Greetings from Aberdeen! We hope you are having a good start to 2022 and we wish you peace and joy in the year to come.

The highlight for the Centre for Autism and Theology since the last newsletter was the online conference that we were able to organise. On December 13th-15th 2021, we hosted the Autism, Theology, and the Church Conference: Identifying and Establishing Critical Frameworks for Interdisciplinary Research.

The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars, professionals, and anyone interested in autism, theology, and the church, in order to build relationships, and together identify current topics, issues, and questions in the emerging field of ‘Autism Theology.’ A range of speakers from across disciplines and professions, and from across the globe, gave presentations, responses, and participated in panel discussions.

All conference sessions were recorded, including the BSL interpretation, and will be available on YouTube soon. We will send an email when they are. For now, in this newsletter you can read the impressions of some of the speakers, which they kindly shared with us to be included below.

The conference attracted much attention, with over 260 people registering. We were quite overwhelmed! For us, the interest of so many in the conference, and the rich conversations we had during the conference, motivates us to keep working in this field and support the development of the field. On that note, we will continue our webinar series (four times a year), the next taking place on March 20th, 4pm 5.30pm, with Dr Léon van Ommen who will present some key findings of his research on autism and worship (see announcement in this newsletter for more details).

“It was a privilege to be invited to attend such an innovative conference. My work is an attempt to construct a profitable theology that is liberative, borrowing from the many predecessors in liberation theology the tools and methods that give voice to oppression and marginalisation. The conference indicated to me that there is a desire for this type of work that hears and promotes the silenced voices of those who are autistic. However, it also indicated the conflict and difficulty with understandings of disability. The nuance of theologically rich dialogue that does not repress lived experience of difficulty but also attends to autism as having theological possibilities that are constructive. The whole person attended to in such constructive theology, with cues taken from the traditions of embodied theology and combining them with autistic experience, both positive and negative of non-normative bodyminds. This gives scope for understandings of neurodivergent time, neurodivergent liturgical practices and many other sources of reflection. I am excited about the future of neurodivergent theology, the rejection of normative paradigms, the centralisation of that which has been unacceptable and the liberative potential of theological discourse.”

- Dr Claire Williams
"Thank you to the Centre for Autism and Theology (CAT) for the generous invitation to be a respondent at the Autism, Theology, and the Church Conference! It was very meaningful to me. The conference topics were well-chosen and timely, interacting with many current issues of concern both to scholars and the larger community. I was delighted to see many persons with autism at the conference, and had a great time chatting with and learning from them at the conference via the Wonder.Me platform thoughtfully arranged for by the conference organisers. The CAT is doing wonderful work, and is quickly establishing itself as the premier centre worldwide in the field, especially by including voices from all around the world. May this be the start of many more intentional and international conversations on autism, theology, and the Church!"

- Mr Wen-Pin Leow, Director, Centre for Disability Ministry in Asia, Singapore

"When I began writing, autism theology existed on the margins, often as merely an addendum within existing disability theologies. In speaking at ‘Autism, Theology, and Church’, and in hearing other’s voices, what has become clear is that the trajectory of autism theology has grown far beyond what I could have anticipated in those early years of research. It is worth noting that traditionally, theological research has often been seen to be ‘playing catch up’ to other disciplines in respect to its responses to contemporary issues, perhaps as a consequence of its comparative ‘newness’ as an academically recognised discipline. However, what emerged from this event is that theology is now making strides in autism research which can arguably be seen to be significantly ahead of other disciplines. Autistic voices themselves are now emerging within the research process, not merely as research subject, or indeed object, but as offering a distinct perspective through which to consider, construct, and in some cases challenge our theological scripts. The significant, and sometimes deeply complex, issues raised by the attendees of this conference have highlighted just how important it is to both recognise how far we have come, but to also ask, where next?"

- Dr Eilidh Campbell

“I found the conference to be a very encouraging experience. Immersed in the daily struggles for acceptance of autistic individuals and their caregivers, it is easy to forget that progress has been made over the years. The broad representation of views given by speakers with lived experiences of autism, their caregivers, and ministers enriched my understanding of autism, theological perspectives, and church practices. I also enjoyed hearing from speakers and conference participants who came from places around the globe. Clearly, the faithful embodiment of the church as the body of Christ with different members is a shared concern and commitment of those at the conference. Indeed, much more needs to be done before the church can live out the oneness that we are called to be. For that, I very much look forward to the continual dialogue and sharing of expertise and experiences that will direct future interdisciplinary research and the church’s faithful practices.”

- Dr Cynthia Tam
“I was extremely excited to be asked to participate in the Autism, Theology, and the Church conference because three of my greatest passions are autism, theology, and the Church. Much of my time is spent reflecting upon one or more of those three things. While I have spoken at theological conferences before and have spoken on autism before, this conference felt like coming home. The bringing together of people with autism, their families, practitioners, and theologians into the conversation was a major step forward for full inclusion of people with autism. Two communities that tend to have strong convictions that can create sharp disagreements are the autism community and theologians. Yet, this conference was a gathering of people who may have had some different views and yet were able to unite in a common goal of seeing full welcoming and inclusion of people with autism into the Church at all levels.”

- Stephen J. Bedard, DMin

“It was a privilege and delight to take part in this conference on Autism, Theology, and the Church. I was struck by how a new field of ‘autism theology’ is clearly emerging, and that this might be importantly distinct from the wider field of disability theology. The shared conversation had at this conference was not only respectful, but constructive and new – there are exciting discoveries to be made.”

- Dr Joanna Leidenhag

“The conference showcased well the variety of approaches being adopted - quantitative research and more qualitative research based on lived experience. It struck me that many contributions were operating visibly through either the ‘medical’ or the ‘social’ model - though the ‘limits’ model was also referenced. I offer two reflections for consideration: 1) All such models have useful insights to offer, but all also have limitations and none provides a comprehensive understanding. Perhaps one of CAT’s contributions might be to press towards a more ‘foundational’ approach to autism in a theological context. 2) I value the neurologically-based understanding of autism articulated by Peter Vermeulen. One consequence of this is that, I suggest, we need to distinguish between ‘autism’ and ‘learning difficulties’ - the ‘person we meet’ being a combination of autism and learning (or lack of). Both, of course, need to be understood and responded to appropriately, but we need to be clear what we are dealing with at any time. Much of the research on show, it seemed to me, blurred these topics - tending to address learning difficulties as much as autism. Perhaps CAT has a role here in bringing academic clarity to bear here.”

- Stewart Rapley
“It was a great privilege to be invited to be a panellist at the recent ‘Autism, Theology, and the Church Conference’. As a practitioner, rather than an academic, I was delighted that the practical insights and thoughts I was able to share meshed so neatly with the input of the more academic and theological contributors. It was also helpful that some of the contributors are Autistic themselves, and this first-hand understanding of Autism brought an integrity and context that was well received. Speakers from around the world shared their local experiences and thoughts and this helped to broaden the discussion, while also challenging us to accept that different cultures can use different Autism descriptors. Overall the conference was an excellent opportunity to understand more about Autism, Theology, and the Church and to build knowledge and networks that will be helpful for the future. If the conference runs again I would be delighted to be involved once more.”

- Mark Arnold, Additional Needs Ministry Director, Urban Saints

Upcoming Webinar: Autism and Worship

When? March 10th, 4pm-5.30pm GMT

What? Dr Léon van Ommen will discuss key findings of his research on autism and worship. He will discuss themes that arose from his interviews and observations in Singapore and the United Kingdom, and offer liturgical-theological reflections on these themes.

Who? Dr Léon van Ommen is Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen, and Co-Director of the Centre for Autism and Theology.

How to join? Details will be confirmed in due course.

Previous webinar – Recording available

On 11 October 2021 Stewart Rapley shared with us about this recently published book Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church. Stewart is a member of the Centre for Autism and Theology’s Advisory Group, and of the Board of Trustees of the National Autistic Society. The webinar was recorded and can be found, with the recordings of all previous webinars, in the CAT Webinar Series Playlist on the Centre’s resource page. It has also been uploaded onto our YouTube channel. All recordings have accurate captioning.