

# Autism and Church: A reflection

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## Abstract

This is a reflective piece on the experience of an autistic child and their family in churches over a period of years. It considers a variety of church practices in terms of their encouragement or inhibition of the child's journey of faith and their experience of welcome, safety, and love. It also draws a contrast between the church practice of welcoming and the experience the autistic child and family have had at one of the centres of the Riding for the Disabled Association, and its very different approaches and ethos held in relation to those who are disabled.



‘Do you think you are too good to sit over here with the rest of us?’ That was the question shouted out a few minutes before I was due to lead a watchnight service, directed by an adult towards my 11-year-old autistic son who sat off to the side in the sanctuary whilst others sat in the middle. That is just one of the many comments my son has endured from adults in church over the years, either made to him directly or overheard. As a child and now as a teenager he has already realised that church is not always a safe place. His faith in people – though not in God – has been diminished. He also is unlikely to want to return to a church building on a regular basis.

In his book *Autism and the Church*, Grant Macaskill states that ‘the church is not a safe place for those who are vulnerable just because it is the church’.<sup>1</sup> A place which has ‘All are welcome’ on its website and

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 89.

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noticeboards may not be a safe place, let alone a welcoming one, for a child who by their age is vulnerable and who is doubly vulnerable because of being autistic.

Jesus said, 'Let the little children come unto me' (Mark 10:13), but instead some shout or criticise or make life so unpleasant that the little children just don't want to come anywhere near a church building to hear of Jesus; and neither do their parents. This is incredibly challenging, and even more so when the parent happens to be the minister. Thus I write this reflection not on behalf of others with autism, but as a parent of a child with autism and as a Church of Scotland minister.

My words may sound at times critical but that is appropriate when the lived reality of church for some autistic people is exclusion, misunderstanding, or isolation. The emotional impact on a child with autism is significant, and in his book *The Reason I Jump* Naoki Higashida explains that the worst thing about having autism is that 'you can't begin to imagine how miserable and sad we get'.<sup>2</sup> For parents that truth is sometimes observed numerous times in a week as a child battles prejudice and misunderstanding.

Some congregations, despite having no wish to exclude, are simply unaware of how their interactions and practices create barriers for autistic people. Some are intentional about being welcoming of autistic people, and that is to be applauded. Some will exert no energy to change their practices or welcome, and some will be actively hostile, yet happily declare how open and welcoming they are as a congregation. At the same time, I do not wish to minimise for a moment the difficulties that exist in relation to attendance at church by those who are autistic, for the autistic person or for congregations. Sometimes the two will just be incompatible.

That said, there are chinks of light appearing in church practices throughout Scotland. In some places love is present in the midst of congregations who support autistic people and welcome them even as they sit off to the side in a sanctuary, or rock back and forth at coffee or lunch clubs. In some places new ways of being church and worshipping in community are being explored with autistic and disabled children. In others new worshipping communities are in the process of being formed, like the St Thorlak's Community in Glasgow, which recognises challenges

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<sup>2</sup> Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump* (London: Sceptre, 2013), 70.

of attendance and social interaction for those with autism.<sup>3</sup> In other church buildings, youth clubs have run for years for autistic teens and are a witness to inclusion, meeting need and the love of God.

The National Autistic Society defines autism as ‘a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.’<sup>4</sup> We may be tempted to read the words ‘developmental disability’ and make judgements about an autistic person’s intellect. However, some people who are autistic have either average or above-average intelligence, even those who are non-verbal.<sup>5</sup> Many, like my son, attend mainstream school, have incredible recall, are creative and able to engage in academic studies like their peers.

Autistic people are not ill; they are not broken; they are not defective or deficient. They are just different from those who are neurotypical. Autism is not a condition that can be healed, despite the belief some hold that autism can be cured by medical intervention, diet, or prayer. Autism is a fundamental part of who my son is, but he is not defined by it.

I think it is a very helpful distinction to make that my son’s neurology is what drives his behaviour; many of his actions are a response to a sensory overload rather than behaviour which seeks attention or is intent on disruption to those around him. Autism is not a discipline or parenting issue, though it does create numerous issues for parents as they care for their child and help them negotiate the world.

The current understanding of autism is evolving. As one psychiatrist told me, ‘We really don’t know very much about it.’ We are painfully aware there is a lack of understanding, not only in the medical world but in church life, in schools, and in society in general.

Stories from others are too numerous to relate, but many people choose simply not to continue to try to get their child to church at all. I for the most part am one of them. No-one wants to go to a place where they aren’t

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<sup>3</sup> St Thorlak’s Community is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Presbytery of Glasgow, for creating and developing a community church for people with autism and for families with children who are autistic; see <https://www.nands.church.org/st-thorlak-s-community>.

<sup>4</sup> National Autistic Society, “What is Autism?”, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>.

<sup>5</sup> BBC, *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, Episode 1 highlights the experience of Murray Bruce, who is non-verbal but through technology is able to communicate and enter into conversations appropriate for his age.

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welcome, or which is so challenging it causes distress for the rest of the day. As his mother I wish to protect him and as a minister I get frustrated and angry that this is his experience of church. My son spends time assisting his technologically-challenged mother to prepare the digital element of worship. The absurdity is a child who was excluded in many ways in church has been for a few years enabling others to worship.

The Church is the Body of Christ in the world and is made up of those who are baptised into this community of faith. For those of us who believe in infant baptism, we are assured through the Church of Scotland's liturgy in *Common Order* of the love of God for those who do not understand it.<sup>6</sup> I reference this because we can often get caught up in intellectualising faith or make it overly social, but in doing so we forget about the place of grace. Society functions on social capacities and many churches are run on similar understandings. However, we are each made in the image of God regardless of our capacities. Grace is greater than our intellect and ability to function socially. 'The image of God cannot be lost or compromised in any way.'<sup>7</sup> We are not part of the Body of Christ by default, through our social capacities or intellect, but by grace and by the actions of Christ on the cross.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, details the need for all parts of the body to be present for it to function effectively. I have often wondered if the reality of where the Church finds itself now, is not just a direct consequence of secularism but a consequence of a lack of intentional hospitality towards those with disabilities and a failure to recognise or value the spiritual gifts which they and their families possess. Paul is adamant that the body does not function effectively without a recognition of the uniqueness of gifts brought together in community. The distinctive and valuable contribution of those with autism will be lost if they are not able to be included in

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<sup>6</sup> Church of Scotland Panel on Worship, *The Book of Common Order* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2015), 87: 'In this sacrament, the love of God is offered to each one of us. Though we cannot understand or explain it, we are called to accept that love with the openness and trust of a child. In baptism, *N...* is assured of the love that God has for *her* and the sign and seal of the Holy Spirit is placed upon *her*.'

<sup>7</sup> Kathy McReynolds, "More Than Skin Deep: The Image of God in People with Disabilities", *BioLogos*, 29 June 2012, <https://biologos.org/articles/more-than-skin-deep-the-image-of-god-in-people-with-disabilities>.

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church life. This view is shared by Stewart Rapley in his book *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church*.<sup>8</sup>

Our experience in two very different places – churches we have attended and The Brae, a Riding for the Disabled centre – reveal two very different approaches to those who are autistic. It can be difficult to draw a distinction between organisations that are structured differently for different purposes. But the way an organisation is structured shows who the organisation is for.

‘All are welcome’, many churches proudly declare, but that may depend on whether you can make your way to the other side of the building to access the ramp whilst others enter via the front door, or whether a lift exists to allow you access other levels of the building. ‘All are welcome’ may only apply to those able to navigate the complex social and worship practices. ‘All are welcome’ may come with a condition of not sitting in someone else’s favourite seat, or not making noise or moving about.

The Brae Riding for the Disabled centre was established in Dundee as part of a network of centres dedicated to delivering a programme of lessons in horse riding and carriage driving for those who have disabilities. This network had grown since its inception and there are about 500 centres spread about the UK. Horse therapy has long been known to provide incredible benefits to those with disabilities. As expressed in their mission statement, the organisation seeks ‘to ensure that anyone with a disability can benefit from the unique bond between humans and horses.’<sup>9</sup> The Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) states on its UK website: ‘We welcome clients with physical and learning disabilities and autism, and there are no age restrictions.’<sup>10</sup>

Access which may bring challenges at church is not an issue at The Brae. It has wheelchair access throughout, and a lift that allows wheelchairs and those with mobility issues to access the gallery where everyone sits. Making noise is not an issue at The Brae, nor moving about in the viewing gallery, as it is understood that noise and movement, like arm waving, flapping or verbal high-pitched sounds are behaviours to be

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart Rapley, *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> RDA UK, “Transforming Lives Across the UK” (Strategic Plan 2022–2025), <https://rda.org.uk/strategy/>.

<sup>10</sup> RDA UK, “About RDA”, <https://rda.org.uk/about-us/>.

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expected in some people with autism. The ponies are selected for their temperament and seem unworried by noise and some movements that riders may make.

Churches can be noisy places. Those of us who are neurotypical can tune out what is essentially background noise due to a circuit in our brains that filters unwanted sensory input.<sup>11</sup> However, autistic people like my son can often hear every noise that we have unconsciously filtered out. Ironically, we may not have noticed the noise which has caused discomfort to an autistic person, and they may not be able to communicate it in that moment verbally, but you can bet their discomfort, if it is expressed in an action or noise, will be noticed and commented on.

The environment of The Brae is sparse. Light cannot flood the riding school from outside as it can do in church through stained glass windows; distracting light patterns and colours dancing through the space are simply not present. It is quiet in The Brae; there is no music (except for competition rides), or loud conversations, or people being shushed, tutted or glared at. The smell of the horses permeates the air rather than a myriad of perfumes and aftershaves, food smells, or the mustiness of an old building.

Many churches now make use of digital technology, but it is often word heavy and visually light. A visual perspective helps my son immensely when attending new spaces. Think Google Street View: an overview and then a closer view of what a place looks like. In church terms that would include photos or even videos about the building, and what the various areas and items within it are for. It would also include an explanation of various practices: why we do what we do and what that looks and sounds like. For people like my son for whom the unknown can cause distress, these are helpful resources, which is why at The Brae visual aids of photos of staff and ponies are on walls and were sent out prior to my son's first visit.

At The Brae he does not need to run a gruelling social marathon to enter. He is able to make his way down the corridor to the riding school unimpeded by anyone waiting to welcome him. At church welcome teams stand like sentries and the expectation is small talk, something people like

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Trafton, "How We Tune Out Distractions: Neuroscientists Trace a Brain Circuit that Filters Unwanted Sensory Input", *MIT News*, 12 June 2019, <https://news.mit.edu/2019/how-brain-ignores-distractions-0612>.

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my son can really do without. He, like others who are autistic, does not care whether you think it is a good morning, but he has learned that in certain social situations a response is required. That response may only be one word – ‘Yes’ – and for him that is enough to convey that yes, he thinks likewise that it is a good morning. However, some will take it as rudeness.

In church, numbers can vary, but being with 40 or 50 people can be difficult for someone whose hearing is extremely sensitive. At The Brae numbers are much smaller, with 5 or 6 riders at the maximum plus their carers and at least one volunteer per horse (up to a maximum of three per rider). No-one arrives too early, with the majority arriving in the five minutes before the lesson because socialising is not something most want to engage in.

The riders are known to staff and are called forward by name, and their name is used whenever the instructor is speaking to them during the lesson. At no time in The Brae have we been shushed or tutted at, asked to move, or encountered any negative comments. There is something about going to a place when you know that many of the people there just know what it is like to have to battle each day of each week and what it is like to be judged and excluded. There is something about going to a place where you see children and young people who are often very painfully aware of the things that they cannot do, engage in something that they may never have thought they could do, and do it well.<sup>12</sup> This is a place for body and soul where life skills of communication and self-confidence are supported and encouraged in a safe environment.

I am aware that the design and purpose of The Brae means that in terms of riding it does exclude those who are able-bodied, but not from being present and participating in a different way. By their presence and work those who are disabled are supported by those who are not. In my naivety I once thought that is how the Church should function.

Yet disability is often not visible in churches, except perhaps in the elderly. The impact of such invisibility is explained by theologian Dawn DeVries:

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<sup>12</sup> The RDA ask parents to fill out a survey about the impact of each set of lessons: ‘68% of those participating had improved communication, 76% experienced more enjoyment in activities, 77% showed greater confidence, 76% experienced physical improvement, and 82% experienced improved ability to build relationships’, RDA UK, “Impact”, <https://rda.org.uk/impact/>.

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[...] what cannot be seen is not real and thus cannot be a problem [...]. Unfortunately for the citizens [...] who have disabilities, however, the lack of accessible public space has rendered them invisible to many of their neighbors; and this invisibility has, in turn, functioned precisely to convince those neighbors that they do not exist [...]<sup>13</sup>

But of course, they do exist. In 2017, the Scottish Health Survey estimated that 32% of adults and 10% of children were disabled.<sup>14</sup> In 2017 there were 47,231 people with diagnosed autism in Scotland, ranging in age from very young children to adults of 67 years of age.<sup>15</sup> But these numbers are not typically reflected in many places in worship, which unfortunately skews how worship and congregational life is approached and lived. It also impacts the richness of communities and their ability to function in a well-rounded way.

As I have already stated, it is difficult to compare organisations that have been set up for different purposes, but it is essential that the church learns practices that engage and welcome those who are disabled, including autistic people. There is joy and challenge in knowing my son, and in places wonderful people and congregations are intentional about their hospitality that has allowed him to be present. They have enabled, rather than disabled him. They speak love in words and actions, in meeting a child at the door and allowing them to sit or move as they need. They encourage and give space for interaction and do not require that interaction to be on their terms alone. For all the criticism of our experience, there are many places where the question has been asked, What does he need? What can we do in order to help him whilst in the church building, and how would he like to participate? And indeed, if these questions aren't asked, then how will anyone know how to support a child like him?

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<sup>13</sup> Dawn DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities", in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Government, "Scotland's Wellbeing: National Outcomes for Disabled People", 31 July 2019, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-well-being-measuring-national-outcomes-disabled-people/>.

<sup>15</sup> Scottish Government, "The Microsegmentation of the Autism Spectrum: Research Project", 26 March 2018, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/microsegmentation-autism-spectrum/pages/9/>.



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Church congregations can sometimes forget that they exist as a body because of Jesus. They are his Body in the world – not individually but collectively. He modelled inclusion and bringing wholeness to those who were ill or excluded. Similarly, Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28 that ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ Congregations need to learn this afresh if the Body of Christ is to function effectively in this world, and all are to be welcomed in His name.