



Newsletter

December 2020

The logo

We are excited to introduce the logo of the Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community! Our logo is based on two features of King's College at the University of Aberdeen. Firstly, the shape of the logo and the light colours around the central feature, the lamp, are reminiscent of the rose window that can be found in the Divinity Library. This library is where most Divinity and Religious Studies research seminars take place. The Centre is part of the vibrant research culture of the Divinity and Religious Studies Department. Rose windows are also often found in church buildings, which is a subtle hint to the Centre's focus on Christian communities. Moreover, rose windows are typically made up of many different parts, often colourful. The richness in display of colour, shapes, and images within many rose windows reflects the ambition of the Centre to display that richness in the work we do and the people who are and will be involved. Furthermore, the colours reflect the rich variety in which autism is expressed and the beauty of all people.

The second feature is the lamp itself, reminiscent of the quire lamps in the King's College Chapel, next to the Divinity Library. This is where daily morning prayer takes place. In reference to 'Christian' in the Centre's title, the designer wanted to represent the light that the lamp spreads, as the light of Christ. The light is refracted through the rose window, which again points to the manifold shapes and colours of autism.

The logo was designed by Holly Russell. You can find more of her art and design work [here](#).



Image by Holly Russell

A Vision for Autism and Theology

The Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community aims to be an international hub for autism and theology research, with an interdisciplinary component and in connection with the third sector and more widely, any interested individuals or parties.

Autism is now recognized to be a common condition, and most Christian communities or families will have experience of it, in some form or another. It is easy to assume that autism can be considered in isolation from the faith commitments at work in our society, and that

those who have to deal with a diagnosis of autism can process it in simply clinical or scientific terms. Communities of faith, however, always process and understand their experiences in ways that are shaped by that faith, which is itself formed by their traditions and sacred texts.

The Centre is intended to host research that will help to foster positive Christian understandings of autism, drawing on scripture and theological traditions, and sometimes challenging the misuse of these. In the first instance, this is intended to help churches to respond well to the pastoral reality of autism. Beyond this, however, it is intended to facilitate the sharing of such experiences with other communities of faith, associated with other religions and traditions, and with the medical world itself, as its own engagement with persons of faith develops.

The Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community is embedded in the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy and is closely linked to three other works in the University of Aberdeen: [The Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability](#), [The Centre for Ministry Studies](#), and the [Friendship House Initiative](#).

Distinctive features

The Centre has three distinctive qualities that set it apart from much of the contemporary study of autism, including other theological research.

First, we affirm that autistic people are to be considered a gift and a gain to the diverse Christian community. Much theological discussion of autism starts with a “deficit” approach that sees autistic people as lacking something, sometimes even using their perceived deficiencies as a means to cast light on what “normally” functioning humanity should look like. We consider such approaches to be theologically problematic, and to entail a lack of proper affirmation of the value of those with autism. This reflects a theological articulation of the notion of “neurodiversity.” As a corollary of this, we are committed to ensuring that our research is led to a significant extent by autistic people and is always undertaken in collaboration with autistic people.

Second, we recognize that Christian faith is always shaped and informed by the biblical writings that are regarded as Scripture by the church, even if this relationship is conceived in different ways by different traditions. This means that theological and pastoral reflection on autism must always engage with the Bible, as it functions in the life of Christian community. Because autism is not named, as such, within the Bible, all such engagement requires careful reflection on how to read the Scriptural material properly and a willingness to challenge the misuse of Scripture, which can be destructive and alienating.

Third, we are keen to support communities to overcome barriers of misunderstanding and unawareness of the needs and gifts of each member. It is not uncommon for autistic people to feel that they are not seen and heard, and to feel they need to adjust to social expectations in order to belong fully to the community. On the other hand, non-autistic people may feel they do not understand autism and may be reliant on popular and often misleading portrayals of autism in the media. We want the Centre to be safe space in which such issues can be explored, making use of insights from the global autistic community and from the global church. Many of the issues that we engage with can be divisive and the matters of debate are often more complex than we realise. Sometimes, they are distinctively coloured by geography, culture and language. We want the Centre to provide an environment in which the complex diversity of autistic experience can be considered within the complex diversity of the global church.

Qualities of the centre

1. Autistic people are to be considered a gift and a gain to the diverse Christian community.
2. Christian faith is always shaped and informed by the biblical writings that are regarded as Scripture by the church
3. We are keen to support communities to overcome barriers of misunderstanding and unawareness of the needs and gifts of each member.

Music, Autism and Church: The role of music for persons with autism in public worship



In November Zoe Strong presented her research on Autism, Music and Church, in a seminar organised by the Centre. The recording of the seminar will be available soon on the Centre's [website](#). The following is a brief summary of her findings.

The Christian church is a place where everyone, including people with autism, should be seen as valuable and essential to the community. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In the church, there are many different sensory stimulations, and this often causes people with autism to struggle. Music is a fundamental part of church services as it is a way in which people worship God in a community. Additionally, music therapy has often been seen to benefit those with autism as it can be a form of communicating emotion where words are not necessary. With both of these functions of music in

mind, this research explores how people with autism experience music in church. Theological research into autism is an emerging topic and so, there are many conversations still to be had. With music having an important role in the life of autistic individuals and church worship, there is scope to consider the role of music for autistic people in public worship.



Image by Holly Russell

The research involved interviewing ten autistic individuals to find out how each person experiences music in church and how they use music to engage with spirituality. Three main themes were drawn from the interviews. The first was **'connectedness.'** Most of the participants interviewed consider music to be an important mode of connection, whether it be connecting people, ideas, or emotions. Furthermore, it can be a way in which people connect and communicate with God. The second theme was **'music as experience of faith.'** Music is not only an aid for

people to experience faith but can in itself be an experience of faith. This can be related to connectedness if it leads to or from a point of connection, or an entirely different experience of faith. **'Music as conducive or barrier'** was the final theme. The interviews revealed that before people connect to God through music, several factors come into play which lead to music either being conducive or a barrier. To an extent, all three themes feed into and influence one another.

The research showed that all participants find that music is important to their experience of church. The importance for some may relate to the way in which it enhances connection with God and others, provides a medium for talking to God both with and without words, or the impact it has on the emotional experience of God and faith. Not only can music be seen as a way in which it benefits autistic individuals but the autistic experience of music in church enriches the worship of the entire Christian community. The autistic community have a great deal to contribute to the church and music is a way in which this is made evident. This study shows the alternative ways of experiencing music that many of the participants bring, as well the highly emotional experience had by some. Furthermore, the accounts given by those involved in the study are beneficial for developing an understanding of ways in which faith is experienced through music.

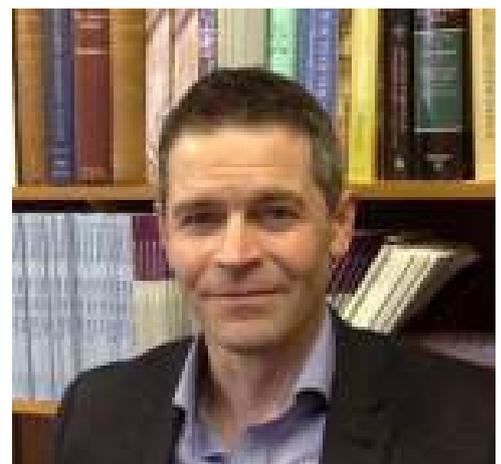
This research was funded by The Carnegie Trust.

Interview with Grant Macaskill

founder of the Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community, and author of [*Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology and Community*](#).

Grant, when did you come to Aberdeen?

I came to Aberdeen in 2015, having previously taught at the University of St Andrews. It felt like coming home: my background is in the Gaelic-speaking parts of the Highlands and Islands and, when I was growing up, the University of Aberdeen was where many of my friends and family came to study, particularly in the Gaelic and Divinity programmes. My current position (the Kirby Laing Chair of New Testament Exegesis) was once held by I. Howard Marshall, who was a well-known figure in my church background. I had the honour of meeting Howard shortly before he passed away and his widow kindly gave me his collection of academic journals. I never saw myself becoming an academic, so being in this position feels like a dream.

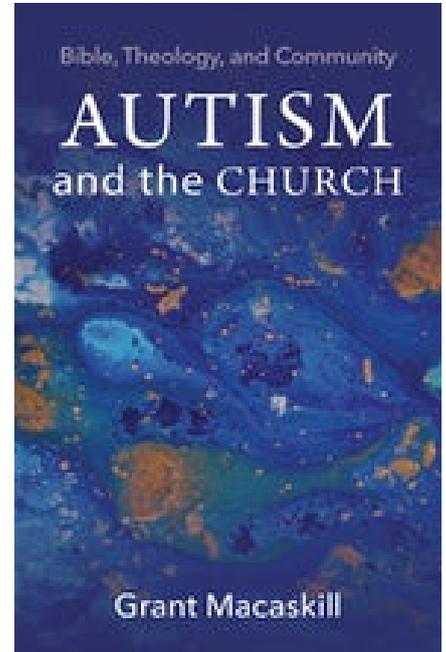


Can you tell us a little bit more about your work?

Most of my research is focused on the New Testament, as a diverse but coherent body of literature that is not just historically significant, but that continues to function as “sacred scripture” for Christian communities. It is highly intersectional literature: the writings began to emerge within the diversity of early Judaism, in the period of Roman rule and cultural influence, with complex social and economic issues at work. The writings negotiate the presence of new differences and surprising embodiments, as the movement spreads and develops through the Roman world. Often, these involve fresh readings of Jewish scriptures, shaped particularly by the story of Jesus and the conviction that the apparent tragedy of his death is actually pivotal to the hope that the communities share.

Christian communities often have quite different approaches to the New Testament, nevertheless claiming its authority. Do you engage with such questions at all?

Because I engage with the New Testament not just as a historical collection, but also as the sacred scriptures of the Church, I am interested in its practical theological function. Most Christian traditions remain committed to seeing Scripture as authoritative in some sense, though they will understand that authority in different ways, and when confronted by any issue will want to think about how it might be understood in relation to Scriptural teaching. I am interested in what it means to use Scripture well and, conversely, about how Scripture might be misread or misappropriated. Where that happens, I am also interested in thinking about how to advocate more appropriate readings without alienating conversation partners, something that happens all too often and that is one of the reasons that some conversations become polarized, with positions entrenched. Spending a lot of time with readers of the Bible from different cultures, particularly Ethiopian and Middle Eastern ones, helps a lot. It shows how much of our approach to interpretation is shaped by our particular culture.



What is your interest in autism, as a New Testament scholar?

I was recently formally diagnosed as autistic. The diagnosis was not a surprise, though the journey from beginning to suspect this to be the case (as an adult) to finally being diagnosed was a long one, including two years on a waiting list for assessment. My research into the Bible and Autism reflects this particular intersection of interests and experiences, as they have developed over the years. There has been a lot of excellent work done on the practical level to help churches understand autism, but less that engages with the particular issues around the use of the Bible. These are particularly challenging because the issue was not named, as such, in the ancient world. Some of the attempts to see autism in the Bible can be well intended, but might have unfortunate consequences. For me, some of the relevance of the biblical material lies in pastoral themes that might bear in particular ways on autistic experience. I like being autistic and can't imagine being any other way; it's part of who I am. I am good at my job because of it. But there are also difficult experiences that are part of it. Some of these are the result of people not understanding autism and not accommodating it, but others are just about the way my brain works, which is not always healthy. The biblical material is relevant to how I think about my identity and experience in pastoral terms. Much of the book is taken up with these themes and I have had a lot of contact from others who have found it helpful to deal honestly with the more difficult aspects of being an autistic Christian.

Thanks Grant!



Centre for the Study of Autism and Christian Community



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