

Re-Framing Church

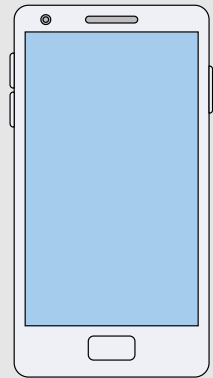
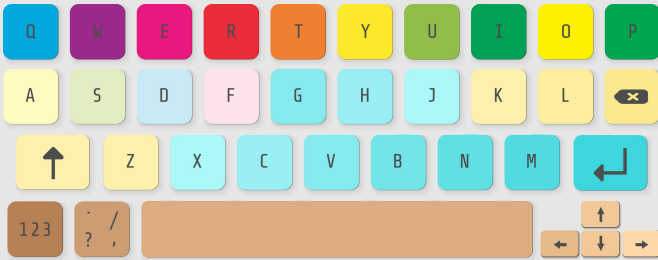


Through the Lens of Autism

Research Report

Welcome to our E-Zine

This E-zine will play automatically, like a video.



But if you need more time, you can use the Space Bar to stop and start.

Or tap the screen to pause on your touchscreen device.

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

Churches can be great places, but they can be overwhelming places too.

We wanted to find out two things:



1 How do autistic people experience church, especially worship services?

2 What can churches do better so that autistic people feel that they belong just like anybody else?



To find an answer to these questions, we talked to 21 autistic people.

13 were speaking and took part in interviews.



8 autistic people were non-speaking and/or had a learning disability. Some used a spelling board like this one to share their thoughts with us.



Some autistic people were also parents of autistic children and some were also church leaders.

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

The conversations took place in the United Kingdom, Singapore, and the United States.



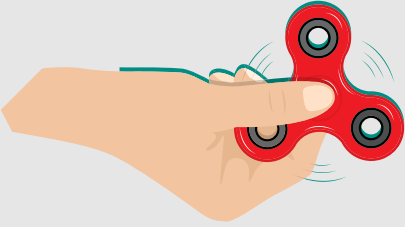
In Singapore, we visited a church that tries to be a place where autistic people belong.



So, what did all these people say about church?

1

First, the most important thing was that autistic people and their parents want a place where they are accepted as they are.



For example, in the church in Singapore, it was okay to fidget, to walk around, to jump up and down, to make all kinds of sounds.

People in churches shouldn't give judgmental looks or shush autistic people.

2

Second, the autistic people said they really like making friends in church. Sometimes it is hard for non-autistic people and autistic people to talk to each other, but all the autistic people that we talked to said they want non-autistic people to be their friends.

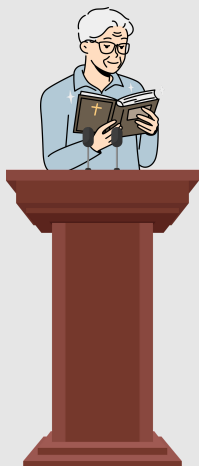


People can get to know the autistic people in church, find out what they like, what they dream of – and be their friends!

Third, autistic people said that they like to do things in the worship service just like everyone else.

Some were doing the Bible readings in the worship service, some went around with the collection basket, some played or sang in the music group.

3



Some of the autistic people we talked to were already priests or training to be a priest.

One autistic person led the Lord's Prayer, even though he could not speak very quickly; this actually helped not to rush the prayer but to pray it thoughtfully.

Churches can be creative and talk to autistic people and those who support them. In that way, they can find out how the autistic people in their church want to help with tasks and duties.





4

Fourth, autistic people can experience the world differently to non-autistic people. Some people said that being able to experience sounds, light, taste, touch, and smells very strongly can help them to experience God more intensely.



But many people we talked to said that the music was too loud in their church, or that they did not like a musical instrument that was out of tune. Some said the lights were too bright, or that the smell of the flowers was too strong. Others said they didn't like it when people were too close to them.

Often small changes can make a big difference.

For example, some autistic people may prefer to sit in the same place every Sunday, or may need to have unscented hand soap available.



It is helpful to have a leaflet showing the structure of the worship service. You could include pictures or symbols to make it easy to follow



It is OK to ask autistic people whether they need help. Don't presume that you know what an autistic person needs without talking to them.

5



Fifth, autistic people often think very logically. Therefore, autistic people can give different/new insight into Bible stories because of the way they experience the world.



However, it can be overwhelming to listen to a sermon when the preacher says things that do not connect logically.

Logical thinking also means that autistic people can sometimes be distressed when people say they will do something and do not do it.



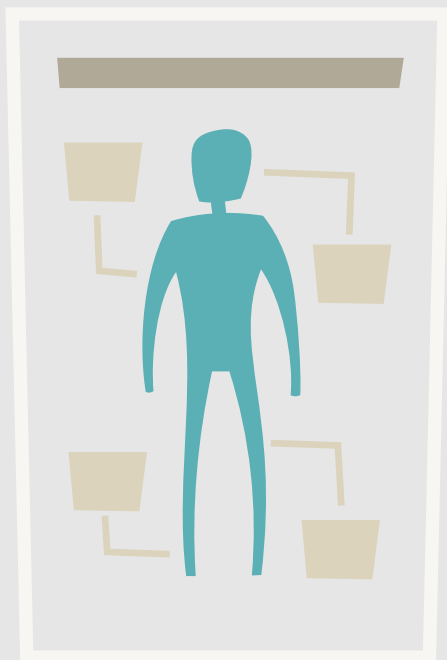
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Sixth, the church is not complete without autistic people.



In the Bible, the apostle Paul said the church was like a human body, and that the hand cannot say to the foot "I don't need you."

The church is the body of Christ: every member is necessary for the body to be healthy and function well.



7

Seventh, when autistic people worship with the rest of the church, we all learn something about worship and liturgy.

Autistic people help the church to know that we don't all need to do things in exactly the same way when we worship together.

For example, sometimes we all say the same prayer, but some will kneel, others remain seated; some will be able to say a text that is in the liturgical book or on the screen, others join in silently.



In summary,
it all comes down to a
change in attitude. Making small
changes can be very helpful, but
churches can do more.

It is easy to look at what most people do and want, and then do that. That is called 'normalcy.'

However, what most people do and want often excludes autistic people.



A church where everyone
belongs needs to be a church
that values everyone.



We hope that this e-zine has given you some ideas for making sure that your church is a place where autistic people belong.

Visit the centre for autism and theology website



www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/cat

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THANK YOU FOR READING



To Find out More

We have written more about this research 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.

Coming soon: Van Ommen, Armand Léon, and Henna J. Cundill. **“Non-Speaking Autistic Participation in Liturgy and Church Life: (Non-)Speech Acts.”**