

Supporting Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Rebekah Dyer

Introduction

A recent study found that children with autism are almost twice as likely never to attend church or other religious services when compared to other children.¹ This is because both the families and the children often experience the church as inhospitable to autistic persons. The barriers to inclusion seem insurmountable for these families: overstimulating environments; negative perceptions of autism; inadequate and demeaning responses to autistic behaviors; insufficient support systems for family members, such as for siblings; and more. The culmination of these barriers makes the prospect of participating in church life daunting for autistic persons and their families. One parent of a child with autism expressed the following challenges of attending church as a family:

The demands of living with a person with autism are great, and families frequently experience high levels of stress. Parents have to deal with behaviors and pursue treatments while also planning for the future; siblings might feel embarrassed or overlooked; and it's important for the whole family to stay involved in a faith community. Recognizing and preparing for the challenges in store will make a tremendous difference to everyone involved, including parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family and friends.²

The purpose of this article is to help churches prepare to welcome people with autism by sharing the love of Christ. Through this article, you will learn more about autism and its characteristics, the specific needs and barriers people with autism face in the church, and strategies to include autistic Christians, affirming their dignity and place in the Body of Christ.

What Is Autism?

At the broadest level, autism is a neurological and developmental disability affecting people from all social and ethnic backgrounds. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), based on data from 2020, one in thirty-six children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).³ Autism is often identified in the first years of someone's life but sometimes not until adulthood. Autism exhibits through thought patterns and behaviors expressed in some common characteristics: lack of typical communication skills, difficulty in interacting with others, repetitive behaviors, hyperfocus on particular interests, and sensory sensitivities. Nevertheless, there is wide variation in the expression of autism. This has led to the description of autism as a spectrum, as it displays itself in unique ways from one person to another.

Early attempts to understand autism blamed insufficient parent-child bonding but further research suggests it stems from a variety of factors: genetics, environment, and brain development. The developing understanding of autism has bolstered renewed attempts over the decades to define the disability, which has been included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) since 1980. The DSM-VI is the latest edition, and it is the first to describe autism as a spectrum, depicting autism as having three levels with differing characteristics. According to the DSM-VI, the three levels of autism increase in severity of impairment from level one to level three, which requires the most support.

Individuals who fall within the categorization of level one experience communication needs that can impact them socially and require support. They often do not interact with others in a typical manner. They can communicate but struggle with conversational skills (pragmatics) and understanding social norms. Their desire to interact socially varies. They may struggle with certain behaviors, transitions between activities, organization, and planning.

The second level is characterized by diminished verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Individuals who fall within this categorization require substantial support. Their communication limitations impact the individual socially and affect their capacity to initiate interactions with others. They often have narrowed interests and struggle to function in unfamiliar contexts. They may demonstrate restricted and/or repetitive behaviors and struggle to broaden their focus.

The most severe level of autism is the third level where individuals require very substantial support. Verbal and nonverbal social communication skills are severely impaired and limited for autistic individuals who fall within this categorization. There is a significant lack of interest or response to social interactions, and this can lead to inflexibility of behavior and higher levels of distress in reaction to change. Behaviors associated with autism are more severe.

It is important to understand that not every autistic person fits neatly into a single category or level of autism because of the spectrum-like nature of symptoms. The spectrum includes a wide range of characteristics and varies in degree for everyone. As has been often said, “If you meet one person with autism, you have only met one person with autism!” What is true for one autistic person may not be true for another. This requires sensitivity and responsiveness to the unique personality and behaviors of each autistic person.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Language

The language around ASD has evolved in recent years in an attempt to keep pace with our growing understanding of autism. These rapid changes can make keeping up with appropriate language daunting for many. The most important thing to consider when determining word choice when interacting with others is to follow their personal preference. Every individual has their own preference, which can be identified through conversation and intentionality. Identifying and using their preference displays respect.

Some prefer to use people-first language, which identifies the individual prior to the disability. An example of people-first language would be to refer to an individual as “the young man with autism” versus “the autistic man.” The focus is on the individual as a person rather than on their diagnosis. Conversely, there has been a movement by others to use autistic as an identifier. These proponents have argued that autism is central to their identity and experience of the world, so self-describing as autistic highlights their embrace of their neurodivergence (i.e., their differences in thinking and experiencing the world). Autism, in this perspective, is not a deficit needing a cure. Instead, it is constitutive of a unique identity that should be celebrated and embraced by society, since it offers unique strengths and beneficial perspectives. Again, people will differ in their preferred language choice, so it is always safer to ask when unsure!

Characteristics

Autism spectrum disorder is extremely varied and encompasses a wide variety of characteristics: differences in communication, social skills, and behaviors. The varied presentation can make it challenging to know how best to respond and support autistic persons. The best way to learn how to respond is first to build a relationship of trust and rapport. As the relationship develops, the needs for support can be determined.⁴ The following description of common characteristics can prepare you to understand and respond to what you encounter.

It is important to recognize that all autistic people communicate, but many communicate in ways not typical to the broader population. While many autistic persons will use verbal language, many are non-verbal or non-speaking, which means they do not speak through propositional sentences. For those who are non-verbal, they may develop an alternative way to communicate, such as pointing, eye gaze, noises, or using assistive technology. It is important to recognize any attempt an individual makes to communicate, even if it is atypical. It is still communication and an important way to form a relationship!

Communication delays in autistic persons are typically recognized at an early age through diminished verbal communication, initiation of communication, and interest in peers, as well as unsuccessful attempts to interact with peers. When children with ASD do have a desire to interact with or communicate with others, it is often displayed in a way that is viewed as inappropriate. For example, if they want something to eat and are not able to verbalize it, they might grab someone's hand and attempt to take them to the snack to indicate what they want. Sometimes, the lack of communication skills can trigger undesired behaviors. The behaviors are a result of not feeling understood and heard. The more support they receive with communication, the fewer undesired behaviors will occur.

Social skills typically develop as babies interact with their parents and families. As children get older, they begin to interact with their peers in a school setting. Autistic persons often do not evince a strong desire to interact with others and, as a result, do not develop typical or culturally appropriate social skills. In addition, once children with disabilities begin attending school, they may be placed in classes separate from their typically developing peers, which can exacerbate the lack of social skills. Inclusion programs can promote opportunities for all students—those with and without disabilities—to develop social and communication skills.

The behaviors of autistic persons are varied and are often triggered by changes in their environment. They thrive in environments that have structure and routine. Behaviors such as tantrums or yelling can result from the expectation to participate in a non-preferred activity. They may demonstrate single-minded behaviors at an early age, such as lining up their toys in a specific way. They may develop a primary topic that they focus on excessively, wanting to learn everything about it.

Additionally, individuals with ASD commonly demonstrate repetitive behaviors, often described as “stimming.” Stimming is something they do to calm their nervous system, such as spinning in circles. As this behavior is not viewed as typical, the individual is often asked to stop this type of behavior. However, it provides sensory support and should not be viewed as something negative. Instead, this type of behavior should simply be monitored to ensure they do not harm themselves or others.

Interacting with Autistic Persons

Autistic persons often have specific sensory needs. Some may be overstimulated or under-stimulated by their environment. The sensory sensitivities can include elements of touch, light, sounds, movement, and other sensory inputs. It is important to understand a person's specific sensory needs. For instance, if an individual feels overstimulated through touch, such as a handshake or hug, they may exhibit a strong reaction. They may prefer touch in a different way: the use of a weighted blanket or vest, “fidget” tools, or alternative seating. The lights in an environment may be overwhelming and they may prefer to have them

dimmed or eliminated. The use of noise-cancelling headphones can be very helpful for individuals who are sensitive to noise, particularly in loud worship services. Many autistic individuals become overstimulated when they are with a large group of people. They typically prefer to sit alone or away from a group. The best way to determine what sensory sensitivities impact a person is to ask them questions and try to understand the world from their perspective.

A consistent environment that provides concrete expectations will best serve individuals on the spectrum. Each faith community has unique expectations, and these may need to be communicated in a specific way for individuals with ASD. People on the autism spectrum tend to understand things in a very literal way and so will do best if the communication makes sense literally. When communicating expectations for behavior, it is best to specify what the desired behavior is rather than only communicating what you do not want them to do. Instead of saying “Do not hit!” you can say, “Be gentle with your hands.” As you attempt to communicate your expectations, it is beneficial to model or act out how you want them to respond in a certain situation. Providing pictures to support any expectations will help make the communication concrete as well. By making the expectations concrete and explicit, individuals will be better able to understand and respond accordingly.

Perhaps the greatest need for people with autism is for others not to underestimate their abilities. When society underestimates autistic persons by discouraging participation in church and ministry by default, they portray those individuals as being “less than.” Conversely, when church communities assume the competence of autistic persons by inviting their participation, they demonstrate the value of each unique individual and their personal abilities. We are all created in God’s image, and none of us are “less than,” though we are all very different. We need to assume that everyone we interact with, whether they have a disability or not, is competent. Then simply provide the necessary supports they may need in any particular area.

Barriers

To create an inclusive environment, it is important to consider any barriers—whether intentional or unintentional—that may prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in the faith community. It can be difficult for individuals who do not have a disability to be aware of the possible barriers that may be in place. It is beneficial to consider collaborating with individuals with disabilities to analyze, reflect, and set goals to remove any barriers. Barriers may include attitudes, communication, programming, and behaviors. While society has made progress in accepting and understanding individuals with disabilities, stigma or negative attitudes towards disability often remain. This attitudinal barrier often stems from a lack of awareness or knowledge about autism. This can lead to autistic individuals and their families not feeling welcome in the church. They may attend church and not feel that anyone greets them or wants to interact with them. In addition, they or their family member with a disability may experience a lack of opportunities to participate. Persons with autism are often misunderstood due to the characteristics of their disability. Some church members may even believe going to church is a waste of time for persons with disabilities. This attitude does not support Jesus’ calling to love everyone. When the church does not have a welcoming attitude towards autistic persons and persons with disabilities in general, the church misses out on something that God has for them. An inclusive environment does ministry with autistic persons, rather than merely ministry for autistic persons.

It is important that a church provides a variety of options for communication to ensure all individuals, especially those with disabilities, have a way to communicate that is effective for them. When individuals are provided with a preferred way to communicate, they will feel more welcomed and included in the setting. Autistic persons may rely on pictures or technology to communicate with others, specifically with individuals who are unfamiliar with their unique communication styles. These supports can be made available in advance.

Individuals who are nonspeaking communicate in other ways. There are more ways to communicate than with verbal communication. Nonspeaking communication can include pointing, facial expressions, eye gaze, and other gestures. Nonspeaking cues can build a bridge of communication if they are noticed and recognized. Always presume competence when communicating with an autistic person. Interact with them in a way that assumes they have the ability to learn, think, and understand. As you design your program to support autistic persons, include opportunities for response that allow a variety of communication modalities.

Churches need to consider the programming they offer such as Sunday school classes, small groups, trainings, services, communion, classes, and special events, to name a few, and reflect on the inclusiveness of those opportunities. Is anyone able to participate, regardless of disability? Are there offerings specific to those with disabilities and their families? Church leaders and volunteers may struggle with the question, “What will autistic persons get out of this?” The level of comprehension may not need to be the focus, but rather the power of fellowship. Specifically for autistic persons who struggle with communication and social skills, the opportunity to interact with others is beneficial in multiple ways. Beyond the benefits anyone else may experience through participation, they may also benefit from the modeling of developmentally appropriate social and communication skills, and the opportunity to practice and develop their own skills. This is a significant benefit of inclusion. When individuals with autism do not have the opportunity to interact with their typically developing peers, they do not have many opportunities to use social and communication skills in a “typical” manner.

The most common reason churches feel hesitant about autism inclusion is their inability to manage challenging behaviors. Managing problematic behaviors is intimidating for those who are not familiar with them. The “typical” church setting does not allow for noise or movement outside of the planned activities. This can be difficult for autistic persons and the lack of opportunity to move and make noise will most likely lead to increased unwanted behaviors. The standard of what is “acceptable” in church needs to provide grace for autistic persons or other people with disabilities.

Remember that your role in supporting autistic persons does not require that you have all the answers. The priority is to be willing to help. Parents and families of persons with autism face numerous struggles and spend a lot of time advocating for their needs in educational, medical, and social settings. The church should not be one more place to struggle or feel as though they have to fight for inclusion. Seeing an autistic person as valuable whether or not their family advocates for them brings a sense of peace and joy.

Inclusion

First Corinthians 12:26 states, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” God created humans to live in community as members of the Body of Christ. We are all created to interact with each other to support and love one another. We are all created in his image! This verse provides the impetus and purpose of inclusion. Inclusion means everyone feels valued and accepted as a vital part of the community. Inclusion allows for everyone to participate and be an equal part of the community regardless of differences. Differences in an inclusive environment are valued and celebrated.

Erik Carter researched among individuals with disabilities to determine what persons need to feel valued, included, and accepted. The research revealed ten dimensions of belonging. Churches can use this information to create a disability ministry and inclusive faith community. The ten dimensions of belonging include:

1. To be present: Individuals with disabilities want to be able to participate in church without any barriers, physical or attitudinal. In addition, they prefer others assume competence and work to remove false assumptions.

2. To be invited: If a church desires to create a fully inclusive environment, they need to make sure they invite everyone to participate in all opportunities rather than only select ones.
3. To be welcomed: For everyone to feel welcome in church, attitudinal barriers and stigmas regarding individuals with disabilities need to be removed.
4. To be known: We all desire to be recognized and valued as an individual and viewed as an equal by our peers.
5. To be accepted: A goal of interacting with anyone, regardless of disabilities or limitations, should be to focus on their strengths and abilities rather than any weakness or inability.
6. To be supported: The faith community can provide resources and connections in all aspects of life to support individuals with disabilities.
7. To be cared for: Families and caregivers of those with disabilities often need opportunities for respite, which can be a form of ministry provided by the church.
8. To be friended: Relationships, including friendships, should go both ways. This involves reciprocity of the friendship.
9. To be needed: Everyone has gifts and talents. The church can support individuals with disabilities by allowing them to use their gifts and talents to serve in the church.
10. To be loved: We are called to love one another; this includes everyone. We are all created in his image.⁵

Depending on a person's experience in a faith community, their faith will be impacted positively or negatively. Individuals with disabilities and the people who love them may wrestle with understanding the intersection of their faith and their life with a disability. A lack of inclusiveness from other Christians can lead to questions and fears regarding their own faith.

One parent of a child with disability shared their personal experiences with faith and disability:

For years my husband and I had to take turns going to church alone. And we have a daughter that's typical developing. So one of us would bring her and then we would take turns. Sitting in church and looking at other families come as a family, come together, made us feel so isolated. We'd always be rushing off after church in order to switch off, so there was never an opportunity to try to connect with other people. Now the past year, as we have started attending a church with a disability ministry program, has been wonderful because we know we always have someone there for our son. We don't have to worry about a babysitter canceling on us. We know that the staff in the disability ministry are always there and are always welcoming.⁶

Disability ministry should involve not only the individuals with disabilities, but the families and caregivers as well. They deal with unique challenges and will need different supports. Ministries that provide for the needs of everyone strongly portray the love of Christ.

Strategies to Support Inclusion

Due to the sensory sensitivities of persons on the spectrum, most of the strategies to support them involve their environment. They need to feel safe and comfortable in different settings. There are different ways to create a safe environment, including sensory supports, communication options, and differentiated participation options. It may be difficult to determine an individual's specific needs upon first meeting them. The parents, guardians, or other caregivers can be a helpful resource in creating appropriate supports.

The environment should have multiple areas for the individual with autism to move between to meet their sensory needs. Some individuals prefer to be in an enclosed area or under something. The use of mats and bean bags can make the area comfortable and inviting.

Especially during a first meeting, have multiple options for communication including pictures, electronic devices, and different writing utensils. Church programs can start simply by printing out pictures to coordinate with words that may be common in communication, rather than purchasing expensive communication devices. Families may bring their own communication method as well, which will be helpful as they are already comfortable using it. Participation in all activities should be optional to avoid overstimulation and frustration. Individuals with ASD thrive in organized and structured environments. You will want to create a predictable environment with a routine where they can know what to expect. This increases their comfort level. All these supports can create an inviting environment where everyone feels valued and cared for.

As new families participate in a church community, it is important for the leaders and volunteers to take the time to get to know everyone personally, working to understand what makes each person feel welcomed and included. Understanding the basics of a person's disability—how it impacts the person and the family, how they communicate, any preferences or sensitivities, activities the person enjoys or finds calming—will contribute to a sense of wellbeing. The priority is to communicate love! Families who live with disability often feel unwelcome. As they are embraced and valued in a faith community, they can experience the Lord's love through their experience of being welcomed regardless of disability.

There are many things to consider when ministering to individuals with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum, and it is important to remember that everyone on the spectrum is very different. We are called by God to love and minister to all his children, and this includes those with disabilities. Everyone is invited to God's banquet table, according to his Word. Individuals with disabilities and their families may have had experiences where they were left out, singled out, and otherwise not welcomed. They will need an intentional invitation to be welcomed into the faith community.

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Notes

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Dr. Rebekah Dyer, a full professor at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, AZ, is an esteemed educator and advocate for individuals with disabilities. As the special education content lead, she is deeply committed to fostering inclusion across all settings. Dr. Dyer’s passion extends to her involvement with the Lopes Academy, an advisory board where she teaches classes in a two-year certificate program, providing opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to experience college. She organizes an annual Disability Week on campus, promoting awareness and inclusion. With a research focus on Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dr. Dyer has presented internationally and published multiple articles, elevating discussions on special education, dyslexia, differentiated instruction, and disability ministry. Her teaching strengths lie in building relationships, effective communication, and engaging classrooms.