

Consider worship through lens of autism, researcher urges

March 7, 2024

WACO—"Do I belong here?" When people with autism and their families ask the question about church, it may be difficult to answer.

If churches want autistic individuals and their families to feel welcomed and supported, they must reconsider worship "through the lens of autism," researcher Armand Léon van Ommen said at a recent community talk hosted by Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary and the Baylor Collaborative on Faith and Disability.

Van Ommen, senior lecturer in practical theology at the University of Aberdeen, conducted his research by listening to people with autism and their families, with a focus on nonspeakers.

So, his talk included many first-person accounts of study participants' experiences, without including their names.

He identified four key areas to think about through the lens of autism: church as sensory, church as social, thinking differently and "what you do is who you are."

Church as sensory

"Church is a highly sensory space," van Ommen said. Since differences in sensory perception is characteristic of autism, churches need to consider how sensory stimulation in worship services affects people with autism, he said.

Autistic individuals might be hypersensitive and find sensory stimulation

overwhelming. They may be hyposensitive, having a muted response to stimulation. Or they may be sensory-seeking.

“[Stimming](#) [self-stimulating behavior including arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements] could be seen as sensory-seeking,” van Ommen said.

Differing sensory perception means “lows can be lower to the extent that it can be [physically] painful,” van Ommen said. Participants in his study reported if something in the worship service impacts negatively, they “could need to recover for a full day after Sunday worship.”

The auditory aspect of worship can be challenging for autistic people, not only related to volume, but also balance, van Ommen said. One study participant noted when the music is out of tune, it is so painful, “it makes me feel quite ill ... like I want to vomit.”

Touch involved in worship also can be hard. Holding hands to pray or greetings with handshakes and hugs “can be cringy” for autistic people, van Ommen said. However, he added, autistic people often welcome hugs—but only from friends.

“You have to understand, when I ask for accommodations, it’s not to be catered to, but it’s so I can participate at all,” one study participant said.

Church as social

Church also is highly social. Since differences in social interaction and communication are characteristics of autism, churches should think about how the social aspects of church pose hurdles for autistic people, van Ommen said.

Encounters with the welcome team at the door, navigating past groups of

people to get to the worship center, finding a seat, and people unexpectedly chatting with them all are social stressors before the worship service even begins for autistic people, who “are constantly second-guessing social clues and what people say,” van Ommen said.

However, it’s a myth that autistic individuals only care about themselves or that if an “autistic person doesn’t initiate contact, they aren’t interested in me,” he continued.

Social interactions are “daunting but desired,” van Ommen said. Social situations can be difficult, but every autistic person he has worked with desires relationship, he added.

Thinking differently

Autistic people think differently from non-autistic people. One study participant described “seeing patterns, shapes and colors in the liturgy.”

If the liturgy was delivered well, she could participate in worship—seeing these colors shapes and patterns, even when she visited a liturgical service conducted in a language she did not speak, she reported.

But if it was delivered poorly, even when she could understand the words, the delivery kept her from seeing the patterns, colors and shapes necessary for her to worship, van Ommen said.

Autistic people are good at seeing theological practices as the social constructs they are and pointing out things that don’t quite ring true, van Ommen said.

“Autistic people are much more likely to stick up our hand and say: ‘That doesn’t make sense. Teach me that better,’” one study participant said.

Van Ommen said questions from autistic people aren’t always welcome, but

we need to listen to autistic people's theology.

"You don't have to agree with it," another autistic person said. "And you probably won't. But I suppose my dream church would be one open to slightly different ways of looking at things, rather than imposing quite a neurotypical theology onto everybody."

'What you do is who you are'

In conclusion, van Ommen discussed the idea that what you do is who you are, or worship practices reflect and shape what worshippers believe.

The mother of an autistic person said, "If you were to analyze it, what happens in our services actually says a lot about what we think is normal, or what we are prepared to accept as normal, and it also says something about what we think is normal in God."

So, van Ommen said, it is important to create space for autistic members of the body of Christ to feel loved and accepted—as is.

"I don't want to take joy of the others away by accommodating me," another participant said. "I just want people 'to get me'. When I am not supported by the community, I cannot, in turn, give back to the community."

The church cannot do without autistic people if Christians take 1 Corinthians 12:21-23 seriously, van Ommen said. In the body of Christ, those parts which might be considered weaker should be treated with the greatest esteem.

One autistic person commented: "We are treated as projects, not as people who can contribute. Yet we offer so much."

Van Ommen suggested churches turn things around.

“What if we started to think about a church where autistic people are central and if the rest want to participate, great,” he said.

To learn more about the subject, find Léon van Ommen’s podcast [here](#).