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A Healing Community in an Overstimulated World **Paul D. Leichty & Christine Guth**

Community building occurs through talking, activity, and group interaction. Leaders may assume that the more of these activities we have, the better the community life. Yet, for some, particularly persons on the autism spectrum or with certain mental illnesses, communication and socialization are the biggest challenges they face. Too much talk and activity produces isolation instead of drawing them into community. Responding thoughtfully to the needs of such persons may give us handles on what it means to build a truly healing community for all people in the midst of bombarding stimulation in our modern world.

What can leaders do to reduce over-stimulation in settings of worship, service, education, and socializing? How can we care for stimulation-challenged persons while benefiting the whole body of Christ? Here are a few suggestions:

- *Worship bands and multi-media effects* are becoming common, from youth conventions to Sunday morning worship. Consider using a wide variety of music styles, moderating the decibel level, and getting rid of busy backgrounds behind words on the screen.
- *Fellowship meals* often function as major community-building activities. Yet they can be noisy and chaotic. Consider ways to dampen the acoustics. Provide smaller rooms for quiet conversations away from the major activity. Set up several smaller tables of food instead of one large one to cut down the number of choices, and make sure at least one simple food, such as bread, is available.
- “*Look at me while I’m speaking to you.*” Teachers and parents often ask for eye contact, especially when a child is “acting out.” Many on the autism spectrum find eye contact too intense. One speaker commented, “You can have eye contact with me or a conversation, but you can’t have both.” Consider sitting *beside* a child who needs attention or standing at an angle whereby an adult can comfortably choose to look at you or look away. Plan a car ride together when a longer conversation is needed.
- *Youth activities* are often highly stimulating in an effort to catch and maintain the attention of young people. Yet, large conventions and retreats, days at a theme park, and fast-moving games and parties will be more inclusive if they also provide opportunities for quiet times away from the crowd, for one-on-one conversations, and for activities that require thought as well as action.
- *Structure time for reflection and flexibility* instead of trying to fit everything possible into the day. Turn off the TV and radio. Take time for preparing and eating meals or simply relaxing together without expecting conversation. We may find ourselves savoring the quiet time for personal reflection, and we will be

ready for those rare times when overstimulated people need to debrief and everything comes spilling out.

Being busy has become a way of life in our culture and multi-tasking the norm in the business world. We find it hard to get away from media, billboards, glittering lights, and all of the sights and sounds of our modern culture. Even those of us who absorb overstimulation without melting down may find ourselves benefiting from the slowed-down pace that people on the autism spectrum or those with certain mental illnesses may appreciate or require. Learning to adapt ourselves to the pace, routines, and activity levels of people on the autism spectrum can help us to enjoy the pleasure of one-one-one conversation or just being together in silence. Spending time in a quiet atmosphere with a person with schizophrenia or agoraphobia encourages us to “stop and smell the roses.”

When our community life provides familiar rhythms and structures, we all benefit. When we promote predictable patterns that allow relationships to build slowly over time, intentionally shaped to the needs of persons for whom overstimulation is an issue, these patterns and God’s grace will work their healing in all of us.

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