

Faith Communities That Include People with Asperger Syndrome

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“A community that excludes even one of its members is no community at all,” asserts a poster created by disability advocate Dan Wilkins.¹ If a community does unwittingly exclude one of its members, all too often the excluded one is someone who has Asperger Syndrome (AS), a condition on the autism spectrum. The presence of someone with AS in a faith community offers that community an opportunity to examine the commitments it shares and consider how well these commitments are expressed toward members who seem different in some way. In a community of Christian believers, Asperger Syndrome is an invitation to be a community that manifests Christ’s inclusive love.

Although we typically focus on the shortcomings of the person with AS, this article considers the shortcomings of the rest of us. When those of us not on the autism spectrum encounter someone with AS, we may need to work harder than usual to build a relationship, and often we resist the effort. We become uncomfortable with the intense interests, unusual mannerisms, or lack of conversational small talk that are typical of AS. We may misinterpret such behaviors as a lack of interest or deliberate rudeness. It takes extra effort to look past superficial differences and get to know the whole person. But all too often, rather than exert ourselves, we keep the person at a distance. By our response, we make the person an outsider. We may not stop to think that those with AS may meet such responses everywhere they go. Christ calls his body to be a community that takes the extra effort to invite outsiders to become insiders. Below I suggest six steps that congregations may take in offering Christ’s welcome to those who have AS, but first let us take a brief look at how human communities define and create disability.

The community’s role in enabling and disabling

Western society typically identifies disability as the medical problem of a particular person. A social definition of disability, in contrast, emphasizes the role of the surrounding culture in identifying who is disabled and who is not. Disability, in this view, is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by certain social settings to people who have some kind of limitation or impairment.² The limitation itself is not the disability; rather, the disability is the disadvantage imposed by a particular context. As an oversimplified example, the limitation of not hearing would not be a disability in a social setting where all communicate in sign language.

¹ Dan Wilkins, The Nth Degree, 21325 Bradner Road, Luckey, OH 43445, <<http://www.thenthdegree.com/posters.asp>>.

² Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, “Preface,” *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), ix–x.

The social understanding of disability provides a framework that is especially useful for understanding AS, given that social differences are one of its primary characteristics. In this view, communities have a significant opportunity to minimize the disabling aspects of AS by responding to people who have AS with inclusive practices—and a significant likelihood of contributing to its disabling aspects by their indifference and lack of understanding.

The community's potential role in disabling and enabling raises a question for self-examination for communities of faith that include people with AS.³ We might ask, is our community disabled when we treat certain persons with behavior differences as expendable or less valuable? The biblical view would claim that, along with all of humanity, persons with AS are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). The apostle Paul would caution us that those who seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Cor 12:22). Because persons with AS are created in God's image and indispensable for the body of Christ, congregations are challenged to look again at those we have made outsiders. We are invited to take down the barriers we may have erected that exclude people with AS. When we do, we will discover the unique gifts these folks offer to our community life.

Steps toward inclusion

If we accept that welcoming and fully including people with AS in our communities of faith is God's call, what efforts will move us in this direction? A first step toward this goal is to learn more about AS. One critical fact about AS is that it is a neurological condition leading to differences in social interaction.⁴ Science suggests that the behavior differences of AS result from observable differences in brain structure, not obstinacy, rudeness, bad parenting, or low intelligence. This understanding can help counter our human tendency to place blame. Observers puzzled by the inconsistency between a person's cognitive and social abilities often reflexively assume that the behavior differences are a deliberate sabotaging of social conventions. Information about AS respectfully shared with a congregation may bring understanding of the challenges people with AS face and curtail the tendency to make inappropriate judgments.⁵

A second step toward welcoming and inclusion of those with AS is practicing direct communication. Direct verbal communication, in contrast to communicating by hints, innuendo, and body language, is often helpful for people with AS because they are often less able to perceive others' intentions and read nonverbal communications. AS invites those of us who are not on the spectrum to learn to be more straightforward in expressing ourselves. Cutting back on teasing and sarcasm will likely help those with AS feel more at ease. At a minimum, such remarks should be clearly identified as teasing or sarcasm. Similarly, we may need to pay more attention to clarifying our expectations for appropriate behavior because those with AS do not

³ Most medium-sized and larger congregations are likely to contain at least one person with Asperger's, given the current data on prevalence of the condition. A recent U.S. analysis estimates that in the one person in 150 has Asperger's or a related condition on the autism spectrum; Melody Stevens, et al., *Prevalence of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in Multiple Areas of the United States, 2000 and 2002: Community Report from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007), 12, <<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/documents/AutismCommunityReport.pdf>> (accessed Feb. 15, 2007).

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, 1994).

⁵ Barbara Newman shares excellent examples of how to go about this in *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2006), 49–58.

always comprehend the “hidden curriculum” of everyday life. The love of Christ suggests that we do so with kindness and respect for the person’s dignity and capabilities.

Making particular people with AS welcome in congregations may lead us to a third step: altering our physical spaces for worship, education, and fellowship to tolerate a little more background noise, more movement, and more elbowroom. Some people with AS may further benefit by reducing sensory overload from flickering fluorescent lights, irritating sounds, or bothersome smells. Careful listening to how a person experiences the physical environment in a church building can suggest what adaptations might be helpful.

As a fourth step, inclusive communities may consider strategies for integration into the life of the community that are particularly suited for a person with AS. One key strategy is to look for ways of celebrating and capitalizing on at least one of a person’s intense special interests, a trait highly characteristic of AS. These sometimes-unusual gifts of God are what most engage that person’s passions. Bringing these gifts into community life can thereby generate meaningful connection with the community of faith. Doing so may well stretch the bounds of our traditional list of gifts exercised in church. If God has graced a person with a strong passion for deep-sea animals, for example, finding an appropriate avenue to share this grace with a congregation will take creativity, but also promises to strengthen relationships and appreciation for the wonder of God’s amazingly diverse creation. The intense interests of a person with AS may suggest an individualized approach to catechism that will engage the person more deeply. Another strategy is offering affirmation, recognition, and support to adults who have the gift of enjoying the unusual interests and entering the divergent worlds of young people with AS. Friendship with adults may come more easily for these young people than friendship with peers, and thus be particularly important.

A fifth step toward supporting inclusion for young people who have AS is supporting those who interact with them on a daily basis. Parents and family members of those with AS are likely to have strong needs for acceptance and support. Parents may feel the pain of social stigma even more acutely than their child does. Parents may grieve in recurring stages for the loss of the child of their expectations. Regular inclusion of lament in congregational worship offers space to bring such loss to God. Parents may welcome tangible expressions of solidarity, such as respite care at home, a cell phone number to call when family tensions are erupting, someone to sit with the child or siblings during worship, or someone to spend time with the young person while engaging in a shared interest.

A sixth step toward inclusion is making sure that our community offers approaches to God that are accessible to those with AS. The preference for predictability that characterizes many who have AS may mean that ritual in worship is particularly meaningful. Typically those with AS approach the world best in concrete ways. As we seek to be welcoming, we can examine how much of our corporate experience is centered on feeling-oriented activity and choose to pay deliberate attention to cognitive approaches to worship, study of the Bible, Christian ethics, etc. We need to offer models for expression of Christian commitment that include intellectual analysis and concrete action, and do not depend solely on abstract symbol, metaphor, or feeling the presence of God. Finding alternatives or supplements to treasured metaphors may challenge our settled notions about human nature and about what a relationship with God is like. Rearranging our deeply held ideas and perspectives is one of the gifts AS offers us, and another opportunity to marvel at the amazing diversity in God’s creation.

Equal partners in faith

If we hope to invite all of the marvelously diverse people around us into the transforming and redeeming community of Christ's body, then we have both a responsibility and an opportunity. Responsibility and opportunity lie with those of us who claim the greater social ability to ensure an accessible place in the body for those whose social abilities take a different shape. Embracing this opportunity to ensure access invites us to examine our expectations of conformity and to pare them down to what is truly essential for community life, allowing and celebrating divergent approaches that do no harm.

Above all, full inclusion asks us to respect our brothers and sisters with AS as equal partners in faith, capable of self-determination and valuable contribution. Opening ourselves to receive them for the gift that they are to our communities requires us to examine ourselves and our community practices, and to repent where we have been insensitive, judgmental, and narrow-minded. In the process, our congregations will be stretched, enriched, and made safer and more welcoming for all people, becoming communities where not even one is excluded.

Christine Guth invites your comments on this article. Please send them to christine@adnetonline.org.