

NEURODIVERSITY BY DESIGN

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CHURCHES TO
WELCOME NEURODIVERSITY

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THE
Theology &
Neurodiversity
PROJECT

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

—1 CORINTHIANS 12:12

THE BODY OF CHRIST

There is so much diversity in this world God created. As Christians, it is our joy and our practice to love the diversity of God's creation tangibly—after all, we can't know God without knowing one another! Paul describes how we ought to relate to one another in 1 Corinthians 12, reminding us that Christ's body is made up of different parts, all equal in value. Every one of us is a member of Christ's body and we are not complete if we are missing even a single piece.

It is our work as a church to genuinely welcome all of God's children into relationship with one another and with Godself. And welcome doesn't just mean words! It means designing our spaces and training ourselves to embrace people and behaviors we don't always understand so that we can love them well. After all, it is only through loving others in God's creation that we can practice loving God.



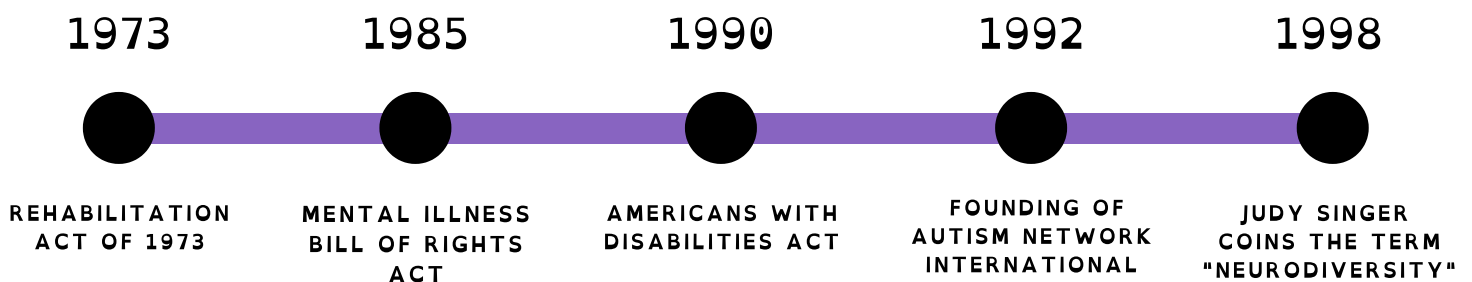
WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

The fields of psychology and neurobiology have taught us a great deal about the natural ranges of human behavior and neurology, highlighting the immense variety within our species. This research led to the creation of separate categories labeling people with less common behaviors "atypical" and people with more common behaviors "normal." One example of so-called "atypical" behavior is people on the autism spectrum. In fact, it was the autism community, along with other disability rights activists, who modeled a new way to view "atypical" people not as people with disabilities, but through a positive, strength-based model: Neurodiversity!

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for people who are not "neurotypical." Neurodivergent people may have conditions like autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, Tourette syndrome, or Down syndrome, among others. Even people with emotional and behavioral difficulties, like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety can fall under the category of neurodivergent. Many people become neurodivergent at some point in their lives due to aging, brain injury, or other life situations. Many neurodivergent people also go undiagnosed, leading to unnecessary frustration and suffering.

A neurodivergent person may or may not consider themselves a person with a disability. Neurodiversity can actually provide many strengths like creativity, attention to detail, sensitivity, compassion, and vision. However, all neurodivergent people are affected by living in spaces and social circumstances not designed for their brains. This can cause them to feel like outsiders, unwelcome in neurotypical spaces where their behaviors and ways of processing the world are not valued or even considered. This is why the church must be intentional about welcoming neurodivergent people.

SOME DIVERSITY & DISABILITY HISTORY



NEURODIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

Our church is no different than the outside world, statistically speaking: one in five of our congregants is likely neurodivergent. However, like many institutions, most churches do not yet have the knowledge or resources to accept these people naturally and spontaneously into the community.

We may say that we welcome the “stranger,” but do we welcome people who are different to lead worship? Do we invite them to our homes after the worship service is over? Do we ask them to join our committees and make decisions for the whole church body?

Neurodivergent people bring amazing gifts into the body of Christ—perspectives that neurotypical people cannot access and companionship that they cannot know without the presence of neurodivergent people.



Now that we know so much more about how neurodivergent folks think and what helps them participate fully in community, it is imperative that we take time to read the available resources, listen to those in our community, and design better ways to do ministry so that everyone in the body of Christ can be more fully included. Thankfully, because human behavior and needs fall on a spectrum (neurodiversity is not all-or-nothing), all of the changes we make to welcome explicitly neurodivergent folks into our spaces will make church more accessible for everyone.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

—1 CORINTHIANS 12:17-20

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

NEURODIVERSITY IN CHURCH LIFE

In this guide, we offer suggestions to improve neurodivergent accessibility across three different areas of church life: environment, fellowship, and spiritual practice. It's important to remember that making church inclusive means addressing all three areas, not just one, and these may not be all of the relevant areas in your church context! We suggest finding ideas from each of these sections of the guide to begin your discussion about growing inclusivity and belonging in your church.

Adapt Your Space

Environment describes the physical spaces in which people gather, worship, and work together, organized so that everyone is able to move easily and confidently within the space, however the Spirit leads.

Welcome Diversity

Fellowship describes the way your community welcomes and includes people with different behavioral patterns and needs so that everyone can connect meaningfully with one another in the body of Christ.

Connect with God

Spiritual Practice describes the way you share the life of faith together, through education, liturgy, creative work, and spiritual care, ensuring that everyone is given the opportunity to connect with the presence of God.



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

DESIGNING FOR NEURODIVERSITY

Designing for neurodivergent needs is really just good design. Many needs of neurodivergent people relate to basic accessibility—dyslexic people need readable signage, autistic folks need to limit sound and visual sensation. Other needs may require a change in practice or culture to create acceptance—people with ADHD need plenty of opportunities to move around, even during worship. Ultimately, neurodivergent people need what everyone needs, regardless of neurology—to feel like they belong.

Neurodiversity can manifest in many different areas of human experience. In general, when designing for neurodiversity, it's important to be aware of some of the different areas where neurodivergent folks might have difficulty. It is also important to remember that neurodivergent brains do not only produce difficulties, but also remarkable strengths.

While this guide is not intended to be a primer on different kinds of neurodiversity, some ideas are marked with symbols, indicating the various areas of difficulty they address. Certain disabilities tend to align with different areas, but all people are unique. The best way to find out if an idea is going to benefit a group of people in your community is to ask them directly what they think about it and provide avenues for feedback.



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

GUIDE SYMBOLS FOR ACCESSIBILITY



Cognitive Function

mental abilities that include attention, memory, learning & reasoning



Executive Function

mental skills like organization, problem solving, flexible thinking & self-control



Emotional Regulation

ability to exert control over one's own emotional state



Language & Reading

ability to read, comprehend & interpret written language & text



Motor Skills

ability to make precise movements with accuracy and control



Physical Sensitivity

sensitivity to light, sound, touch, or smell



Social Skills

ability to communicate with others using verbal & nonverbal cues

LET THE JOURNEY LEAD YOU

This guide is not a one-size-fits-all method, because like people, every church is different. The ideas are meant to be a jumping off point, a starting place for discussion—not a comprehensive implementation plan. Your best leaders in your neurodiversity efforts will be the people in your community who live with neurodivergent brains, whether they are teenagers with autism, adults with Down syndrome, or elders experiencing the onset of dementia. We recommend including them in planning committees, soliciting their feedback about new initiatives, and inviting them to dream up new ways to welcome more people into your church.

It is also important to remember that no project will be perfect, and the process will function as a cycle—making changes, evaluating, and asking for feedback. This process can help you tailor your planning team's ideas so that they effectively meet your congregation's needs. A good test-run can give you a chance to tweak ideas or programs before rolling them out to the full congregation. And remember that your best feedback will come from those you are trying to better include—work alongside neurodivergent members in the process from start to finish and you won't need to worry whether your dreams meet their needs.



As your congregation becomes more accessible and inclusive, you can expect to welcome more neurodivergent folks into the fold. Early on, you will want to create a process to welcome newcomers, include them in various ministries, and invite them into the process of shaping the church with you. This intentional inclusion will help the body of Christ continue to grow and flower into the neurodivergent “kin-dom” it was always meant to be.

*We are so excited you are
on this journey with us!*

MORE RESOURCES ON NEURODIVERSITY & THE CHURCH

The following books and authors have a great deal of wisdom to share about neurodiversity, theology of disability, and mental health. Most have also written articles, spoken on podcasts, and/or been recorded for YouTube videos. If you prefer to learn through methods other than reading, we encourage you to check out their virtual material!

**Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life* by Thomas Armstrong

The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain by Thomas Armstrong

**Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, & Congregations* by Erik W. Carter

Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness by William C. Gaventa

The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum by Temple Grandin

The Lifesaving Church by Rachael Keefe

Blessed are the Crazy by Sarah Griffith Lund

Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship by John Swinton

*These books in particular provided many insights and ideas included in this guide.



ENVIRONMENT

ADAPT YOUR SPACE



Environment describes the physical spaces in which people gather, worship, and work together, organized so that everyone is able to move easily and confidently within the space, however the Spirit leads.

BUILDING

Architecture

If you have the opportunity to build a new space or add on to an existing space, the best thing to do for both neurodivergent and neurotypical people is just to keep things simple! Architecture tends to use symmetry and patterns that make it easy to get around. It is very helpful to have one central entry point. Like neurodivergent people, people with physical disabilities often feel different or set apart from others, so be sure to have the elevator in this central place as well so that they feel included.

Signage

For both guests and members, it is best to have clear and consistent signage on every room, as well as directional signage at entryways and in central hallways. For neurodivergent people in particular, it can be intimidating to ask for help when someone already feels like they are different. Signage is most effective when it is in a clear, readable font that is easy to distinguish from the background. Consider using the Open Dyslexia font, used throughout this guide, so that those with learning disabilities will be able to read signage more easily. We also recommend using symbols on each sign so that anyone, even young children, can easily find places like the bathroom.

Calming Space

Many neurodivergent people are easily overstimulated by their environment, whether they have trouble focusing or simply pay very close attention to their surroundings. Because church often involves gathering, it can be easy to become overwhelmed by the number of people, the volume of conversation, the activity in the room, or even just by social anxiety. Always provide a quiet, open room with comfortable, spaced out seating where people can go to collect their thoughts or emotions. Keep in mind that many of these spaces are intended for families, sometimes with the worship/event sound audio playing, so you may want a second "quiet space."



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AESTHETICS

Lighting



You might be surprised to learn that the wrong lighting can cause problems with focus and overstimulation. Overly harsh lighting can be very distracting and overwhelming, or even cause migraines. Lighting that is too low can contribute to poor focus. A soft white or yellow light most closely resembles the sun outside and is best for people to focus without being overstimulated. Keep in mind that using spotlights might keep neurodivergent people from leading worship. Strobe effects or moving lights can cause overstimulation, if not seizures, and should not be used so that people feel safe and included in the space.

Interior Design



When decorating a space, consider carefully who will be using the space and for what purpose. From detailed wallpaper to large stripes on youth group walls, one person's "fun" can be distracting or overwhelming to another. Paint color can impact on how people feel or focus within a given space. Avoid red; it increases heart rate and agitation. Green, brown, and blue have a soothing effect, but too much blue can also make people sad. Pink and purple hues create peaceful environments and reduce anxiety and compulsive behavior. Yellow and orange have been used to treat depression and help people think.

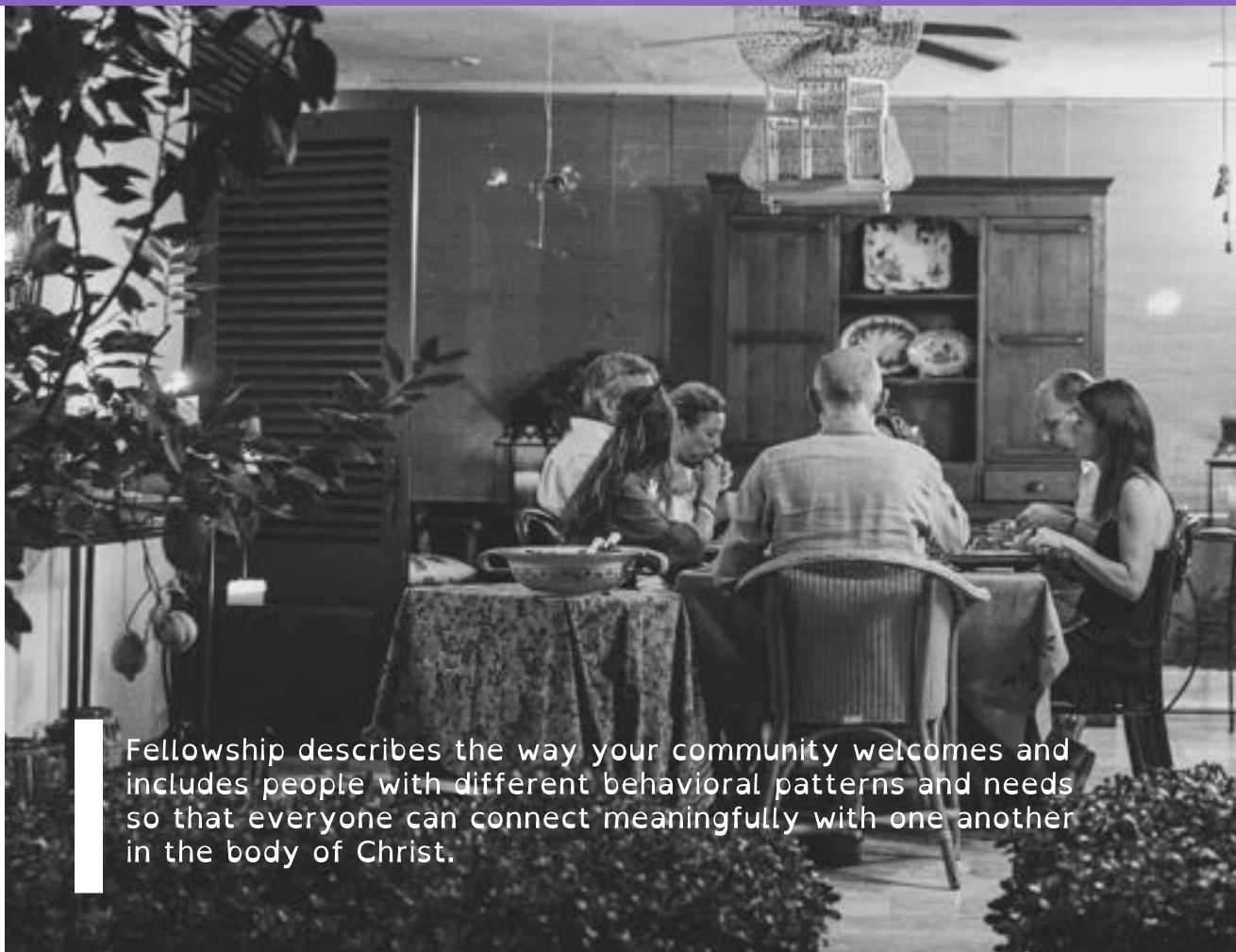
Use your Senses



Remember that neurodivergent people often have finely tuned senses—this requires that we pay more attention to visual stimulation, as well as sounds, smells, and even textures. If you plan to have candles in worship, make sure that they are unscented. Choose a bathroom soap that does not have an overwhelming floral smell, but instead a minimal smell like cotton or cucumber. Before you purchase or accept donated furniture, be sure to feel if it is pleasant to touch or scratchy. Think about including murals or sponge paint on walls, even as a place for someone to practice mindfulness as they run their hands along the textured spots. Sound is perhaps the most difficult to manage, because older adults in churches often require louder amplification, but individual sound devices can help.

FELLOWSHIP

WELCOME DIVERSITY



Fellowship describes the way your community welcomes and includes people with different behavioral patterns and needs so that everyone can connect meaningfully with one another in the body of Christ.

WORSHIP

Greeters & Ushers

Make sure that greeters have name tags so that they can be easily identified. Using the Open Dyslexia font might make them easier to read, and having a symbol for ushers and/or greeters would also help many people. Make sure that each usher and greeter is familiar with how different people may greet them. Many neurodivergent people are nonverbal, do not make eye contact, or do not like to be touched. If a handshake is offered and the person does not offer a hand, simply put it back down by your side. If a person does not make eye contact, do not assume that they are ignoring you—it is still appropriate to ask if they need anything or give directions, unless they move away.

Nonverbal

Be sure to have pens and paper near entrances if people need to communicate but are nonverbal—this is also great for people who might like to write or doodle during worship. It also would be helpful for greeters and ushers to learn the American Sign Language alphabet so they are able to sign their name or basic words like “bathroom.” Videos are available on YouTube. Some neurodivergent people are nonverbal and may communicate with ASL, as well as people who are d/Deaf.

Buddy Program

Having buddy programs available for those who are neurodivergent could be a wonderful addition to church communities. The church could hold welcome and training programs for those who would like to be buddies and could work on the different ways buddies can help out and welcome others. The buddy or partner program could be for neurodivergent people, for new guests, or just for people who want to make friends and share their pew.



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Worship Culture

Making sure that all visitors and members know that they are welcome in your space is crucial. Your church's commitment to being welcoming, inclusive, and accessible should not be assumed—it should be celebrated and widely discussed! In the welcome or announcements each week, state clearly that people are welcome to move around or make noise as needed. Make sure the congregation knows that any noise is welcomed and celebrated as participation. Have a separate room where neurodivergent people or young children can go to feel less stimulated, while still being a part of the service. Make sure that any accommodations meant to help are not secluded from the rest of the congregation or worship experience. Another way of welcoming all people is changing our language. Rather than a children's sermon, invite kids and "anyone who is a child at heart." If able, one could also consider using props for sermons to give those who benefit from seeing visuals another way to experience the message.

Participatory Prayer

Create a way for people to participate in prayer during the service. Have congregants write and/or read prayers specifically for the service, or have a box where people could submit prayer requests and have the pastor read 3-4 prayers anonymously during a "Prayers of the People." In a small church, you could have people raise hands to offer prayers. Prayer does not have to be verbal, it could also be gestured or acted out or just expressed with emotion.

Service & Bulletin/Slides

When designing bulletins and/or slides for worship, consider using the Open Dyslexia font so that the text is more readable for people with learning disabilities. Both slides and bulletins should have a clean, simple design that is not cluttered by too many images or symbols. On slides especially, make sure that the text is easily readable and there is high contrast between the text and the background. In general, a consistent order of worship is helpful for neurodivergent people, even if there are some pieces that change regularly, like different hymns or parts of worship. Be sure to also keep bulletin formatting consistent and use the same slide background throughout an entire service. We also advise leaving some blank space in the worship bulletins or having paper available for doodling—this is very helpful for those who focus best when doing something with their hands.

LOGISTICS

Leadership



Behavior or thinking patterns should not prevent someone from leading in worship or decision-making.

Churches should question whose voices are not being heard in their congregations and work together to include those perspectives. If comfortable, these individuals could read liturgy or scripture, help with kids' time, or share creatively.

Asking neurodivergent people to serve on committees or sessions, councils, boards, and leadership will help the church see more of God's presence because God's people will be more represented. Providing opportunities to be greeters, ushers, and readers also expands the church's stance of welcoming all of God's people while also helping neurodivergent siblings with motor and social skills. It's a win-win!

Events & Trips



Events and trips are a huge part of church life, but might be intimidating for those who are neurodivergent. Lack of transportation often limits being together—consider include offering transportation to and from church events. Ask what changes are needed for trips, games, and events to be more inclusive. If someone requires more assistance, pair them with a helpful buddy (not a family member). People often have different social needs than those around them. Having multiple options available, as well as the ability to opt out of social gatherings, would be helpful to welcome those who would like to participate, but do not want to interact in large groups or who are overstimulated.

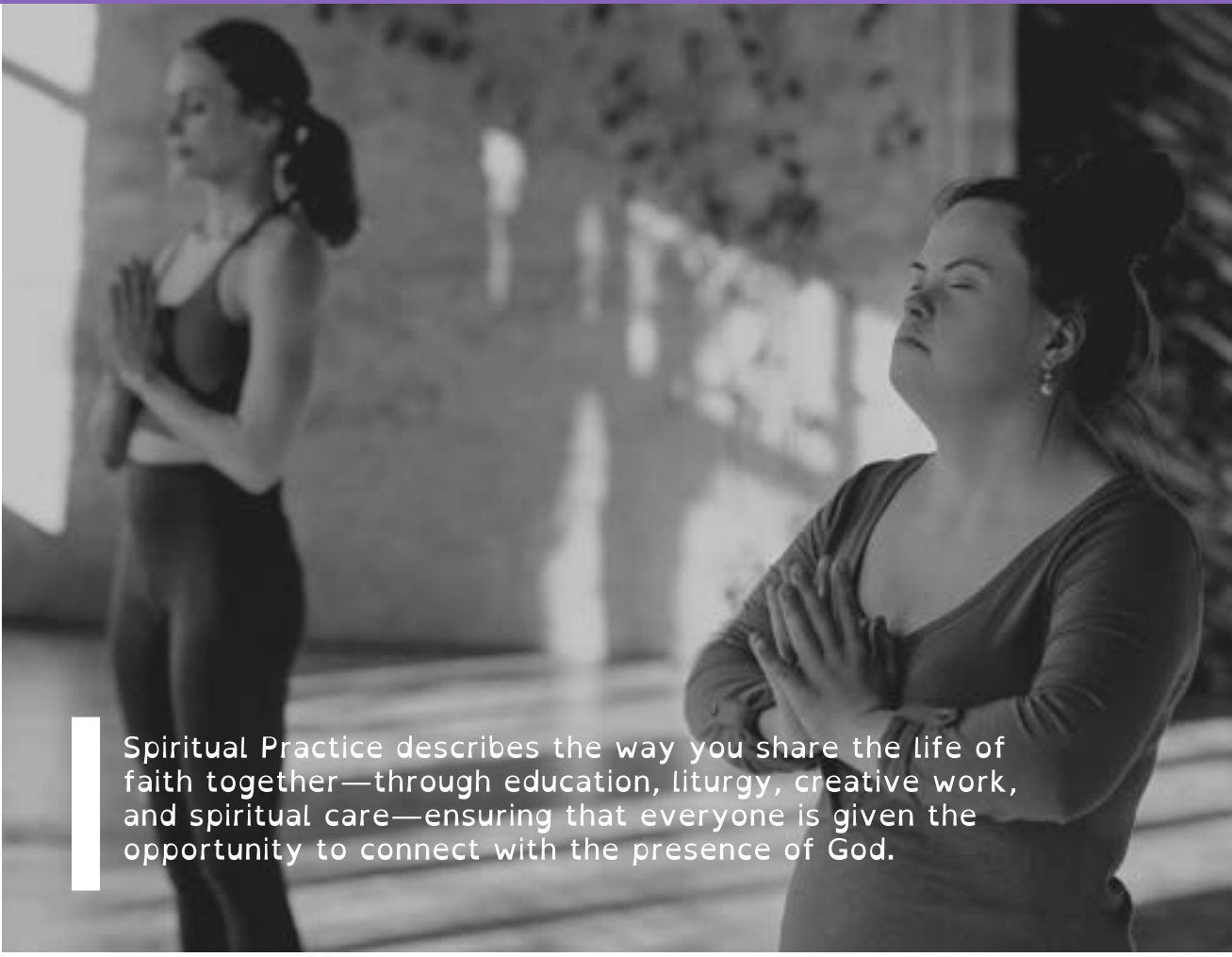
Parent/Guardian Check-ins



The church is committed to caring for all of God's children, and this includes both neurodivergent people and people with disabilities. The pastor or program director should meet with guardians of these unique students at least every year to assess their needs as a family. Ask about their basic needs and sensitivities. Ask how the church can support the parents elsewhere. Some pastors offer to attend meetings for the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) just to be a calming and supportive presence. When their children age out of school, can the church help parents make connections to find suitable employment or provide volunteer opportunities for these young adults? Think beyond the Sunday morning context!

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

CONNECT WITH GOD

A black and white photograph of two women in a prayerful pose. The woman in the foreground is on the right, wearing a dark long-sleeved top, with her hands clasped in front of her chest and her head tilted upwards. The woman in the background is on the left, wearing a dark tank top and leggings, also with her hands clasped and head tilted upwards. They are standing in a bright, possibly outdoor or well-lit indoor space with large windows or open doors in the background.

Spiritual Practice describes the way you share the life of faith together—through education, liturgy, creative work, and spiritual care—ensuring that everyone is given the opportunity to connect with the presence of God.

WORSHIP

Liturgical Repetition

Repetition helps ground a communal experience. While worship is usually structured in similar ways week to week, exact repetition of songs or sayings can help neurodivergent folks feel stable and secure. It can also help everyone remember a key message about your church—there’s a reason Catholic mass is said in the exact same way every week! If your church is non-liturgical, consider adding some repeated elements, like singing the same song as the “church’s hymn” or pronouncing a set benediction at the end of every service. Even such little repetitions can give people who have difficulty processing new information something to hold on to week to week, which can make them feel more connected to the church and to God.

Praying Pictures

Everyone wants to communicate with God, but not everyone can speak or write their prayer requests. You can include those who are non-verbal by providing picture-cards of different responses to God. Cards can have images for “Thank you,” “I’m listening,” “I’m sorry,” “I love you,” and “Why God?”. Let folks bring up the cards they want to pray before collective prayer time so that their prayers can be included in the church’s shared prayer.

Blessing Giver

Some neurodivergent folks are incredibly affectionate. Give them the opportunity to share their gifts by inviting them to offer blessings to everyone who wants one. These blessings can be offered at the door on the way into worship, after communion before people take their seats, or after service. Just make sure everyone knows when “blessing time” is so they have a chance to get in line!



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Visual Sermon

Sermons are a powerful tool to share the good news about God's promises with a large group of people. However, not everyone is able to learn by listening, either because of language processing issues or because of difficulty focusing. Providing visual elements in a sermon—whether through video, powerpoint, or even physical demonstrations like drawing, or acting, can help everyone stay engaged in learning about God's good news.

Holy Dance

Sometimes we need ways to relate to God that don't require words. Many churches use liturgical dance as a way to express love, joy, sorrow, and worship with the body. This allows those who have strengths in physical emotional expression to share their gifts with the congregation and welcomes those who participate best by watching instead of listening or singing a chance to engage more deeply with the church's worship.

Creator's Corner

Liturgy isn't for everyone. A "creator's corner" gives those who have trouble sitting still or who get overwhelmed by being in a crowd a place to get away from the center of things, while still being a part of corporate worship. Set up a station at the back or side of the worship hall with paper, scissors, picture books, drawing materials, etc. Invite anyone who wishes to engage creatively with the liturgy to make their way to the corner at any time during the service. Allow creators to show off their creations after worship on a community display board.



LEARN

Intergenerational Class



Instead of creating Christian Education classes based on age group, consider letting people group themselves by interest or activity instead. We learn about God not only from reading and talking, but from spending time working with people in different phases of life, from childhood to old age. Plus, practicing inclusion across generations dovetails with practicing inclusion across the neurodiversity spectrum. It's a win-win!

Improvise Ethics

On occasion, the best thing is to act it out. Pick an ethical question and let the class tell a story about it, taking on characters and acting them out. Class members can choose characters from the Bible or create modern-day characters, but whatever they choose, ask them how those characters would address the problem at hand. Then have them act out the scenario for one another, and give each other feedback on what their characters chose. Would they choose to do the same thing? What should a Christian try to do?

Show & Tell



Everyone has something to share. Host a “show-and-tell” fair a few times a year to allow church members to share what they’ve learned in their different educational adventures during Sunday School time. Makers can display what they made, researchers can give handouts or host conversations, performers can perform to a live audience, and everyone can appreciate one another’s gifts and insights.

Maker's Space

Creativity doesn't have to be social. A maker's space gives people the chance to dream up projects and work on them with others or alone, as they see fit. In a maker's space, neurodivergent folks can be free to focus on the details, follow their passions, and connect with their Creator by creating something themselves. Provide arts and crafts materials, as well as a few arts books to help inspire possible projects, then free people to work as they wish during class times.

Learning Through Movement

Sometimes our bodies are our best teachers. When teaching Bible stories or important lessons about God's love, choreograph movements for everyone to follow along with the message. You could use traditional poses from yoga or tai chi, or you can make up your own! Act out your choreography slowly as you tell the story, then ask your class to copy your movements. You can even go through the story a couple of times, letting people get used to the motions and the narrative so the story really sinks in. Then ask people how they felt while acting out the story. What was their favorite part? Did any insights pop up while doing the movements? What was God saying through their bodies?

Solo Study

Some neurodivergent folks love learning without interruptions. Many churches have a library or a collection of resources about the Bible or spiritual topics. Why not open it up to members every class time? A good spiritual library can give people a chance to go deep and navigate based on their own interests. Consider having some computers available for research that extends beyond the current library's offerings, as well as writing utensils and journals to collect thoughts. Try to end study sessions with a quick debrief—you'll be fascinated to discover what these deep thinkers have learned!

Virtual Forums

Not everyone engages best in-person. While we have much to teach one another as siblings in Christ, learning relationships don't have to be built in-person. In fact, many neurodivergent folks find it easier to communicate through a digital medium, where there are fewer barriers to communication based on one's ability to speak clearly or interpret nonverbal signals. Consider hosting virtual classes to discuss theological or spiritual questions, or starting a church discussion forum (like Discord) to allow these people to connect with one another without the barriers that a "normal" classroom setting puts up.



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PRACTICE

Spiritual Direction



Spiritual partners are key in the journey. Having a spiritual director available—whether they be a lay leader, staff member, or friend of the church—is an excellent way to give people a chance to consider how God might be moving in their lives. Different from a therapist, a spiritual director isn't there to “fix” anything. Instead, they simply provide a quiet, calm presence for the Spirit to do its work in another for an hour or so. Because of this, spiritual direction can also be done in lay groups with just a little training.

Quiet Space



We all need a little quiet. A prayer room or meditation space can be lifegiving to neurodivergent folks who get overwhelmed by the noises and demands of everyday church life. A couple of comfortable chairs and cushions on the ground can turn an unused basement room into a haven in which to connect with God. Offering group mindfulness classes occasionally can remind people of the utility of the space and give them practices to use when they choose to take refuge.

Labyrinth



Sometimes going in circles is exactly what we need. A labyrinth is an ancient Christian contemplative tool which is easy to build and provides a deeply grounding practice. It can even fit in the palm of your hand! As travelers enter the labyrinth and follow the path into the center, then out again the way they came, they embody the spiritual journey—drawing near to God alone, then going back out into the world, bringing the holy alongside.



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Mindful Building Care



Who says cleaning is for janitors? Caring for sacred space can be a profoundly grounding meditative practice. Assign everyone a particular cleaning task and emphasize that finishing is not the goal—the goal is loving attention, for a given period of time. Make cleaning materials available and let each person attend to their task as they see fit. When time is up, gently invite everyone back for a group prayer, reminding again that they don't need to "finish." We are all works in progress, and beloved just as we are.

Listening to Nature



God is in all of creation, speaking. We can listen together by going slowly and paying attention to our senses, taking in all of the detail and beauty of nature. In an outdoor space, encourage everyone participating to simply follow their ears, walking slowly and looking deeply at the natural world around them. Some people may stay still, focusing wholly on their sense of hearing, while others become engrossed in particular things—a tree, the grass, a bird. You can trust that God is speaking in all of it.



