

Welcoming neurodiversity in worship

A neurodiversity lens invites us to reconsider what we define as “normal” in how we think, perceive and experience the world.

Jen Bluestein

During outdoor worship at a recent weekend camp retreat for children and parents, one young girl sat apart from the group and drew on the concrete floor with sidewalk chalk. Later, the girl’s mother shared with me that her daughter has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. The mother asked if it was okay that her child had been sitting apart and drawing during the worship service. The mother quickly added, “She is absorbing a lot more than it looks like she might be.”

This mother’s experience of social norms about what it means for a child to participate in worship in other environments had conditioned her to expect that she needed to apologize for and defend

her child’s behavior — even at an outdoor camp worship service that was designed for kids and their parents.

Another child, Olivia, a fourth grader with dyslexia, reports that reading small print and single-spaced bulletins is challenging for her, which prevents her from participating in prayers.

A children’s ministry director at a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation, Kate, is autistic. Kate received a call from a distraught mother whose autistic son had been excluded from other congregations because those congregations “were not equipped to handle” the child. Kate also tells of another mother whose autistic preschooler became emotionally dysregulated during worship. The



mother carried the child outside the sanctuary, and then a well-meaning but poorly informed congregant approached to ask if she could help “get her child under control.”

Over many years of serving children and their families, including many neurodivergent children, I have seen families struggle to conform a child’s behavior to the (sometimes unspoken) congregational norm that expects a quiet child to sit in a pew for an hour-long worship service. These expectations, which can challenge even neurotypical children, can be even more difficult when a child’s brain perceives sensory stimuli differently, making the sound of rustling bulletins or the smell of a nearby person’s perfume or

cologne overwhelming. Parents whose early elementary-age autistic children have aged out of the childcare offered during worship can struggle to help their child join worship because other congregants have deemed the child’s activity level to be disruptive, or because the loud organ music and bright lights can overstimulate the child, leading to a meltdown. These neurodivergent children and their families suffer from the stigma and shame associated with failing to meet these social expectations in church life.

... employing a neurodiversity lens allows us to interrogate our standards for what is considered a “normal” way of thinking and experiencing the world.

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is a relatively new term, coined in the 1990s and often attributed to autistic activist and social scientist Judy Singer. Neurodiversity reflects the reality that human beings are created and experience the world in diverse ways. In other words, our nervous systems process sensory stimuli in varying ways, and of course, everyone thinks differently. Since its first use, the term “neurodiversity” has sparked a neurodiversity movement that has gained momentum toward including the voices and experiences of those who are neurodivergent — whose brains function in ways that differ from dominant societal norms.

Many people think only of autism when they hear the term “neurodivergent.” However, neurodivergence includes the reality of people who have ADHD, sensory processing challenges, Tourette’s syndrome, certain learning disabilities and many other ways of experiencing the world. When we understand the experiences of neurodivergent people through the lens of neurodiversity, we resist pathologizing God’s

children who experience the world in these ways — we resist the temptation to view their brain differences as something to be fixed. Instead, employing a neurodiversity lens allows us to interrogate our standards for what is considered a “normal” way of thinking and experiencing the world. We ask whether what we think about the church, our worship practices, our Sunday school classes and even God is shared by others in our church environment who experience it very differently.

If we listen to the stories shared by neurodivergent people — such as the parents of a boy with ADHD who worried that their child would be excluded from Sunday school because he needed to move frequently and struggled to follow directions, or the adult who struggles to shake hands and make eye contact during passing of the peace — we may learn something new about how others experience church.

BARRIERS TO INCLUDING NEURODIVERGENCE

Disability scholar Erik Carter, in his 2007 book *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, identifies an “attitudinal barrier” to the inclusion of disabled children in congregational life. While our congregations publish statements of welcome and have a genuine, wholehearted desire to include all, attitudinal barriers for neurodivergent people

For neurodivergent children and their parents, attitudinal barriers may look or feel like judgment of parenting practices when some congregants — or even the parents themselves — indicate that the children are distracting when they are not sitting still or are being too noisy.

may show up in subtle, unexpected ways. These barriers may include the idea that a congregation must have a disability ministry or that people need exceptional credentials to welcome and include those with disabilities, including those who are neurodivergent. Often, attitudinal barriers in our churches manifest as unwritten social rules, such as the belief that it is rude or disrespectful not to make eye contact when speaking with someone.

... for neurodivergent people who process sensory information differently ... participating in and experiencing God in worship may look different from the ableist expectation of what it means to be an engaged participant.

For neurodivergent children and their parents, attitudinal barriers may look or feel like judgment of parenting practices when some congregants — or even the parents themselves — indicate that the children are distracting when they are not sitting still or are being too noisy. These beliefs often result from what a person was taught as a child about “appropriate” behavior in church. When we embrace neurodiversity, however, we begin to examine these unwritten rules to ask: Are they true? Does this belief reflect how God calls us to be in community, or is it an arbitrary expectation that we have designed?

Neurodivergent children and adults may struggle to participate in many aspects of worship services. Some, especially those with dyslexia, can find the highly verbal nature of worship challenging. For others, the requirement to sit still for a sermon may make worship uncomfortable.

Many enjoy parts of worship services, like passing the peace or playing dramatic musical pieces, that people with sensory processing issues may find overwhelming or even painful.

Ableism – the ways the world is constructed to privilege able-bodied experiences, both individually and systemically – is the biggest impediment to including people with disabilities in the church. Within church culture are deeply ingrained ableist views that someone is only participating in and learning from worship if they sit with other worshipers and appear to be paying attention. Yet we know that faith is more “caught” than taught and that worship environments are among the contexts in which children catch language about God. In her 2015 book *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development*, theologian Amanda Hontz Drury recounts how her three-year-old child absorbed and later used language about God’s healing without being explicitly taught it. This story illustrates the capacity of even very young children to form their understanding of God from the language they hear.

However, for neurodivergent people who process sensory information differently than others do, participating in and experiencing God in worship may look different from the ableist expectation of what it means to be an engaged participant.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUROINCLUSIVE WORSHIP

The need to transform worship to include neurodivergent people has increased as our understanding of disorders such as autism and ADHD has increased. In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2023 released findings that show that nearly 3% of children in the United States have autism, and almost 10% have ADHD. However, autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences are not concerns only of childhood. Autism Speaks, a national advocacy group for those with autism, indicates that one in 45 adults in the U.S. has autism. Adults with ADHD diagnoses, many of whom do not receive

a diagnosis until adulthood, account for 6% or 15.5 million adults, according to the CDC.

In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released findings that show that nearly **3%** of children in the United States have autism, and almost **10%** have ADHD. However, autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences are not concerns only of childhood. Autism Speaks, a national advocacy group for those with autism, indicates that **one in 45** adults in the U.S. has autism. Adults with ADHD diagnoses, many of whom do not receive a diagnosis until adulthood, account for **6% or 15.5m** adults, according to the CDC.

Limited research has studied the intersection of neurodiversity and faith. However, one recent review of 13 studies of autistic adolescents revealed that autistic teens and their caregivers consider spirituality to be essential to their lives and that caregivers want their teens to have opportunities to participate in religious communities. Despite this indication that religious practice is important to autistic teens and their caregivers, a 2018 study by sociologist Andrew Whitehead found that the odds that a child with autism will never attend a worship service are almost double that of a child without autism.

Many neurodivergent people and their families are changing churches in hopes of finding a church that is a better fit — or are simply opting out of worship.

One of the greatest gifts of the church is its role as an intergenerational community, especially for children who have few opportunities to interact with people beyond their parents' generation. In intergenerational worship, people of all ages experience their place in God's story and should feel loved and seen. Yet this intergenerational community presents challenges for neurodivergent children. While churches regularly offer large-print bulletins, hearing devices and wheelchair-accessible spaces to include people who have physical disabilities, practices that promote neuroinclusive worship environments have been more slowly implemented.

In her 2025 book *Blessed Minds: Breaking the Silence about Neurodiversity*, pastor Sarah Griffith Lund encourages readers to consider how the church can become neuroinclusive, or adopt "an approach or environment that actively includes and accommodates people with diverse brain functions." Many neurodivergent people and their families are changing churches in hopes of finding a church that is a better fit — or are simply opting out of worship. The lack of neuroinclusive practices limits the worship experience for neurodivergent individuals and deprives the congregation of the contributions they might make to its worship life.

WAYS TO MAKE WORSHIP NEUROINCLUSIVE

With funding from the Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Nurturing Children through Worship and Prayer Initiative, two groups within the PC(USA) are inviting churches to delve more deeply into the work of becoming more neuroinclusive.

Big Faith Resources, based at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is working to remove barriers and foster belonging by equipping congregations and their leaders to make their churches into places of welcome and wonder. Through their videos, discussion guides and downloadable materials, Big Faith Resources helps churches to learn more about the experiences of neurodivergent children and their families — and to consider how changes

to the church environment might help the church become more neuroinclusive.

And through the grant-funded Renewed Grace project, Grace Presbytery is working with cohorts of its churches to develop a process of education, assessment and experimentation with changes to worship practices to promote neuroinclusive worship. The first cohort of the presbytery's nine churches launched a yearlong process this past fall. As part of Renewed Grace, the presbytery staff is also conducting listening sessions with neurodivergent children and their families and will share what they learn with congregations. Through these listening sessions, they are already learning from parents of neurodivergent children that one of their deepest desires is for the church to be a place where they feel safe from the judgment they experience in other areas of their lives — a place that will welcome their child as a uniquely created child of God who has gifts to offer the church.

... becoming a
neuroinclusive church
is a process that a
congregation must
repeatedly engage in.

In their 2025 volume *Neurodiversity, Faith Formation, and Theological Education*, editors and theologians Michael Paul Cartledge and Erin Rafferty describe the development of their online course *Cultivating God's Brainforest*, hosted by Princeton Theological Seminary's Institute for Youth Ministry. Cartledge and Rafferty write that they learned that "inclusion is a dynamic rather than static process, where congregations themselves need to be learning and adapting their approaches alongside neurodivergent leaders." In other words, becoming a neuroinclusive church is a process that a congregation must repeatedly engage in.

START BY LEARNING ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY

Because attitudinal barriers persist, the path to becoming more neuroinclusive begins with educating ourselves and examining our understandings of neurodiversity. The resources mentioned in this article are only a small portion of the growing number of books, websites and other materials available for churches to learn about neurodiversity. Congregations that are invested in becoming neuroinclusive will begin by listening to the neurodivergent people in their own communities. These conversations are best held in a humble posture of curiosity about how the church might currently be contributing to injustice and exclusion, and how it might adapt its practices to include neurodivergent people as active participants.

Jesus cared deeply about those excluded from the community and criticized those who upheld rules that kept them out. Perhaps Jesus, with his own need for periods of quiet and his questioning of social norms, was himself neurodivergent? How might we see God differently when we create communities in which neurodiversity is not just welcomed but celebrated? ○

Congregations that are invested in becoming neuroinclusive will begin by listening to the neurodivergent people in their own communities. These conversations are best held in a humble posture of curiosity about how the church might currently be contributing to injustice and exclusion, and how it might adapt its practices to include neurodivergent people as active participants.



THE REV. DR. JEN BLUESTEIN is the coordinator of generational leadership development for Grace Presbytery and the project director for Renewed Grace, an initiative of Grace Presbytery. She previously served as a pediatric chaplain and in churches in Texas and Arkansas.

