

4.0 How can churches support autistic members?

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Centre for Autism and Theology
Research Report





THE NEURODIVERSITY AND FAITH SERIES

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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 neurodiversity and theology, working together with neurodivergent people and their faith communities. Our diverse team of researchers work on a range of projects, unified by a desire to equip neurodivergent people and those who seek to support them in living out a life of faith.

This series of reports is designed to present our researchers' findings in a short format, suitable for use by faith communities, religious leaders 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 links 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.

Autistic people are less likely than non-autistic people to go to church.

Churches can be great places, but they can be overwhelming too. We wanted to find out about the barriers that autistic people face in their churches and Christian communities.



To find out more, we set out to research two questions:



1. How do autistic people experience church, especially the worship services?
2. What can churches do better, so that autistic people feel that they belong, just like everybody else?

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

To research this topic we talked to 21 autistic people.



13 of those people were speaking and took part in interviews.

8 were non- or minimally-speaking, and some had a learning disability. Some interviewees used a spelling board to communicate their responses to us.



We also spoke to 6 parents of autistic children, 5 church leaders and a church advisor.



The conversations took place in the UK, Singapore and in the USA.

Our main finding was that autistic people and their families want a place where they are accepted as they are.

In Singapore, we visited a church that actively tries to be a place for autistic people to belong. In this church, the autistic people and their caregivers knew that it was okay for someone to fidget, to walk around, to jump up and down and to make sounds. They would not be 'shushed' or be given judgemental looks.

Autistic people also said that they valued making friends in church.

Sometimes there can be barriers to communication between autistic and non-autistic people, but autistic people said that they want non-autistic people to take time to get to know them and to offer friendship.



Our interviewees said that they like to be involved in the life of their church.

Many were already involved in lots of different ways. Some did the Bible readings, others went around with the collection basket, and some played in the music group. Some of our autistic interviewees were ordained church leaders.

One young man loved to sweep the sanctuary floor. He chose to do this faithfully every week.

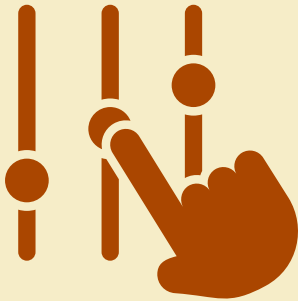


Another led the Lord's Prayer during worship, even though he was a very slow speaker. This helped everyone to pray it slowly and reflectively.

Churches can be creative, talk to their autistic members, and find the best roles for everyone.

Autistic people can experience the world differently from non-autistic people.

Being able to experience sounds, smells and tastes more intensely can lead to more intense experiences of God.

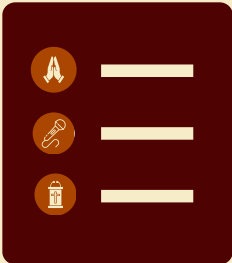


But it can also lead to a lot of discomfort. Some of our interviewees said that sounds could be too loud, lights could be too bright, and that it was uncomfortable when musical instruments were out of tune.

Some did not like it if other people sat too close to them.

Predictability often helps autistic people to manage sensory stress. Small changes, such as providing unscented handsoap, can make a big difference.

Many autistic people think very logically, and like services to have a clear structure.



It is often helpful to have a leaflet available which shows the structure of the worship service. Including pictures and symbols can make this easier for some autistic people to follow.

Some autistic people will find it overwhelming if a preacher says things in a sermon that do not connect logically, and some will feel distressed when people break promises, or say things they do not mean.

Autistic people can give different or new insights into the Bible because of the way they think. These insights can help the whole church to learn and grow.

Autistic people help the whole church to learn about worship and liturgy too.

Sometimes we all say the same prayer, but some people stand, some kneel, and some move around. Some join in with the words, while others pray in different ways.

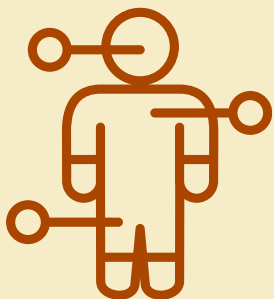


It is easy to look at what most people do, or want to do, and assume that is the correct way for everyone to follow. This is called ‘normalcy’.

But normalcy can make some people feel like they don’t belong.

Autistic people help the church to understand that we don’t all need to do things in exactly the same way when we do them together.

In the Bible, the apostle Paul writes that the church is like a body.



All the parts of the body are different, and all the parts of the body need each other.

Paul writes that the hand cannot say to the foot 'I have no need of you!'

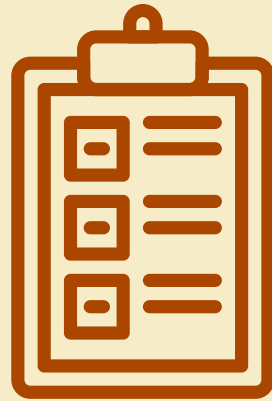
Therefore, although autistic people can find church difficult, without autistic people the church is not complete.



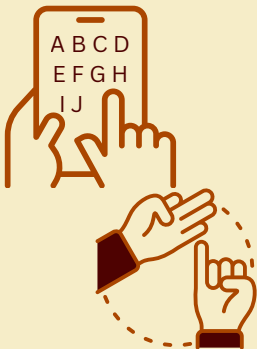


It is okay to ask an autistic person about how they experience church.

At the Centre for Autism and Theology, we are often asked for a ‘checklist’ of autistic accommodations. But all autistic people are different, and no two people would have exactly the same list.



The best way to find out what each autistic person needs is to talk to them.



If the autistic person is non- or minimally- speaking, you can ask their family and caregivers how that autistic person prefers to communicate. Let them help you to start a conversation.

About the researchers

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To download this booklet, and to find out more about our work visit us at:



www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/cat

Further publications related to this project:

Van Ommen, Armand Léon. 2022. "Re-Imagining Church through Autism: A Singaporean Case Study." *Practical Theology* 15 (6): 508–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2080630>.

Van Ommen, Armand Léon, and Topher Endress. 2022. "Reframing Liturgical Theology through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experiences of Worship." *Studia Liturgica* 52 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00393207221111573>.

Van Ommen, Armand Léon, and Katy Unwin. 2022. "The Sensory Aspects of Worship and Liturgy as Experienced by Autistic People." *Questions Liturgiques / Studies in Liturgy* 102: 267–88.

Van Ommen, A. L., and Cundill, H. 2024. "Non-Speaking Autistic Participation in Liturgy and Church Life: (Non-)Speech Acts." *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 28 (1), 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2023-0027>

Van Ommen, A. L., 2023. *Autism and Worship: A Liturgical Theology*. Baylor University Press.

Van Ommen, A. L., and H. Cundill. 2023. "Reframing Church through the Lens of Autism." E-zine. YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCku7nY1Lyg>.

Van Ommen, A. L., and H. Cundill. 2023. "Autistic Experiences of Worship and Liturgy: Tips for Churches." YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCku7nY1Lyg>.

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