resistance. I think that is especially true with people who have learning disabilities, or who have weird ways of dealing with speech, those with difficulties with dealing with emotions. And a lot of times we don't intend to be rejecting but we're not necessarily welcoming.

If you would look at the biblical story of the blind man to whom Jesus was able to restore sight, a lot of people were upset that Jesus restored his sight because a disability was by definition caused because someone had sinned. So we dealt with our unconscious uncomfortableness by assuming they sinned or his or her parents must have sinned.

The other issue was that the young man whose sight was restored disrupted the social welfare system of his day in as much as he had been sitting on the side of the road with a bowl or something to receive handouts, and people could feel good because they were helping him out not seeing that they were making him dependent upon their meager contributions. Since the disabled weren't receiving their dues anymore, they weren't feeling so good anymore. And I think that has a lot to say about how we reach out to persons with disabilities in our churches. I can't think of a church that would say up front, "We don't want any people with disabilities in our church." Every church I've known about wants to draw people in, that's the intention. But many churches don't quite know how, how to overcome their own uncomfortableness with people with disabilities. And how to respect persons with disabilities as children of God with a disability.

My disability does not define entirely who I am. It does give me a challenge. It means I have to think about things in a different way; but it does not define who I am. I'm not, therefore, the blind man. I happen to be blind and this is part of who I am as a person and to be celebrated, and not to be a barrier between us. Now, one of the things that means—and sometimes I have to tell people this—if people come up and start talking to me, it is helpful if they tell me who they are, even if they have a name tag on, this doesn't do me a bit of good! And while I get fairly comfortable with learning people's voice tone, I don't always know how to recognize someone. Most people can look around them to see who people are because they can see physical conditions; but, even so, we all need to greet one another by name to remind one another who we are as opposed to assuming we can figure that out. That's a welcoming gesture for people, at least those who want to come to engage me in conversation.

The other thing that happens—and this happens a lot at church—at times after the worship service there will be a big crowd and we're milling around at fellowship hour and sharing together, and I'll be talking to somebody and all of a sudden they're not there but I don't know that. They've caught the eye of somebody across the room and are headed across the room, and it does feel a little silly for me to be talking to thin air. So I think persons in our congregations need to think carefully about how we welcome one another into the fellowship of the church and it is very important that churches be places that support and encourage one another not only in the faith but in all walks of life.

Marcia: Rev. Little, if you were to create a mission statement for AIM work, how would you summarize it within a few sentences?

Rev. Little: I would include in the mission statement for an AIM Committee the following objectives:

1. Become actively involved in welcoming persons with disabling conditions into the congregation
2. Evaluate the physical building plan for ways in which the church can be more welcoming

3. Assist leaders, committees, and the congregation to reflect on ways in which they have resisted reaching out to persons with disabling conditions and to help them to learn how to put forward a more positive welcoming atmosphere

Marcia: Rev. Little, what are some ways for an AIM committee or church to accomplish the AIM objectives or goals?

Rev. Little: I think for us to deal with our own internal resistance, attitudes, our biases, we need to find opportunities to reach out and welcome persons with disabilities into our fellowship, to look for opportunities to gather together. It may well be that we need to go out of the church to where people are, where people are gathering with particular disabilities. A case in point: We at Westminster thought that we needed to welcome people who are hard of hearing into our fellowship. One of the things we did was that a couple of members of our AIM committee went and met with the Association of Hearing Disabled Persons. And what we discovered was that they have a hard time meeting with us, meeting with hearing and sighted congregations and they have a need for a special kind of equipment and hand signing. They gather together to support one another and they were really not prepared to come and join us. We did not continue with the project. I think we could have continued by saying to them that our building or location is open to you to use and then maybe over time you will feel comfortable in actually engaging with us in a way that can be useful for you and to us. We didn't go that far, but I think it might have been the next practical step; plus to say our fellowship hall is yours for no cost at all.

Marcia: Rev. Little, how did you find people to be members of your AIM committee at Westminster?

Rev. Little: First of all, a couple of people I talked with said, "I think it's a good idea." A person I was comfortable with said, "I'll chair it!" And I said, "Great; that's absolutely wonderful!" And she was an elder so she sort of had priority in that sense. We just gathered a few people around us. After we had been meeting for about three years, a young lady and her husband joined the church and she was poorly sighted, blind, and she was on a state board for offering services for the blind. So of course we captured those people into our work. We kept looking for people we could talk into being part of the team. We did not have to worry about issues of whether they could be voted in or not. We essentially formed a committee that was willing to work together around these issues.

Marcia: Thank you. Now to a broader stance, how would you relate the topic of social justice with disability awareness and inclusion in the churches and in the greater community? What are your thoughts on that?

Rev. Little: Okay, I think the first thing that I would want to look at is that there has been legislation since the 1960's that tries to acknowledge that there are things as a society or a country, that we need to do to provide more effectively for persons with disabling conditions. There was some good effort but an awful lot of people didn't benefit for a long time. Employment for persons who are blind still isn't very good. Now I have to say I've been fortunate in that I've been fairly well open to employment. But there are a lot of blind people, people with a disability, and that disability gets in the way of their being able to be employed. There's the whole issue of, for instance, stores being more welcoming by fixing the

problem of steps; being open to allowing people to come in whether they have wheelchairs or they walk well, and so forth.

I remember early on in our time in Sacramento, somebody took us to a restaurant and we discovered that the restaurant really was up on the second floor and that the only way for my wife, in her chair, to enter the restaurant, was to be taken up an elevator which was used by the restaurant to bring up food and to bring all the garbage back down. So it was not a very convenient way to get us into that restaurant.

Now some of the laws regarding open accommodation have been strengthened over the years, certainly in the 90's and the first part of 2000. There have been improvements some of which have resulted in providing better for our military folks returning with major disabilities. But we certainly need to be a more open country in terms of what needs to take place. It is still very easy to go to a hotel and ask for the accommodations for disability and to discover that what is being provided just isn't adequate. The important thing is we've come a long way, and the church has not always been out front in this. It has taken churches a long time to realize what barriers there are to full participation for persons with disabilities.

In some sense churches are in a unique situation. They cannot be sued like stores can be sued or restaurants can be sued for not providing adequate accommodations. For instance, a restaurant can be sued if they refuse to allow a guide dog. A friend of mine who is totally blind had to take a restaurant to court for not letting his seeing-eye dog accompany him into the restaurant. A church as a non-profit corporation, can't be sued for having too many steps, not having accommodations for restrooms, an elevator or the like because it is a non-profit corporation. However, if they are open 3-4 nights for a theatrical production or operate a pre-school and they are making money off that, they can be sued for not providing adequate accommodations. It shouldn't take a lot of effort for churches to realize that churches really ought to be leaders, not followers, in setting the standards for persons with disabilities.

Marcia: Rev. Little, please reflect upon your own personal experience now and could you tell me, did you find a special meaning or purpose for your life as a direct result from your having a disabling condition; and if so, how did that shape your particular perspective on life?

Rev. Little: I think very early I accepted my disability as something natural and something I simply needed to live with, and that it wasn't good or bad, it simply was. I know that over time, I have come to appreciate it as a particular gift. Yes, there are challenges that it presents me with; but probably more importantly, there are gifts which it grants to me. A minor one, but it's still important: My wife and I raised three children but I was never called upon to be the chauffeur because of my disability. My wife had to get the children from place to place. Sometimes I felt somewhat guilty that I couldn't help her. Yet, in reality I felt relieved from not having that responsibility.

I think also I was born with the gift of optimism and I had good support, and my sight impairment was not a particular deterrent. My disability was something I could live with and enjoy and I could overcome its disability features, but at the same time discover its advantages.

Marcia: I recently saw the results of a study [<https://drgrevich.wordpress.com/>] that concluded that the majority of disabled persons do not attend religious services or take part in a religious community. My ideas about that are that a lot of disabled people are of lower income and who do not own a vehicle making it difficult or almost impossible to get to a church. So this is a big economic barrier. What are your thoughts on that?

Rev. Little: I think that a lot of people with disabilities do have a resistance to reaching out. I think a lot of us are somewhat cautious concerning whether differentness will or will not be accepted. But I do think that sometimes the barrier is that we are not ready to welcome. So then we really have to look at that. We have to acknowledge that there are people with serious disabilities who do not expect to be welcome and therefore in some sense determine that they will not be welcomed by never showing up. I think the way to overcome this is for church folks to seriously reach out to persons with disabilities and encourage them to come and be a part of the church. It takes a lot of encouragement. I think in the first place we need to be sensitive to those parents who are struggling to raise their children who have a disability. The church needs to go the “second mile” to reach out so that they and their children will feel welcomed into our fellowship. I think every parent of a disabled child needs the community to come forward and incorporate them into their life.

I think as we discover that there are people with certain disabilities that gather together, that this offers us opportunities. I know that at one point there was a serious outreach to invite to a luncheon on a regular basis, people who are mentally ill. And somehow the contact was made with those persons, maybe through the hospital, maybe through the community agencies serving persons with mental illness. We first invited them to lunch and then after time, into a more permanent way of joining in with the church fellowship. Sometimes you need to take the church to these people instead of supposing they will come to church.

People with a mental illness have a hard barrier to overcome. They have been rejected so often that it is very difficult for these people to reach out or to *respond* to your invitation. It takes work, again, again, and again. It is a matter of building that sense of trust, that sense of confidence that they can begin to trust you in a way that they haven't been able to trust very many people. And I don't know if there's any easy answer—it's just hard. That is why it's not as difficult reaching out to parents who have children with a disability of one kind or another, it is probably easier because some of those parents know they need help, know they need support. Once we've built this wall around ourselves in terms of being able to respond to the invitation it's hard to break down these walls and to try. Particularly since many of the people with emotional disabilities have tried to break through the walls any number of times as they were growing up and have found that the wall doesn't give very easily and that people are more apt to just disregard them or mock them, make fun of them or to take advantage of them.

You also mentioned, and I think this is another issue that sometimes people with disabilities are essentially people without income. Some of that is in our fault as a culture. We don't make it very easy for people with disabling conditions to earn a decent wage. I was very lucky. I never got rich, but there are a lot of people who are blind who don't ever get offered a job, who have difficulty finding employment. There are people who are disabled because they have low IQ or they have difficulty getting around. Physical disabilities probably get in the way least often. But even there, they may walk

into a business and apply and the business says, “We don’t need a person who can’t move fast in our business.” There is prejudice against employment of persons with disabilities—it’s against the law to screen them out—but nevertheless in a large number of situations people with disabling conditions simply don’t get employment or don’t get adequate employment. They get very poor wages; they might get welcomed into a job that might pay \$9 an hour. That is not a living wage.

Marcia: Rev. Little, how can the church be a spotlight or leader for the wider culture? What can the AIM committee do to help change societal attitudes? How can the AIM committee energize religious communities to deal with all these different issues?

Rev. Little: I think in the first place members of the AIM committee and maybe drawing upon others in the congregation, need to do a very serious survey, looking at the community that you’re serving. What are the issues? What does the community do? Does it have a survey of who is homeless? What is it doing to address the issues of the homeless? What are the issues that maintain people being homeless? Is it racial? Is it ethnic? Is it mental health? Is it substance abuse? Is it a whole number of different things? Nobody wishes to be homeless. You cannot convince me that anyone wishes to be homeless. There are people who have tried and tried and tried. And then rather than live crammed into a center and have to get up to get out of it at 7 o’clock in the morning, may choose to camp along the river. For instance here in Sacramento, we have people who are camping out. That’s technically against the law. Most of our communities make people who are homeless criminals. We need to change that around. And the church needs to be about this business. The church needs to call this situation to the attention of the community and then say as a community that we need to find ways to provide housing.

As a community we need to provide ways for people who are homeless to be able to sit in the park, have a place to go to the bathroom, have a place to hang out, and have a place where they can be welcomed into our community. We need to work at that and overcome our tendency to be fearful of persons who are disabled, fearful of persons who are homeless because of one disability or another. We all need to see that as an issue and that we need to do something very different than what we normally do; and that is to make sure that we see the responsibility to tax in a certain way. If every home in the county has a tax levied on it that is designated to provide housing for the homeless we would see some differences.

Marcia: Rev. Little, I’ve come to the end of my list of questions. Is there anything else you’d like to add or emphasize for your closing words?

Rev. Little: I do think that working to break down the barriers for inclusion in our congregations, but also the issue to some extent to break down the barriers for full participation in the life of your community, all is part of a very challenging issue because we are comfortable being with people like ourselves. We all live with some degree of bias and we need to recognize that we all are more comfortable being with people who are like ourselves. And therefore, to reach out beyond that, to reach out to welcome people who are different than ourselves, to seek out opportunities to reach out, is not an easy task. We need to recognize that it takes a lot of courage, it takes a lot of steadfast willingness to do it over and over and over again, as we open our doors, open our hearts, open our minds, and welcome people into life together with us.

RESOURCES

Internet

www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc

Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association/Presbyterians for Disability Concerns

- Congregational Audit [Survey] of Disability Accessibility and Inclusion PDF download
- Living Into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities [a paper approved by the 217th General Assembly; created as Social Witness Policy] PDF download
- Offering Our Gifts: view presentation, audio/visual
- Disability Access/Inclusion Special Sunday Service packets PDF downloads

<http://faithanddisability.org/>

Collaborative on Faith and Disability

www.hopeforrecovery.com

Mental Illness Recovery and Spirituality by Marcia A. Murphy

- <http://www.hopeforrecovery.com/eugenics-people-disabilities-roots-societal-rejection-neglect-indifference/> Eugenics & People with Disabilities: The Roots of Societal Rejection, Neglect and Indifference
- <http://www.hopeforrecovery.com/aim/> AIM: Access & Inclusive Mission
- <http://www.hopeforrecovery.com/coping-spiritual-meaning-psychosis/> Meaning in Psychosis/Recovery from Mental Illness

www.uichildrens.org/cdd/drl

Disability Resource Library/Center for Disabilities and Development/University of Iowa Children's Hospital/University of Iowa Health Care

http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/departments_institutes/boggscenter/ The Boggs Center for Developmental Disabilities/Rutgers University

Books

Reinders, Hans S. (2000) **The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical Analysis.**

Hingson, Michael, with Flory, Susan (2011) **Thunder Dog: The True Story of a Blind Man, His Guide Dog, & The Triumph of Trust at Ground Zero**

Tada, Joni Eareckson (2001) **Joni: An Unforgettable Story**

Rumrill, Phillip D. Hennessey, Mary L., Nissen, Steven W. [2008] **Employment Issues and Multiple Sclerosis**

Senelick, Richard C., Dougherty, Karla [2010] **Beyond Please and Thank You: The disability awareness handbook for families, co-workers, and friends**

Murphy, Marcia A. [2010] **Voices in the Rain: Meaning in Psychosis**

Blatchford, Claire H. (1998) **Going With the Flow** [Children]

Banister, Katie Rodriguez (2003) **Aunt Katie's Visit** [Children]

Bunnett, Rochelle [2006] **Friends at School** [Children]