

Asperger Syndrome in the Community of Faith

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When a school psychologist hinted eight years ago that we might want to have our son evaluated for Asperger Syndrome (AS), I gained my first awareness that God's good world contained such a thing as a social disability. As someone who learns the basics of social interaction intuitively and easily, it had never occurred to me that relating to others involves skills, or that some people have brain differences that make such skills quite a challenge to learn. Eight years ago, I had never heard of AS, and neither had anyone else I knew. In the intervening years, the condition has received increasing attention in the media, and my mention of this disability raises fewer puzzled looks than it used to. AS occurs in the population at an estimated frequency of four to seven people in a thousand, so most of us probably know people with AS, whether we are aware of this or not.

Asperger Syndrome is a neurological disorder that involves noticeable impairment in social interaction, accompanied by unusually narrow interests and activities, and repetitive or stereotyped patterns of behavior. The condition is a pervasive developmental disability related to autism. It differs from autism in that those with AS by definition always have normal or above intelligence and no delay in language development in early childhood. Most of what I write about AS would apply equally to a similar autism-spectrum disorder, PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified). Some may also use the term high-functioning autism as a rough equivalent to AS. A heightened sensitivity to sensations that others find minimally bothersome may accompany these conditions.

Our Anabaptist tradition believes God is present in the community of faith, the body of Christ. When a member of the body of Christ is limited in basic abilities to initiate and maintain relationships, the greater burden for reaching out with care must lie with those who do not have this disability. We bear a responsibility to enter into the world of the person with an autism spectrum disorder in order to discover how this person may meaningfully contribute to the community of faith, given the person's particular gifts and passions. We also carry a responsibility to minimize barriers to his or her participation in the church.

When people with Asperger Syndrome (or similar conditions) take part in our churches, those who reach out to include them may at times find the experience confusing, even baffling. People with AS usually have a reduced ability to read the nonverbal signals others send. People who do not have AS typically rely on subtle nonverbal cues to indicate such things as, "You are standing too close," "I'm getting bored," "It's time for you to go home," "I'm uncomfortable with this topic," or "I have something to say." It usually makes us uncomfortable to express such messages directly—an unspoken taboo often surrounds speaking about such topics. It makes us even more uncomfortable, however, to continue a conversation with someone who ignores our nonverbal signals. We often respond to our uneasiness by withdrawing from the person who evokes our discomfort. Such withdrawal shuts down the possibility for relationship—no big deal for us, perhaps—but for the person with AS, this withdrawal reaction may happen many times a day.

Our learning to translate nonverbal communication into words, non-judgmentally, is one way we can keep a relationship alive. Rather than jumping to the conclusion that a person who "can't take a hint" is hopelessly rude, and writing her off, we might look for the gift from God she offers to us. If we lay aside our prejudgments, we could choose to follow a hunch that she simply does not know the "social rules" for the situation. Or perhaps she knows the "rules" but doesn't

perceive how the situation feels from another person's point of view. Alternately, maybe some sensation she finds overwhelming—a particular smell or sound or flashing light—blocks her ability to concentrate on anything else at the moment.

One example: say I am sending a nonverbal signal to someone who just doesn't "get it" that he is standing too close to me and talking too loudly. Rather than walk away, or cork up my feelings until I explode, I might say politely, respectfully, and directly, "Would you mind standing a little further away from me?" An "I message" is often useful—a way to explain my experience without accusing the other person. I might say, "I'd like it if we could stand a little further apart," or "My ears are hurting; can you talk a little quieter?"

Our faith tradition reminds us that all human beings are made in the image of God. If we make the effort to nurture relationships with those with Asperger Syndrome, we may learn valuable things about the God whom we worship from these unconventional folks who reveal God's image. AS is not just disability; it brings with it many strengths and gifts. The very differences that tend to cause social challenges also contribute to strong capabilities. Authors Carol Gray and Tony Attwood have compiled a list of those strengths that highlights the typically high integrity of persons with AS. Those with AS, they point out, are likely to relate to others with "absolute loyalty and impeccable dependability." They have a "determination to seek the truth," an "original, often unique perspective in problem solving, clarity of values/decision making unaltered by political or financial factors, and an "ability to regard others at "face value" without prejudice or bias. Qualities like these challenge us who are neurotypical (i.e., not having AS) to more faithfully live out God's calling in our world.

Persons with Asperger often develop exceptional expertise in certain areas of passionate interest, which gives them considerable ability to contribute to the church in specialized ways. Discovering these special capacities and finding ways to call them out in congregational life may transform disability into ability. This is one way we can be visited by God's power to work miracles. God has blessed our world and our communities of faith with the unique perspectives of those with autism-spectrum disorders. We have much to gain from welcoming them and making them our friends.