

Ten Ways To Make Your Church Autism Friendly

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With 1 in 68 people on the autism spectrum, most churches will encounter a number of people of various ages and backgrounds who are autistic. I am autistic and a Christian, and my faith is a very important part of my life. As a child, I had little use of language and was very “typically autistic.” But as an adult, I learned to use language, and now I teach churches worldwide about autism.

I work with leaders from the Church of England, and I wrote their national autism guidelines at the request of the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend John Pritchard, who realized what gifts autistic people bring to God and community. Sometimes, complex gifts. Sometimes, simple ones. But the things that help autistic people in churches also help many others. Our research has found that in England congregation numbers rise four times faster when a church becomes autism friendly.

Here are 10 low-cost, easy steps your church can take to become more autism friendly:

1. Check the lights in each room, especially fluorescent ones. Are any of them flickering? Please replace them, or switch them off if you can. The world inside buildings is often exhausting for us. Our heightened senses mean that the world is often beautiful, amazing, fascinating — but we may need some time out to recover from sensory overload. Seeing people clearly in that kind of environment is really difficult, too.

2. Consider your noise levels. Is there unexpected loud noise in today’s service/meeting? Can it be changed easily? If not, can you warn us first? Also, keep in mind that hard or reflective surfaces can cause a lot of echoing that makes it hard for us to hear, especially in a crowd. Our brains cannot filter out the other voices. Carpeting can help a lot, as can a quiet space to recover.

3. Orient us to the building. Do we know what it looks like, and what the layout is like? Is there information on a simple website or blog, perhaps? Autistic people benefit from some information to help orient them to their surroundings.

4. We are very literal, and because of different brain wiring, many of us think more visually rather than just in words. **We need people to say what they mean and be truthful.** Metaphors and expressions can be very confusing — and of course the Bible is full of these, so explanations really help. It’s easy to think we are being rude or sarcastic if we take instructions literally. We’re not. And keeping instructions short and simple helps all of us. Additionally, some of us may use sign language or assistive communication (e.g. picture stories on an iPad). Make teams aware of this. We are often happy to show others how it works.

5. Will there be physical events like shaking hands during the service? Water being splashed about? We may find this physically painful or scary. **Please warn us what will happen** and ask if it's okay to make physical contact with us.

6. Provide a rest area — somewhere quiet to go if we need to. Because we are coping with far more incoming information than most people, we need to pace ourselves to avoid exhaustion. Don't worry if we need to wander outside for a while (if it's safe to do so). Routine and predictability are also vital — needing to know what to expect is very much a part of autism; it's not us being over-demanding or controlling for some malicious reason.

7. Understand that socializing is different for us. Be aware that we find it difficult and exhausting, as we cannot "see" your body language or hear your tone of voice that well. Our body language can be different from yours, and we may find eye contact overwhelming and look away. It is important for communities to realize we are not being rude or evasive. We would not expect eye contact from people who are blind, and it should not be expected from autistic people. Assume our good intentions!

8. Be clear and accurate. If you say you'll do something, please do it. If you need to change arrangements, just let us know. Think about **the order of service — will there be really clear instructions** for us, such as where to sit and when to stand?

9. Offer support. Perhaps find a quiet, caring person to be aware of us, someone ready to lend a little assistance if we ask for it. Brief them well, and please respect our confidentiality and privacy. Offer support to parents and caregivers, too. They will often welcome the chance to relax for a while and worship in good ways, knowing their loved one is safe with people who understand autism's needs.

10. Please ask what else will help. Think about offering good autism training to your teams. You can start with a basic explanation of what autism is and isn't — it is a brain design difference, present before birth. It is not a mental health condition. Some have intellectual or other disabilities as well, but they are not part of autism itself. It is not a lack of empathy.

Is autism preparedness worth it? Always. As 1 Corinthians 12:18-26 says, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be . . . [I]f one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."