A new name for the Centre for Autism and Theology

The Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community has changed its name to the Centre for Autism and Theology, with the tagline ‘Resourcing Christian Communities.’ The Centre was launched in 2018 by Professor Grant Macaskill. Since its launch the Centre has been successful in attracting funding, PhD students, and it reaches a wide audience through its newsletters and webinar series that are published on the Centre’s webpage and on YouTube. We felt that a more memorable name was important for the Centre’s public communication and activities.

The new name does not change the vision and mission of the Centre; the core purpose of the Centre remains doing rigorous academic theological research on autism, and we are keen to engage with interdisciplinary research. The tagline points to the practical outcomes we intend our research to have, which is to resource faith communities to become places where autistic people are valued for who they are and have a strong sense of belonging.

The new email address for the Centre is cat@abdn.ac.uk, but emails sent to the old address will still reach us. The new web address is www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/cat.

Introducing our new Research Centre Assistant

We are pleased to introduce Julie Land, who will support the Centre for Autism and Theology with various practical and administrative matters this year.

Julie, can you tell us about what brought you to Aberdeen? I came to Aberdeen to pursue a PhD in Theological Ethics under the supervision of Professor Brian Brock. My PhD explores a theological account of friendship in the Gospel of John in the context of disability theology. I also came to Aberdeen to be involved in the Friendship House. The Friendship House is an initiative which was commenced by University of Aberdeen’s Centre for Spirituality, Health, and Disability. The initiative aims to foster communities where people with and without learning disabilities can come together to develop Christlike friendships. I was really excited to be a part of this initiative and it has been a gift to be a part of it over the last few years.

What is your interest in the Centre for Autism and Theology? I believe faith communities must be places of belonging where autistic people are valued for who they are. The Centre’s pursuit of theological research on autism for the purpose of resourcing faith communities is so important. I am really excited to be involved and learn from the work happening in the Centre for Autism and theology.

The need for a Christian Narrative for our time

By Stewart Rapley

An article in the Sunday Times on 5 September reported on the Spectrum 10K project being launched in the UK. The article included the claim that ‘Autistic people have called for . . . [the study] . . . to be halted’ over concerns about data usage. The NAS website contains information about Spectrum 10K which is summarised by their comment ‘Research is vital but . . .’
At the same time, I have just published a book entitled ‘Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church’. This book is based on qualitative research in which I explored the distinctive thinking of autistic people in relation to aspects of faith and church engagement. One of the common requests of my research participants was for greater understanding of autism on the part of the church.

As I reflect on this apparent tension, then four thoughts come to mind:

1. Increased knowledge always brings implications in the areas of power and responsibility. Is our new knowledge going to be used in a spirit of love to enhance the lives of autistic people, or to ‘weaponise’ society against them?

2. On the positive side: the example of LGBTQ offers hope. In my lifetime we have gone from ‘Alan Turing’ (homosexual acts illegal, with chemical castration ‘correction’ for gay men) to ‘Stephen Fry’ (same-sex marriage accepted as a legal option). Research suggests that genetics play at least a contributory role in determining sexuality. The broad adoption of such understanding has resulted, at least in the UK, to a more inclusive attitude.

3. On the darker side: perhaps the real issue here is the liberalisation of abortion and the practise-as-normal by the medical profession of pre-natal screening. Brian Brock, in his book Wondrously Wounded speaks movingly of such a challenge in the life of his own family.

4. The history of the church is, sadly, rather mixed in terms of its contribution on these issues.

All of this reinforces the point that we are desperately in need of a strong Christian Narrative that can engage with and enlighten us on these issues. We need to be true to Christ and to the genuine wisdom of the church through the ages, whilst engaging with the world as it is understood in the twenty-first, rather than the first, century. The Centre for Autism and Theology can make a major contribution to this mission.

Stewart Rapley is author of Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church, which was released this month by SCM Press. Stewart is also member of the Centre for Autism and Theology’s Advisory Group, and of the Board of Trustees of the National Autistic Society.

Previous webinar
On May 20th we had a successful webinar on the topic of Autism and Sensory Processing, with psychologist Dr Katy Unwin. 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 (https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/resources-1732.php). It has also been uploaded onto our YouTube channel. All recordings have accurate captioning.