

WELCOMING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM TO OUR CHURCH



To welcome persons with autism in the church, we need to understand autism from the autistic person's perspective and not from the so-called "neurotypical"¹ experience of autism.

Traditionally autism was defined by looking at a list of deficits. Seeing autism as a developmental delay, people with communication challenges, behaviour issues and social interaction deficits, are just some examples. These perspectives can be harmful and hurtful, but unfortunately, this is what autistic people have been perceived to be as, which caused defensive attitudes, shutdowns, and sensory meltdowns.

It is therefore advisable to rather look at autism in the way autistics look at themselves, and who better to get this information from than from autistic folk themselves? Upon consulting with autistic advocates and spokespeople², the following surfaced:

- Autism is a different way of processing, particularly sensory matters.
- These differences usually pose a threat to the "ordinary" and is then seen as deficits, which are usually translated as inabilities, and ignoring simultaneously the abilities of autistic people.

Bearing this respectful way of perceiving autism in mind, herewith some practical advice that will assist autistic people of all ages:

- The unspoken rules in the church environment need to be clear and explained to the autistic person, thereby eliminating unforeseen misunderstandings. Do not assume for example that they know the order of service or the dress code.
- Bear in mind that many autistic people have co-existing diagnoses, for example intellectual impairment, sensory processing disorder, ADHD,

¹ *Neurotypical* is a word used to describe a person who has a typical brain (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Neurotypical>)

² "I have a condition where my brain doesn't create a consistent model of the world to serve as a model for my everyday experience" (@MyrnaPloy)

"It is a different way of thinking and processing, particularly sensory input" (Jax Blunt @liveotherwise)

"I'm switched ON in subtle ways the rest of the world doesn't notice, and switched OFF in many ways the world expects" (AspieUnderYourRadar @VoxVisual)

"Autism is both good and bad, enjoyable and intolerable, joyful and sorrowful. It is pervasive and omnipresent. Autism is a change and a joy" (@LaVidaAutistic)

"My brain works in this different way to what is expected and that's not a bad or a wrong thing, it's just a different thing" (@autisticudor)

Downs Syndrome, cerebral palsy, physical illnesses, epilepsy, etc. These diagnoses should not be confused with the autism definition. For example – autism is not an intellectual impairment, but the latter and autism often co-exist.

- Children being treated as intellectually disabled instead of autistic is one of the main causes of meltdowns and uncomfortable behaviour patterns.
- The sensory experience of the autistic person guides his comfort or discomfort in a situation. Be aware of individual needs, e.g. light sensitivity, sound sensitivity.
- Ask individual autistic people what their needs are, and listen to them rather than publications that try to cover the broad autism spectrum. Not all autistic people are alike. It is advisable to get to know a person as an individual.
- Understand meltdowns, especially the difference between a temper tantrum and a meltdown, and know how to prevent them. If it should happen, a safe place and a person to assist can be of great help.
- The dynamics between the autistic person and his family is important. Be aware of parents speaking over their autistic child or maybe overprotecting them, thereby hindering them to partake in activities.
- Be careful of stereotyping – each autistic person is a unique individual and they are not alike.
- Autistic folk are comfortable when they can:
 - Predict and trust
 - Start simple and work upwards as they get more able
 - In a structured and calm environment
- Be aware of bullying, even in the church. Most autistic people are often subjected to bullying.
- Never brush them off because they are different and communicate in different ways.
- Many autistics are non-verbal, and it is therefore advisable that the church familiarize themselves with alternative methods of communication.

In closing: Accommodating the autistic individual in church, means a process of relationship between the church family and the individual.