



Neurodiversity in the Church

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James 1:2 warns us against practicing our faith with partiality. However, we may do just that when we fail to acknowledge and address the needs of those who fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence. Neurodiversity recognises that our brains work differently. Just like our fingerprints, our brains are unique. For most people, their brains are similar enough that while they differ in

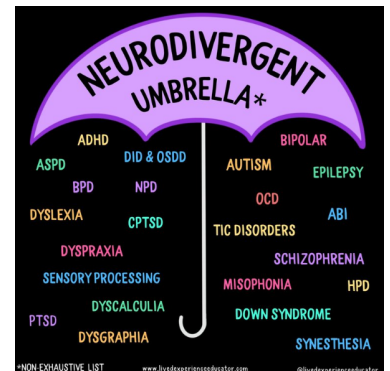
skills, preferences, and styles, for the most part, they perceive the world in a similar way. Some people exhibit differences in functions like social understanding, sensory processing, attention, communication, memory, and many other cognitive functions.

These differences result from neurological conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), dyspraxia and other categories of brain function. Neurodivergent people think differently to the majority of neurotypical people. Their unique perspectives and experiences may enable them to excel at creativity and innovation, have highly specialised skillsets and have the ability to hyper-focus. The neurodiverse paradigm seeks to maximise strengths rather than focussing on perceived weaknesses. Embracing neurodiversity is critical for an inclusive church and also presents us with huge opportunities. Neurodivergent people should be accommodated and celebrated. If their perspective is embraced this can be a considerable advantage within the church.

However, the differences neurodivergent people experience can present significant challenges for the individual, their families, and the church. Neurodivergent people experience a significantly higher levels of unemployment, social isolation, bullying, depression and suicidal ideation. Within the church, a general lack of awareness of the needs of neurodivergents may result in unintentional barriers for those who feel they don't fit in. This is because the way we 'do church' is generally organised by neurotypical people who experience the world the way they do.

How often do we have neurodivergent people, helping to decide how we shape what the church should look like and how it should function? Where are the disability perspectives in our worship services or small groups, Pathfinder curricula, Sabbath School, etc.? How do different perspectives impact our mission and values? It's essential to prioritise and listen to neurodivergent voices because whenever we have the same types of minds creating anything, it will always include some unintentional barriers just due to a lack of knowledge and lived experience.

Communication misunderstandings can occur when we interact with someone with autism who does not understand traditional social cues and may come across as aloof and disinterested. It is not unusual for neurodivergent people to be oblivious to offences that others perceive. In settings perceived as unaccepting of difference, some neurodivergent people will often mask their neurodivergence to gain acceptance. This masking or camouflaging behaviour often causes fatigue and the need to re-energise away from people. For example, an autistic person might avoid self-soothing behaviors that others may view as strange, force themselves to look people in the eyes, pretend to understand things they do not, practice fake smiling. They may simply avoid the anxiety of social situations.



From a church perspective, our attempts to make people feel welcome and included may be the very things that do the very opposite. Consider, for example, the spike in discomfort for the person with social anxiety who is forced to “Greet somebody in Jesus’ name” or how the person with OCD cringes inside when required to hold hands to pray. Imagine the fear in the heart of the dyslexic child put on the spot to read a Bible text in a Sabbath School class. Spare a thought for the person with sensory processing challenges who doesn’t like to be touched, being pounced upon by the greeter who hugs on sight. Think of the extreme introvert who is called out to “stand up, tell us your name and where you are from.” Research indicates that what people in new situations tend to fear most is speaking in public and being embarrassed. Yet, we often expose them to both.

It is not unusual for neurodivergent people to intentionally plan to arrive in time for the sermon and leave before the last hymn to avoid social interaction. Worse still, they may not come at all. So if we want neurodivergent people to feel at home in our communities of faith, what do we need to consider? And, before we conclude that the numbers are insufficient to warrant an overhaul of how we do church, we need to take into account that in the UK, an estimated one in seven people is neurodivergent - and that’s in addition to all the other varieties of disability. It is highly likely that we have many undiagnosed neurodivergents sitting in our pews.

To thrive, neurodivergent people often need accommodations to be made in understanding, programming, resourcing, environment, and many other areas. For example, a calm sensory environment, a routine with the same start and end times, giving extra time to perform tasks, and direct instructions. A greater awareness of neurodivergence is vital for church leaders and everybody within the household of faith. The saying comes to mind, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” As we educate ourselves, we will have a greater understanding and tolerance of differences in our congregations. It can reduce the tendency to make assumptions and judgements that can negatively impact our relationships. It can promote better understanding of why somebody is behaving or communicating in a particular way.

“The problem with trying to knock a square peg in to a round hole is that you damage the peg in the process”

An awareness of neurodivergence creates opportunities for us to make accommodations that promote inclusivity. Education can build bridges to empathy and support. It also equips the church to harness the untapped potential for ministry within the pool of unique talents and abilities of many neurodivergent members. Greater awareness involves recognising each other’s uniqueness in general and the variance within neurodivergence. If we have met one neurodivergent person, we have met ONE neurodivergent person.

As churches, we can make changes by starting small. We can take an intentional look at how to organise our churches from the perspective of neurodiversity. We can actively seek out the voices of those who experience church through neurodiverse lenses. So, for both neurotypical and neurodivergent people, learning can help promote clearer communication, reduce anxiety, build relationships and open up opportunities for service.

Our willingness to recognise and accommodate neurodivergence should be informed by an awareness that from God’s perspective, we all have different strengths and challenges, and yet, are totally acceptable to Him. He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” (Isa. 55:8). Yet He makes accommodations for us. He “knows our frame that we are dust (Ps. 103:14).” He provides grace for our deficiencies, and He provides a community of faith in which unity can thrive in diversity, so that His strength can be manifested in us.