

2.0

How does being autistic impact prayer?

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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

Autistic Christians have said that they worry about their prayer lives not being “good enough”.

The concerns shared by autistic people have implications for the wider church. Should pastors and theologians be re-thinking what is written and taught about prayer?



To find out more, I worked with a steering group of autistic Christians. We interviewed people, and held an online discussion group, where we asked autistic Christians to tell us about their prayer lives.

Overall, eighteen autistic Christians from across the UK contributed to the project. They were from a range of different churches (some had ceased attending any church) and some were also members of online Christian communities.

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



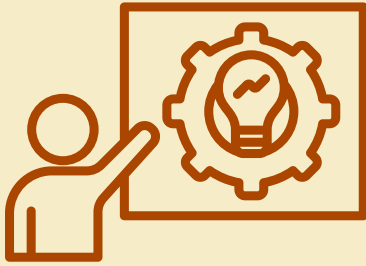


Autistic Christians said that they struggled with prayer in a number of ways.

These fell broadly into three areas:

- Difficulties maintaining a habit of daily prayer.
- Uncertainty about the use of liturgy or how to practise contemplation.
- Uncertainty about what it is okay and not okay to pray for in prayers of intercession.

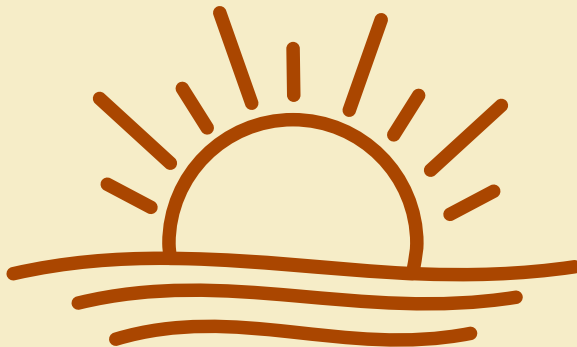
These worries about prayer had led some participants to feel anxious and ashamed about their prayer lives. Some had ceased even trying to pray.



My reflections on these worries led me to look at the origins of some common Christian teachings about prayer.

For example, the idea of ‘daily prayer’ has its roots in the ancient Jewish custom of praying frequently, at turning points of the day, such as when sitting down to eat or preparing to go to bed.

These days, many Christians consolidate these frequent times of prayer into one fixed time of prayer every day, usually first thing in the morning. But for some people, especially autistic people whose circadian rhythm might be different to the majority norm, a practice of several shorter times of prayer at turning points in the day may be more sustainable.





Different participants in this project favoured different styles of prayer. Some loved liturgy, but some found it oppressive.

Some worried that, if the words of the liturgy didn't match what they wanted to say, they were being dishonest. Others preferred to try contemplative styles of prayer, but said that they found it difficult to quiet down a 'noisy' brain.

In my research, I reflected on the idea of prayer as a 'conversation' with God, examining how conversations can have lots of different forms, structured or unstructured, full of words or sometimes almost silent. In every case, both participants are changed by the conversation that takes place, whatever form it takes.

This is because, in conversations, we open ourselves up to another person's perspective. Even if we do not 'hear' their response, we have still considered what that response might be, and so opened up our inner world in a way that helps us to see our thoughts and feelings differently.

Within those prayer conversations with God, many Christians make prayers of intercession.

But participants in this project expressed worry over what Christians could and should pray for. Some said that they felt uncomfortable if they heard other Christians praying for things in ways that seem to make demands of God. It could also cause anxiety when prayers were not answered, or when one couldn't be sure if prayers would be answered or not. Overall, intercessory prayer was often felt to be something which opened the door to uncertainty.

Reflecting on this, I explored the parent-child metaphor for a Christian's relationship with God. A child will often ask their parent for things, such as treats, sometimes even knowing that the answer will be no. In these situations, the act of asking is an unconscious form of relationship-affirmation. A child might even feel comforted by a 'no' - by having wise and fair boundaries re-confirmed. Viewing prayers of intercession as a free space for exploration and affirmation of relationship releases Christians from needing to decide what God will or won't do.

Overall, I found that autistic Christians did not need to be ashamed of their prayer lives.



In churches, certain ‘norms’ about prayer exist - norms about how often Christians should pray, how Christians should pray and what Christians should pray for. Some of these norms are taught explicitly by church leaders, and some are communicated implicitly between believers. However, these norms tend to reflect the ideals of the neurotypical majority, and they do not always have a firm basis in scripture or theological thinking.



The main recommendation of this research project is that Christians of all neurotypes should seek to have authentic conversations about prayer - conversations where people are willing to be open about what prayer is really like for them.

Church leaders may want to facilitate these conversations for small groups. (Resources to support this will be made available through the Centre for Autism and Theology very soon.)



However, it should be noted that some autistic people find it difficult to take part in group conversations. Therefore, it is important to encourage one-to-one conversations too.

About the researcher

To find out more about this research project, you can contact Dr Helena Cundill.

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A more detailed research report arising from this project, as well as details of any forthcoming publications, can be found on the Centre website.



www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/cat

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