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How do our senses enable worship?

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Centre for Autism and Theology
Research Report



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**THE
NEURODIVERSITY
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Foreword

From the Centre for Autism and Theology



Welcome to the Neurodiversity and Faith series.

The Centre for Autism and Theology is an international hub for research into neurodivergent experience and theology. Working together with autistic or neurodivergent people and their faith communities, our diverse team of researchers undertakes a range of projects, unified by a desire to equip neurodivergent people and those who worship alongside them.

This series of reports is designed to present our researchers' findings in a short format, suitable for use by religious leaders, groups and interested individuals. But, behind each of these reports lies a much larger project. So, if you are interested to follow up on anything that you read here, please follow the link on the final page to visit our website, where you can find out more about specific research projects, download this booklet, and browse our other resources.

Introduction

Why did we research the senses?

If we want to understand autism, we need to understand sensory processing. Autistic people are often more sensitive to certain sensory input than non-autistic people (and this seems to be true for some other neurodivergences as well).

Autistic people may be extra sensitive to certain sensory input (“hyper-sensitive”), for example smell or sound, or under sensitive (“hypo-sensitive”), for example to touch or temperature. Some autistic people also ‘crave’ or seek out certain sensory input (“sensory seeking”). For example, some may sleep under a weighted blanket because the pressure feels comforting.



- **All of our senses can be involved in a church service, but what if that results in a sensory overload? And do we actually worship with all of our senses?**

Church services are sensory spaces. From the moment we walk into a church, we see the colours of the interior, we smell the building or our neighbour's perfume, we hear people talking, music, the air conditioning; we taste the bread and wine at Holy Communion.

We also feel ourselves in the space with reference to the other people and the furniture (this sense is called proprioception) and we stand for singing which needs our sense of balance (vestibular).



For many (neurotypical) people, all of this is processed without thinking about it. However, for many autistic people, being in this highly sensory environment can be overwhelming.

Some autistic people would even need to recover for hours if not days afterwards, and some decide not to go to the service at all because they don't have the energy or mental space to deal with it.

We wanted to find out how autistic people experience the sensory aspect of worship and to compare that with non-autistic people's experiences.

We worked with five churches with five very different styles of worship. These were

- A Greek Orthodox church in Australia
- A Roman Catholic church in Australia
- An Anglican church focused on autism in Singapore
- A non-denominational Evangelical church in the United Kingdom
- A Taizé-style Anglican Eucharistic service in the United Kingdom.



We deliberately chose churches with very different sensory environments or “sensescapes”.

Before beginning this research, we obtained approval to proceed from the University of Aberdeen's Research Ethics and Governance Board.



First, we asked participants to fill out the SAW: Sensory and Worship Questionnaire.

299 people filled out the SAW: 82 diagnosed autistics, 61 self-diagnosed autistics, and 156 non-autistic people.

The questionnaire resulted in four main findings:

1. Both autistic and non-autistic participants experienced similar enjoyment from some sensory aspects of church.
2. Autistic people experience significantly more sensory barriers in church.
3. Autistic people require more sensory accommodations.
4. Autistic people felt more connected to God when in control of sensory and social aspects of church.

Almost a fifth of the autistic participants said that the sensory environment in churches causes them to stay home.

Then we conducted focus groups and measured the sensescapes of our five churches.



Putting together the data from the SAW, the focus groups and the sensescape measurements, we found that the sensory aspect of worship is important for everyone. Sensory input can either help participants to focus on the worship service or it can be distracting.

We found that the senses can create a certain context, which one participant called a ‘prayer zone.’ This is where the combined sensory input of the building - its smells, soundscape, lighting and other factors create an atmosphere that helps people to focus on prayer.

The question that arises is: how can churches curate a sensory environment that helps people of all neurotypes to worship God?

Recommendations

It is important to realise that everyone has a different sensory profile. This means that everyone is different in what they are sensitive to, which senses they find less important, or for which senses they pro-actively seek input.

Because of all these different sensory profiles, it is impossible to curate the sensory environment of church in such a way that it is the best for everyone. However, that does not mean that churches cannot be intentional about the senses and sensory input. Worship services are often very wordy, but they can be designed to creatively engage all of the senses.

The starting point is listening to each other in church. In this way we can find out about the sensory profiles of church members, especially those who are neurodivergent. Very often, a change for one person benefits many others, and churches should be communities where the needs and wants of people are met with encouragement and support.

Find out more at: www.autismchurch.com

About the researchers

Dr Armand Léon van Ommen is a Senior Lecturer in Liturgical Theology at the University of Aberdeen. His research focuses on autism, worship and liturgy, and disability. Léon co-founded the Centre for Autism and Theology in 2018, and has been Co-Director of the Centre since 2020.

Dr Katy Unwin is a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Counselling, and Therapy at La Trobe University in Australia. Her research is focused on understanding sensory differences in autism to support autistic flourishing, as well as listening to the broadly 'unheard' voice of limited/minimally verbal autistic people.

Léon and Katy have collaborated on several projects. Researching together as a theologian and a psychologist, they aim to resource faith communities to be places of belonging for all people, autistic and non-autistic alike.

You can find more of Léon and Katy's work, including books and articles they have written, on www.autismchurch.com.

About the researchers

Cody Crawshaw is a Teaching Fellow in Practical Theology and PhD candidate at the University of Aberdeen. Her research focuses on how faith and anxiety interact, particularly in the experiences of Christian women.

If you are interested in exploring the senses further, you may want to explore the Bible study series that we created as part of this project. You can use these studies either individually or in group. They are free to download from our website, www.autismchurch/resources.

Additional publications related to this project:

Katy Unwin and Armand Léon Van Ommen, 'Autistic and Non-Autistic Experience of the Sensory Aspects of the Church Service', *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 52, no. 4 (2024): 410–25, <https://doi.org/doi/10.1177/00916471241266810>.

Armand Léon Van Ommen and Katy Unwin, 'The Sensory Aspects of Worship and Liturgy as Experienced by Autistic People', *Questions Liturgiques / Studies in Liturgy* 102, no. 3–4 (2022): 267–88, <https://doi.org/10.2143/QL.102.3.3291363>.

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