

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**Hospitality to Individuals on the Autism Spectrum
and their Families**

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by

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Hospitality to Individuals on the Autism Spectrum and their Families

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Contents

Preface.....	iv
Chapter One: An Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Facts on Autism	8
Chapter Three: Research and Literature Review	16
Chapter Four: A Theology of Hospitality	30
Chapter Five: Awareness and Education	46
Chapter Six: Preparing to Welcome the Stranger in our Midst.....	49
Appendix 1: Participant's Guide	62
Appendix 2: Discussion Moderator's Guide	75
Appendix 3: Volunteer/ teacher guide	90
Appendix 4: For volunteers working with children	96
Appendix 5: Institutional Change Worksheet.....	98
Appendix 6: Introducing children to the Autism Spectrum Disorder	99
Works Cited	103
Bibliography... ..	105

Preface

There is a growing population of both adults and children in our world that is not widely seen in worshipping communities. This population is children and adults who live with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Writing from the aspect of a formerly ignorant but concerned pastor, there was a need for a tool to educate members of these congregations to this demographic, in order to increase comfort in welcoming them into each religious community. This project is presented as a possible tool to enrich congregational knowledge of this rapidly growing segment of our population. With this knowledge, perhaps, churches, temples and synagogues can better reach out and embrace families engaged in this life. Volunteers who work in religious programs with young people have neither the time nor access to training materials on how to be hospitable, comfortable and effective with children on the spectrum. Parents of these children may fear leaving their child with leaders who are ill equipped and unaware of their needs, for both the sake of the child and the leader! From the adult perspective, clergy, staff, group leaders and moderators also need to know the needs and gifts of those on the spectrum and realize spouses and children of those on the spectrum may need additional support and understanding.

If we are able to share some of these materials in the occasional sermon, newsletter article or bulletin notices, we can further educate the entire congregation on the needs and concerns for people on the spectrum, creating an open, loving and welcoming environment for the families and individuals at all gatherings and worship occasions of the congregational family. There are other programs offered to congregations that revolve around a separate worship service for these families. Indeed, they offer suggestions that would enrich worship with children in general- hands on, interactive and multigenerational formats and ideas.

Years ago, as I was called to ponder how best to reach out to children on the spectrum, I encountered a priest who was a father to a child with autism. The issue, as he identified it, is that this approach tends to either isolate the family in a separate service, or divide the family- the siblings and one parent attends the traditional service, thereby allowing the siblings and parent to be a part of the larger community, while one or more family members attends the special service with the child on the spectrum. The goal in this program is to create the environment of unity, hospitality and Christ-like love for all people involved by offering the families a congregation and program staff aware of what behaviors might be exhibited, and how best to work alongside the population with special needs so that the kingdom of God is present when the congregational family gathers.

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."'¹

My prayer is that we find that, by welcoming all people whatever their needs might be, this ministry enhancement will be less about our gift to the individuals and their families, but about the gifts and blessings we receive in opening our arms wider. New insights, thoughts and focus will be offered that will draw our attentions and understandings to new experiences of the kingdom of God through the eyes and wisdom of the little child. We will learn and grow together appreciating more the varying and unique talents and gifts endowed upon us by our God. This is my prayer and my dream.

1. Luke 18.15-17 (NRSV)

Chapter One: An Introduction

Churches, temples and other places of worship and prayer are, by nature, open to all people. The majority of these places and gatherings are hoping to be warm, welcoming and friendly to all people. Far too recently, the problem of inaccessibility was acknowledged and changes began to be made to buildings. It was quickly seen that many houses of worship (along with other places of business) were not friendly to those with physical ability issues. Seemingly obvious, this need was largely ignored in the past. Consequently, the country addressed this issue with the American Disabilities Act, signed into law in 1990, which required all places open to the public to make the structural changes to create a path- literally or figuratively- to accommodate those who need special consideration with regard to their ability to enter the building with ease. Although some options created awkward and even unsightly modifications, an important percentage of our physically handicapped population found themselves able to participate in the worship (or business) of their choice. It was and continues to be much more important to focus on the needs of all people over and beyond those who might wish to avoid change to their buildings, or even changes to tradition(s), such as worship style or location.

The experience of realizing the need to modify buildings serves as a reminder to look for what modifications might be needed for other individuals, such as those on the Autism Spectrum. All members of the congregations in places of worship need to understand that obstacles may be present that interfere with a person to be able to participate fully in worship. It is important to take note of those that are not present in weekly worship and other gatherings and think about what might be the cause of their absence.

One demographic or one population, that is growing, is noticeably lacking in presence among the worshippers. This growing population consists of those individuals who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families. Twenty years ago, the diagnosed ASD population consisted almost exclusively of children. Today, there are both adults and children who find themselves diagnosed as neurologically diverse, with their own gifts, talents and needs. While the diagnosis of Autism is not new, providing quality, welcoming communities of faith for these individuals has been largely unaddressed by worshipping communities.

The population of children on the Autism Spectrum is showing growth in many countries, including the United States. The statistics from the organization Autism Speaks and the Centers for Disease Control make it possible to see this increase. The numbers we have reveal that in the year 2000, 1 in 150 children were diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum, and in March of 2020, one in 54 (Autism Speaks 2020)¹. Additionally, Autism Speaks states that approximately 70,700 to 116,000 children on the spectrum will enter adulthood each year. Autism is a condition found in all generations. Initially, Autism was seen as a condition that only affected children; therefore, only children were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, not only are these children aging into adulthood, senior citizens and older adults are being diagnosed as having lived with this disorder throughout their life. Though the older adults may have struggled with some of the characteristics of life on the Spectrum, aging seems to magnify the issues of Autism, leading to doctors rendering a new diagnosis of Autism later in life. Family members, and the

1. "Autism Statistics and Facts." Autism Speaks. Accessed October 20, 2020. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics>.

autistic person alike, are often relieved to learn the cause of some of the problems that had been present for a lifetime. There are not current figures on the number of senior citizens on the Spectrum, but as the number of adults with Autism grow, we will look for an increase of the Spectrum community in all ages.

So, as one looks into the midst of congregations of worshipping communities today, the autistic individuals are not present in the numbers that equals the percentage of those on the spectrum to the general population. In fact, it is quickly seen that very few members of this population are joining in corporate worship. One may wonder why this population is absent from the pews. It becomes more understandable when one explores the possible actions, reactions and needs of this population. It does not vary from the issues that arise with many children; indeed, ministers and leaders often receive complaints from some members of the religious community regarding what they perceive as inappropriate and irreverent behavior of children in worship settings. The leadership receives complaints about noise, movement and what is perceived as acting in a manner that is not holy and respectful. These issues could be magnified with the presence of a person on the Autism Spectrum. Their actions and reactions might be viewed as disrespectful and interfering with the worship of others, though these actions are merely typical of children (and adults) on the Autism Spectrum and to be expected, and should be readily tolerated if not accepted. When participation is attempted, the experience or anticipation of a few backward glaring looks could cause discomfort and embarrassment and therefore the family of the ASD individual stays home. They do not want to disrupt worship, to be embarrassed by the actions of a family member, nor want to be subject to ridicule or reprimand by those who fail to understand these individuals. The failure of some to demonstrate and practice a true sacred hospitality will be discussed further in this material.

Churches, temples and mosques strive to be places where all feel safe and welcomed, and in a personal mindset of worship. Prejudice and unfair judgement are often the result of unknowing ignorance about the other and their needs. In order to meet the needs of this special population, it is vital churches and other houses of worship prepare themselves to be welcoming, understanding, and most importantly, loving. While those on the Spectrum are primarily thought to be children or of a young age, all ages exist on the spectrum, as noted above. It is important to note that the focus must reach beyond meeting the needs of only the youngest on the Spectrum, and learn of the needs of these individuals as they age into adulthood; nor can there be a failure to care for those of adult age who are also ASD individuals. Worshipping communities are encouraged to reach out and minister to an autistic population of all ages and in all stages of life so as to offer pastoral care for all of the children of God. Congregations inclined to welcome people on the Autism Spectrum will benefit from programs and strategies created to assist religious communities to understand the characteristics of autistic individuals and their needs and gifts. With education and information on how best to offer hospitality and ministry to all those on the Autism Spectrum and their families, the community and the ASD families will both flourish.

Preparation and teaching of congregations is necessary to be able to offer a warm, nurturing and loving welcome to the growing population of children and adults on the Autism Spectrum and their families. Establishment of a comfort level with the Autism Spectrum will improve integration of all individuals into programs and worship services; this can be facilitated with programs that educate everyone on Autism. There is a need to be able to be comfortable with interactions and relationships, with understanding of the challenges to the ASD individuals,

their families, and the congregation. In addition, it is important to understand the gifts of these individuals to the ministry of the church and to the growth of the kingdom.

The changes and understanding needed to accomplish this task can be as awkward as it was to modify buildings for the physically disabled. Some worshipping communities will find they are willing to make accommodations to the physical plant, or to the traditions of their worship in order to be open, demonstrating genuine love of the neighbor. Without much ado or modifications, there are some small changes that can be made to offer safety and a degree of empathy to this large and growing community living among the general population. For example, changing out fluorescent light bulbs for softer lighting can make a space more acceptable to those with sensory issues.

For research, utilization of current materials allowed the use of the expertise and knowledge of those currently working in the field, living on the spectrum, or involved with some type of education and/ or therapy with individuals and families with a child or parent diagnosed on the spectrum. This project sought to adapt this material for use in the church setting in two ways. One, to share the need and Biblical imperative to create a church home for families that might not feel welcome due to the needs and characteristics patterns of those on the spectrum. Second, to prepare the various ministers and the congregations within the church to effectively celebrate and invite participation of all people in the programs and ministries of the church family. Materials for training of the leadership staff and volunteers need to be adapted to those with unique needs. For successful hospitality, training and equipping volunteers to work with children (and perhaps adults) on the Autism Spectrum is critical, as well as education about the Spectrum so the entire congregation can be more accepting of individuals who may be neurologically atypical.

In addition to the creation of an academic paper on the subject of hospitality of religious communities to those on the Autism Spectrum, an educational series is offered for use in these communities. It consists of a series of discussion sessions, with participant workbooks, that will serve as an introduction to increasing hospitality, integration and pastoral care to families with one or members that live with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The project will offer some basic, understandable information regarding the Autism Spectrum and what it may mean to minister to the individual(s) on the Spectrum and their family members. The information gleaned shows how the church can be a valuable asset to enriching and supporting therapies, which may be beneficial to all the members of the congregation, fulfilling our mandate to love our neighbor, to seek and support the Christ (for Christians) within each of us, and bring successful worship and ministry to and with the gathered believers.

Jesus has issued the call for inclusion and radical hospitality to all the peoples of the world; it was a significant theme in His teachings and His interactions in His time among the peoples. This call and focus of ministry is now in need of updating for the needs of our communities today. This project seeks to provide congregations and congregational leadership with some information and tools that will make corporate worship with all our complete and diverse parish family more successful.

This project is founded on the belief that worshipping communities will be able and willing to respond to individuals on the Autism Spectrum if information and orientation is available that offers the opportunity to explore worshipping with and encouraging these special people and their families. Ultimately, the project sessions and workbooks will offer awareness training and information on creating a church that is welcoming and equipped to love and care for all people touched with this neurology. The series of introductory presentations and

discussions will focus on why and how to create a hospitable physical environment, offer comfortable and meaningful personal interactions and planned activities done with the best practices known to provide a successful experience for all involved.

Often religious institutions, and members within, believe they offer true and sincere hospitality. The people may be very friendly, and engage with one another freely. However, often below the surface is tension and issues, unintentional and often unseen. The glance towards a loud child, the perception of being ignored when conversation is difficult, the difficulty in accepting a need to move, or fiddle with an object, even the need to wear headphones in the service can create a feeling of unwelcome, and these unwelcoming acts are often unconscious and unintended. It takes intentionality to learn to ignore that which interrupts personal worship, and embrace the previously annoying habits and disruptions. Deliberate and purposeful attention to the needs of those not seen regularly at this time will dissipate the perceived problems and truly allow the doors to be open to everyone. Simple education in understanding and appreciating the neurologically diverse people in our world will increase tolerance and kindness towards the other and most importantly, growth in the kingdom of God. As with any spiritual journey, all involve will experience growth, and the glory of God's kingdom shines brighter for the work that was accomplished by those journeying together. For all who worship the Lord our God, Allah, Jehovah or G*D are called to increase the number of travelers on the journey, to spread wider the reach of the message of love for the stranger, care for the weak and poor and to share all that we have in the way of personal relationships with all encountered during life.

Chapter Two: Facts on Autism

In the very early twentieth century, the term autism first appeared in a paper presented by the psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler¹. The term autism came from the Greek- auto, meaning self, and ism, a condition. He used it in diagnosing a severely schizophrenic patient. Later, a psychiatrist, Dr. Leo Kanner¹ applied the term to some children who were not able to relate to the world in a way he considered normal or healthy. The earliest diagnoses were for children who seemed to be contained within themselves. Kanner wrote about children with “extreme autistic aloneness,” “delayed echolalia” and an “anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness.”² Early on, the cause of this condition was believed to be cold and indifferent parenting, generally blamed on the mother’s failure to properly care for their children. This premise was discredited as more studies were completed and a more complete understanding of autism began to grow.

Later studies began to show a very diverse range of symptoms and abilities comprised this syndrome. As the disorder presents a variety of symptoms, and varying degrees of the known symptoms, autism is now being structured as presentation on a spectrum. The American Psychological Association states that “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a

1. Sicie-Kira, Chantal. *Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism*. New York: Penguin Group, 2014.

2. Lina Zeldovich, “The Evolution of ‘Autism’ as a Diagnosis Explained,” *Spectrum*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/evolution-autism-diagnosis-explained/>.

² 3. Zeldovich, Lina. “The Evolution of Autism”

neurodevelopment disorder that is characterized by difficulties with social communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns in behaviors, interests and activities”.³

This is not a disorder that is detectable in blood tests or by medical tests. Some preliminary work is being done on genetic testing but that approach is still experimental and in its infancy. Diagnosis on the spectrum requires initial observation of typical behaviors with the use of checklists that allow comparisons with standard developmental goals and markers. This method is called developmental monitoring. It is now routine for all pediatricians to use developmental milestone checklists at routine childhood check-ups. This allows the physician to determine if a delay is detected than might mean the child could present on the autism spectrum. There may be a stronger focus on male children, as the spectrum is four times more likely to occur in boys than in girls. If either the parents, a teacher or a physician suspects developmental investigation is warranted, a referral to a psychologist or specialist will result.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health and the Centers for Disease Control, factors that might indicate the presence of autism include, but not are not limited to:

Failure to make eye contact with others

Little attention to other children, parents or caregivers

Poor language development and/or an unusual or monotone tone of voice

Struggle with changes in routine

Failure to respond to their name

Fixation on a particular subject

Unable to hold a back and forth conversation

And failure to understand other's actions, or facial expressions.

³ “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” American Psychological Association, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/topics/autism-spectrum-disorder>.

Without a physiological test to create a definitive diagnosis, these factors are taken in account with observation from parents, teachers, the physician, relatives and others. If the child is older, or the subject is an adult, interviews are also used to determine a diagnosis. There is a tool, The Autism Diagnostic Interview, which aids in distinguishing autism from other developmental disorders. Professionals administer this tool when there is reason to suspect a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Once it is determined a child demonstrates autism spectrum disorder, intervention programs begin. Intervention can begin as early as eighteen months to two year olds, though many times confirmation of the diagnosis and assessment of the level of Autism Disorder does not occur until the child is older. It is better to begin intervention early, for the activities and therapies are beneficial for all children, even if it is determined later that there is a disorder other than autism or the child catches up with developmental milestones naturally.

The American Psychiatric Association has designated three levels of severity of Autism to those on the spectrum. Individuals at Level One have symptoms that are so mild they tend to cause little to no disruption of school or life activities. This is the level at which people would be said to be high functioning. In the past, these individuals would often be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Level Two individuals require intervention with specialists- such as speech therapy or programs designed to improve social interactions and the ability to be more independent. Level Three individuals struggle tremendously with interactions, may be non-verbal, and struggle with self-control and other behaviors. Generally, the individuals at this level have assistance in school and home and require intensive therapy. However, early and strong intervention can make a tremendous difference in individuals at this level of autism that make a more neuro-typical life possible.

The Spectrum encompasses individuals with very mild tendencies to those who struggle with severe disabilities. Often and progressively, the Autism Spectrum is referred to as a neuro-diversity spectrum, to end the idea of Autism being a disability and be understood as a diverse way of being. The neurodiversity of this Spectrum has given the world people with incredible abilities and great knowledge in many areas. The ASD individuals have unique way of thinking that has led to great discoveries in sciences and math, and may have breathtaking artistic talents. The neuro-different way of thinking of those on the Spectrum can lead to unique approaches to problems and the creation of new technology. Fixations can lead to breakthroughs and discoveries in science or other fields. An important factor to understand is that no two people on the spectrum are the same, just as no two people in the world are the same. Every person in the world has their own gifts and struggles, and each deserves love and acceptance as he/she lives fully as each is created.

Today, many informal definitions of Autism or the Autism Spectrum exist, and this one by a counselor, teacher and engaged hands on director, Alan Yau, is helpful especially for those who are trying to understand and engage with individuals on the spectrum. “Autism is a life-long disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and to make sense of our social world.”⁴ Yau summarizes this with the fact that the world is experienced, seen and discovered differently for those on the spectrum. The other fact that is readily apparent is that boys are four times more likely to be on the spectrum than girls. According to the organization Autism Speaks and the Centers for Disease Control, it is the fastest growing developmental condition.

5. Yau, Alan. *Autism: A Practical Guide for Parents*. Lexington: Autism Sparks, 2012.

Many theories are being examined as to the cause, but there is not a clear or agreed upon actual cause. It is known that there is genetic component, as it has been seen to be prevalent in families, among siblings (generally males) and in generational examination. Several studies have discovered a possible link to a malfunction or dysfunction of the mitochondria and the presence of autism.⁵ The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, in their study of the mitochondria of those on the Spectrum, discovered variations in the mitochondrial DNA. This will aid in redefining Autism and other similar disorders as not simply neurological issues, but genetic disorders, which may lead to possible treatments.⁶ There is some hope that a genetic treatment may lead to, at the least, a lessening of the symptoms and issues that are present in those on the Spectrum.

The focus that is most critical at this juncture is on early intervention. It is possible to reroute the brain and to change the trajectory of one's life to enable more a neuro-typical response to the world. The role of the religious communities in this work will be discussed in another section. Intervention can be as simple as providing interactions with peers, and as simple as encouraging musicality and art.

One very important aspect of individuals on the spectrum needs discussion, and offers a possible positive role worshipping communities can offer to the Spectrum community. For four or five decades, the focus was on the children that had been diagnosed as on the Autism Spectrum. Those children have now grown up and are adults in our neighborhoods and workplaces, as well as in our religious gatherings. It is critical to understand the needs of this

6. Goh, Suzanne. "Mitochondrial Dysfunction In Autism Testing And Treatments." The Autism Community in Action. Accessed March 10, 2021. <https://tacanow.org/family-resources/autism-and-mitochondrial-function/>.

7. Bonaime, Ross. "The Cause of Autism May Have Been Discovered." Giant Freakin Robot, January 2021. <https://www.giantfreakinrobot.com/sci/autism-cause-discovered.html>.

new demographic and appreciate the gifts these individuals can bring. Together, the community can determine how best to love these, our neighbors, and be good friends and ministers to them. Remembering the call to hospitality in our spiritual practice, this is one way it takes root in the day to day living of our lives. Furthermore, as Bonhoeffer writes, the entire Christian community benefits in the diversity of religious communities.⁷

There are some characteristics of individuals on the spectrum that may present a challenge. This may happen when one is trying to engage a neighbor, involve a fellow church member, or work with someone in business. As in all areas of humanity, no two people are alike. However, there are some common characteristics of individuals on the spectrum one might encounter with varying degrees in attempting conversation and in working together. These traits include a struggle to read body language and facial expressions. This can lead to someone feeling disrespected or hurt, when the autistic person simply cannot understand the unspoken language. There are often problems in engaging conversation, and one unique characteristic is an honest disinterest in other's interests or opinions. One could discover regular interruptions occur in discussions, and one might be corrected in an insulting manner by the honest higher intelligence of the person on the Spectrum. Other individuals are nonverbal. If one is engaged with instruction of this individual at any level, it might be difficult to hold an individual's attention; fidget gadgets often are employed to assist the individual to focus.

Other tendencies that might present themselves in people on the ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) are hypersensitivity to noises, smells, touches by other people and may show aversions to certain textures. There are individuals that cannot filter out background noises, and in loud situations, may need to run away or shut down due to over stimulation. They may have sensory

8. Derek E Radney, ed., "Quotes from Life Together," Word Press, September 20, 2010, <https://dradney.wordpress.com/2010/09/20/quotes-from-life-together-by-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>.

processing difficulties, which can lead to strange behaviors and judgements on actions the individual must take to protect themselves. In some settings, the individual might find themselves unable to control their own emotions, and suddenly shut down, explode or get anxious and rigid. Without some understanding of these possibilities, the individuals are often misunderstood. Instead, all that might be needed is giving the individual some space for relaxation and time to bring emotions and actions back in check. With a common issue of a struggle to communicate easily or effectively, some characteristics simply magnify and many times, a serious misunderstanding can occur. Furthermore, as autistic people approach their senior years, these issues may magnify and become more severe, especially if any dementia is present.

For neuro-different individuals trying to establish conversation or a relationship, there are challenges regarding the unwritten rules of engagement. The give and take of conversation, such as small talk, may be disregarded and dismissed as unimportant talk. There can be an insensitivity to other's feelings or interests, and things can be said which are hurtful to the neuro-typical recipient, and yet seem as factual or appropriate to those with ASD. Additionally, there might be no attempt to understand another's opinions or interests, with an assertion that their personal opinion or knowledge is correct, sufficient and superior.

Certain individuals also may demonstrate a component of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This disorder creates a need for activities, events or even physical spaces to be in one certain order, with no room for flexibility. For example, the doors must always be closed. Clothing must be put on in a certain order. Handwashing might be extreme or repetitive. Items should stay in their set location. Even the order of a religious service being changed would be

considered wrong and disruptive to the individual. A sense of order aids the ASD individual to relax and function.

Often, any and all of these unique characteristics are misconstrued as a lack of intelligence. Generally, those with ASD are quite intelligent and often more intelligent than the general population. Failure to look past the struggles with certain actions may cause others to miss all of the talents and gifts of that same individual. Additionally, though it may not always appear to be a fact, individuals with ASD do genuinely desire relationships and friendships; they simply struggle to make these bonds and to maintain them. Again, a worshipping community can offer support and a place to learn how to interact in acceptable ways.

There are two final thoughts that might cause some issues with ASD individuals in the actual worship setting. The first is that many individuals find it hard to sit still. This can be interpreted as disrespectful behavior or as disruptive behavior. In fact, it is simply a characteristic to be understood and embraced. Along with fidgeting, an ASD individual may speak out of turn, or respond to rhetorical questions (or correct a misspoken fact). There may be a need to leave due to over stimulation. It is how these individual on the Spectrum are created, and acceptance is required to show genuine and honest hospitality. Finally, the truth of ASD individuals is that they live and work in a very concrete world. Spiritually, worship- and the accepted belief in the presence of unseen and untouchable beings- these concepts can be extremely difficult for ASD (and many other) individuals. Celebration of their very presence in a church or temple is cause for joy as they are working to expand their beliefs and their world to incorporate a healthy religious life.

Chapter Three: Research and Literature Review

Autism Spectrum Disorder is prevalent in our society and many families are impacted by life with someone on the Disorder. This project began with an exploration of the individual (those living with Autism Spectrum Disorder) and their relationship to religious worship. Initially, a general study was undertaken to learn about the Spectrum of Autism, its manifestations and the needs of these individuals. Further study of how to integrate families living with someone on the Spectrum and how to accommodate their unique needs was called for as the paper progressed. This was followed by a need to explore the call to a radical hospitality in all three of the world's major religions. With this objective, a theology of hospitality was created, looking within the Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions to aid in the call of believers to actively engage what might be a new emphasis on outreach and inclusion for this population.

Finally, the need to put together a program to introduce this need to worshipping congregations was obvious and study was undertaken to explore the materials available to assist a congregation in creating hospitality and welcoming environments for those on the Autism Spectrum and their families. This included materials that shared hints and tools from and for parents and teachers in creating an environment, both physical and through activities that would increase success in reaching out to all people, including those on the spectrum.

Current facts were accessed through online resources. The Centers for Disease Control provided objective data on the prevalence of the Disorder and the demographics of this population at its website. This site was used as a source for the very basic information on the disorder, the starting point for further exploration. The numbers are several years old, but other information is quite current, including information on handling the pandemic and its concerns with those who might have special needs. AutismSpeaks is an online website and it maintains

current data that was used to show the need for this project and the urgency for the general population to be informed as to the characteristics of this population. Autism Society is an additional online resource that offered an online class, Autism 101. This class provided the beginning generalizations of the educational components- basics on characteristics and providing general expectations of the difficulties of interacting with those on the Autism Spectrum.

The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism was a strong resource for a deeper understanding of the disorder; a discussion that gave, in layman's terms, a thorough look at the disorder and all that it encompasses. Within this overview of the individual on the spectrum, the needs of those on the spectrum began to be developed. The book begins with a history of the term autism, and its first diagnoses, showing how the misunderstandings began that are present still in today's culture around autism. This began the outline of the material of the congregational education regarding this disorder. The guide documents how the understanding of autism has changed as knowledge and experience increased over the past century, providing needed historical understandings. The author's belief in knowledge as power and knowledge as the way to end stigma carries forth into this project.

Asperger's Syndrome, by Tony Attwood, focuses on those formerly diagnosed with Asperger's, now considered as high functioning Autistic individuals. This material kept the project from focusing on those who are limited in their ability to integrate, and infused the project with the importance on each individual being unique in their abilities and disabilities

Autism, A Practical Guide, demonstrated the ability of an untrained individual to make a meaningful difference in the life of one on the Autism Spectrum. Looking to encourage worshipping community volunteers, this resource demonstrates that all people can get involved. The guidance offered in this book provided useful hints and tips in everyday interactions in short

snippets that were easy to incorporate, and this was his goal in writing this text for parents and others. It is a small book, and indeed, moves from tip to tip after a quick but thorough definition of autism used in the previous chapter, “Autism is a life-long developmental ability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and make sense of our social world”¹, simplifying this disorder into a manageable understanding of the struggle of those on the spectrum.

There are specific activities that apply to volunteers in worshipping communities that will encounter children on the spectrum in their classrooms: make few demands (one task at a time), keep activities exciting to maintain a child’s attention, try to be in their world, use their interests to help them relate to the lesson at hand. The advice and tips in this book will improve interactions with all children and are an essential part of the appendix piece on working with individuals on the spectrum.

There are many more scholarly materials on the diagnosis and intervention of this neurological difference which offer diagnosing and exploration of the possible causes of this disorder. Those sources are aimed toward, perhaps, medical personnel, researchers and others working on a clinical approach to the discussion and the definition of autism. These materials are numerous; there are many journals for professionals seeking the information for a clinical setting. The online journal Autism offers abstracts on the articles that would be for the scholarly approach. An article on crisis in families of those with a family member on the spectrum was used in the project but the vast majority of the articles were for the use of professionals in the field. The online journal produced by IAN (Interactive Autism Community) offered materials for those directly and personally involved in living with this disorder. Additionally, The National

1. Alan Yau, *Autism: A Practical Guide for Parents* (Lexington: Autism Sparks, 2012).

Autistic Society offers some articles written by those on the spectrum, offering insights that cannot be gleaned by data. For the purposes of this project, less scholarly and more approachable offerings were preferred. It seemed important to know and share the materials a parent, friend or other family member might need to educate themselves in the event of a diagnosis within their family or circle of friends.

As stated above, the voices of those affected by this disorder or condition need to speak out clearly. To limit conversation to and with the professionals leaves out an important and necessary resource. There is a value to the materials that allow this perspective to be voiced. Reading some first-hand accounts of both people with autism as well as the voices of parents raising or having raised a child on the spectrum is critical. Alan Yau, as a counselor and therapist working lovingly with those on the spectrum is a great resource, but a different voice than say, Sicile-Kira, an expert in the field. These voices lead to an understanding of the needs these individuals and family members might have that a trusted and aware community could offer. Study then shifted to the needs of the circle of people who are touched by life on the Autism Spectrum. Reading through personal stories available online give a perspective on the great needs for acceptance, patience and understanding. To hear first reports and narratives of those struggling with their lives with the Autism Spectrum Disorder brings to the forefront the call of religious communities to reach out and embrace those in need of a welcome.

In Manda's Story, Manda shared how, as a middle-aged woman, the world began to make sense after she received her diagnosis.² After struggling as a young person, she now can see how her Asperger's (now labelled a high functioning autism) diagnosis has answered questions and

2. "Real Life Story- Manda," Real Life Stories (The National Autistic Society), accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/adult-life/stories/older-people/manda.aspx>Rea.

given her peace. Yet, she states, there is no intervention as an adult, no support for her outside of her immediate family. She needs a community to accept her and help as requested. This is a new occurrence, as people who were thought to be odd or anti-social suddenly receive a late life diagnosis of Autism and begin to rethink their lives and current life choices. Never having felt accepted, she yearns for any sense of friendship and community, which is a major premise of this project. The community hears first hand of the need for integration and hospitality.

There were common issues shared among those on the spectrum found in both books and online articles. Bullying occurs often. Mikie, in the sharing of his story on the website of The National Autistic Society, tells of his experience in being bullied, even in his sixties.³ This was also a finding in a published study that studied peer interaction patterns of children on the spectrum who were mainstreamed into school classrooms that indicated bullying was a problem for children on the spectrum.⁴ That same article indicated issues with depression and social withdrawal. This source also shared that self- doubt and awareness of their differences as an individual on the Autism Spectrum caused issues with self-esteem. Intervention made a tremendous difference and a community of support is an excellent intervention tool. The young adults in the Huws and Jones' study were aware of their progress in social interactions and other behaviors following intervention, "I can socialize with people more and I can behave properly now. I'm getting on with people better than I used to".⁵

3. "Real Life Story- Mikie," Real Life Stories (The National Autistic Society), accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/adult-life/stories/older-people/mikie.aspx>.

⁴ Neil Humphrey and Wendy Symes, "Peer Interaction Patterns among Adolescents with Autistic Spectrum Disorders," *Autism* 15, no. 4 (March 31, 2011): pp. 397-419.

⁵ Humphrey and Symes, "Peer Interaction"

In addition to stating a problem with bullying and other concerns, especially social isolation, The Interactive Autism Network published an article on the issues families face with a family member on the Spectrum. Depression was high among those who felt they were different from their peers. The article, “Families face Autism Stigma, Isolation”⁶ ⁸ interviewed parents who struggle with some of the same issues of isolation and rejection. Online, parents shared how hard it was to be in the public eye and under scrutiny.

As with parents of any child, there can be judgement on the management of their child’s behavior and their parental response when an issue developed. This is often magnified when the behavior comes from a child on the spectrum. The article, The Stigma of Autism: when all eyes are upon you is the story of a mom sharing the pressure she feels out in public.⁷ This issues a call for community to support parents, caregivers and other family members. There is a need for places where concerns and fears can be shared and genuine assurance can be received. Support groups, parent’s night outs, all these are ways to be a welcoming community for parents and these can be offered within and through worshipping communities. A group that meets during adult education times can allow parents to share both their problems and solutions. With trained volunteers, evenings away allow the parents a respite.

“High levels of stress and mental health problems” create times of stress in families.⁸ In an article on defining crisis in families impacted with ASD, it is noted that it is much harder for

6. Marina Sarris, “Families Face Autism, Isolation,” Interactive Autism Network (Kennedy Krieger Institute, February 4, 2016), <https://iancommunity.org/ssc/families-face-autism-stigma-isolation>.

7. Marina Sarris, “The Stigma of Autism: When All Eyes Are upon You,” Interactive Autism Network at Kennedy Krieger Institute (Simons Simplex Community, 2015), <https://iancommunity.org/ssc/autism-stigma>.

8. Jonathan A Weiss, Aranda Wingsong, and Yona Lunsky, “Defining Crisis in Families of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders,” *Autism* 18, no. 8 (November 2014): pp. 985-995, <https://doi.org/https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4230960/>.

parents to have help with their ASD children. Fewer babysitters and caregivers are available and therefore time away is a great need that worshipping communities can offer, as stated above. Pastoral care by the community and the leadership is a ministry that is needed for these parents who provide extra care for their neuro-different child.

Within the article *The Stigma of Autism*, the idea was broached to view autism less as a handicap or a disability, and perhaps as a differently abled neurology. It was offered that autism is, perhaps, a natural variation and to be celebrated. The terminology and ideology is now in a time of changing understanding and acceptance. Frequently, one often sees the terms neuro-typical or neuro-atypical or neuro-different in place of the words Autism Disorder. It is hoped this will break down prejudices or stereotypes of abled- disabled comparisons.

Regarding defining disorders or challenges, there are differences due to the intention of the sources one chooses to explore. Clinically, a disorder needs a diagnosis, a list of symptoms and a treatment plan. Listening to the voices of the professionals differs greatly from the voices of the parents and the Autism Spectrum people themselves. Within the second option is found the ability and the permission to celebrate the differences, to realize and uphold the gifts of each person, to appreciate that neuro-different individuals have an important role and fill a need in our world. *Engaging Autism*, written by a medical doctor and a psychologist, addresses a problem to be healed, or a distant, objective look at the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Contrast that with *Autism Spectrum Disorder* written by a parent. Both have valuable insights, but different approaches to life on and with the Autism Spectrum Disorder. The difference is between finding a fix or a cure, and seeking to give meaning and acceptance. This is a slight exaggeration but shows some of the basic differences one senses as the different sources are explored.

A peculiar study of these resources in this project is in the different directions the study takes. The project leaves behind the collection of data and moves towards a call to create accepting and welcoming communities and provide a tool for teaching worshipping communities about the individuals who live on the Autism Spectrum. With this knowledge, the goal is to encourage positive interactions that benefit all the parties concerned. To further understanding on the theological call to a hospitality to all people, it was necessary to turn to Holy Scripture. The scripture accessed included not only the complete Hebrew Bible, with a focus on the Torah, (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Christian Bible but also Midrash and commentary on the Qur'an.

The initial source for these three traditions draw from a common ancestor. Therefore, there are many similarities to the earliest stories, especially the patriarch Abraham, with few differences between the Qur'an and the Torah/ Old Testament. The sources could have been one, with such commonality between them that it was hard not to create duplicity in the presentation of the material. The beauty of the conversation between the three major religions, which occurred in their texts, through theologians and other writers, was the written directive to promote and embrace hospitality. The Christian Bible shared the common threads of the other two sets of scriptures, with Abraham as the Patriarch of all three major religions. However, once the Christian religion came into being as Jewish and Roman people embraced Jesus as the Messiah, many would turn to those writings, found in the gospels and the books of the New Testament. Jesus, with so many mentions of love and welcome, becomes a strong proponent and argument for complete acceptance and love to all people.

Likewise, Paola Garcia, in a website article discussing charity, shows the Prophet Muhammad shares those same characteristics as Jesus, the prophet and Messiah of Christianity.

He writes Muhammad was ‘sent to this world to elevate morality and perfect human values and ethics.’⁹ While the texts in the Qur’an duplicate many teachings of the Old Testament based on similar ancestors, Islam also takes teachings beyond the older scripture into the life and teaching of the prophet. Indeed, hospitality is emphasized with a quote attributed to the Prophet which teaches one cannot be a good person if one is not hospitable to a stranger.⁹

The midrash that accompanies the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures, also carries forth the teachings on hospitality. As Rabbi Pearce wrote, society is to be judged by the hospitality offered.¹⁰ Through the Midrash, Hebrew Scriptures and canonical teachings grow to embrace a contemporary audience. Therefore, the ancient teaching of hospitality continues into the recent centuries, much as theologians continue interpreting the Christian Scriptures. With regards to the topic of hospitality, there was continuity and agreement among the sources consulted. This extended to the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal/ Anglican Church, as found in the Book of Common Prayer, as it was brought into the discussion. Upon the need for true hospitality to all people, within and outside of the worshipping communities, there was agreement. How and if it is ever truly extended is the topic and discussion for another paper.

Materials currently available that discuss special needs children and faith *include Special Needs Special Ministry*. It touches on many of the same subjects as this project. It discusses the need for inclusion, and provides a brief Christian theological discussion. There is a chapter on

9. Paola Garcia, “Inside Arabia,” Inside Arabia.com, May 16, 2020, www.insidearabia.com/charity-the-third-pillar-of-islam-is-at-the-heart-of-the-islamic-faith/.

10. Mona Siddiqui, “Divine Welcome: The Ethics of Hospitality in Islam and Christianity,” Religions and Ethics, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/mona-siddiqui-hospitality-as-welcoming-in-gods-name/12503800>.

11. Stephen S Pearce, “Judge a Society by Its Hospitality,” ReformJudaism.org, n.d., <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/judge-society-its-hospitality>.

the need for pastoral care for the families and additionally offers some insight in how to be successful in this ministry. It does offer an overview of important topics in a book format. While this book does appear to fill a similar need as this project, volunteers are harder to recruit and rarely want to read a book often for their new ministry. It is recommended for a religious community interested in the forums and discussions this project proposes, including collaborating with community agencies, creating a special needs ministry and addressing questions of possible liabilities to the congregation.

The Special Needs Ministry Handbook is a practical hands-on tool to assist volunteers with suggestions, schedules and activities that are designed for groups of children that may have participants with various disabilities in the group, and does not specifically address individuals on the Spectrum. It does include some curriculum idea (thirty-one sessions) and the lessons are good for all children, include gross and fine motors activities and art projects. The lesson plans are not intended to fit into a Lectionary format, and is designed for use in a Christian program. There is not background material to promote the need for a special needs ministry, nor a plan to introduce the congregation to the needs the students may have and how they may impact the membership.

Seeking examples of actual curricula and activities, a good resource is *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism or Asperger's*. This book offers material to assist with volunteer and ministry leader orientation and some basic training on successful ministry with all children. In offering insight into the issues with communication, the author offers insight into the complications of the language, "For concrete thinker like our kids with autism, the English language, with its inconsistent rules, abstract idioms, nuances of sarcasm, homophones, multiple meaning words, and seemingly nonsensical words like pineapples (which contains

neither pine nor apple) is a desperate morass.”¹¹ This is a reminder to teach community members to speak clearly, concretely and with intentionality. There are numerous responses to everyday problems that might appear, such as the possibility of poor behavior in restaurants or aggressive behavior. The author calls all involved to look behind any poor behavior for the real issue(s) and try to think like your/ the autistic child.

There are specific materials for tools to use in designing the physical environment. *How to set up a Classroom for Students with Autism: A Manual for Teachers, Paraprofessionals and Administrators* is a recommended text for this tool to assist with success in this area of classroom management. Indeed, volunteers who have to do little to no disruptive correction and redirecting will find they are more satisfied and rewarded in their ministry and will stay in their role much longer. Use signage to distinguish clearly between free play materials and teacher’s supplies. Limit visual distractions and use calming colors. This book includes a checklist for classrooms that might help design a safe and productive place for students on the spectrum- really, all students.

For worshipping communities that have integrated children with any type of special need, a good orientation of the needs and talents of those children is critical. “*You’re Going to Love This Kid!*” is such a manual for use in volunteer recruitment and training. It has information to aid in calming the fears of those without prior knowledge of autism and other neuro-different students. This book shifts the focus; do not look only on the special needs and the shortcomings of children on the spectrum or with any type of special need, but seek out the gifts and talents of each child. This book challenges the reader to take a different look at each child. Kluth writes to

12. Ellen Notbohm and Veronica Zysk, *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism or Asperger's* (Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons, 2010).

presume competence, while being sensitive to the frustrations and struggles that might arise. This allows the child to demonstrate their abilities without starting from the assumption they are not capable. Kluth offers the advice to survey parents for more information, to use set schedules and post times of the various activities. Additionally, there is information on legal requirements for education, and numerous checklists for use in a school/ classroom setting.

First person stories and children's storybooks were part of the research. In order to try to understand the people living with the Autism Spectrum Disorder, a simple workbook for children is a strong start for all ages. Simply written with child-like drawings, the questions and activities draw each participant into what someone with autism might experience. "People with autism may feel touch in different ways than you do.....even a light touch may feel like a pinch".¹²

What it is to be Me! Is a short, humorous cartoon book highlighting some of the sensory issues an individual may have to deal with in life. *Ian's Walk, a Story about Autism* is another book in which a sister shares what her brother, Ian, is like as a brother. *My Friend Has Autism* is good for the classroom or ministry group that is welcoming a person or people with Autism into their community. Though these are children's books, and are primarily about children with autism, the truth within offers great teaching and orientation to both adults and children on the spectrum. A parent and educator, Ellen Nothbohm, produced one of the best and most respected texts on accepting and welcoming our friends on the spectrum, *10 Things Every Child With Autism Wishes You Knew*.

Autism is not a childhood disorder, but a lifelong condition. To address the growing numbers of adults on the spectrum, *Understanding Autism in Adults and Aging Adults* is the

13. Ellen Sabin, *The Autism Acceptance Book: Being a Friend to Someone with Autism* (New York: Watering Can Press, 2006).

source drawn from heavily for the project. It defines Adult Autism Spectrum Disorder, and explains how important proper diagnosis and treatment is for the individual and his or her family. There are tools to use for a general diagnosis that might lead one to seek proper clinical care, and explains why older people may show greater characteristics. Regan addresses the concerns a family might have with an adult on the spectrum and strategies to improve life for all involved- such as the suggestions to rehearse social situations (ex: family weddings) prior to the actual event. She suggests those family members who were considered odd or different their entire life may find that they are on the spectrum and suddenly relationships improve as understanding grows. This gives implications for ministry in all worshipping settings as pastoral care for the individual or family can be offered and involvement in ministry can be encouraged, knowing the gifts and talents and how they are affected by the disorder.

Family support for families is explored in *Growing Together Across the Autism Spectrum*. This book is written for children who have a parent on the disorder and specifically addresses the uniqueness of a dad on the spectrum. This offered good suggestions- allow quiet time for someone to unwind after work- and understand there can be a need for perfection. These suggestions and more are incorporated into the teachings on autism. Working more on understanding the pastoral care needs of older adults, The National Autistic Society has a web page entitled Growing Older. This highlight ways to age well with autism, and suggests staying involved and active, and allowing other to help with physical and social needs, which a worshipping community can and should do.

To Be Understood: Transitioning to adult life for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder highlights the difficulties that might be encountered by the new young adult facing a new world. A worshipping community might offer supportive mentors to aid in this transition, or offer even

assist the family with advocating for higher education or disability, if that would be appropriate. The paper offers that services (worshipping communities, perhaps) “should focus on strengths to maximize participation in higher education, employment and independent living.”¹³ This is a new field of interest as growing numbers of people on the spectrum graduate high school.

14. Craig Thompson, Torbjorn Falkmer, and Sonya Girdler, “To Be Understood: Transitioning to Adult Life for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *PLoS.org*, March 26, 2018, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0194758>.

Chapter Four: A Theology of Hospitality

In Christianity, Jesus clearly taught and commanded love for all people, acceptance of all people, and opens up the mysteries of God through these teachings. Within a church, mosque or temple community, people have the opportunity to discover from history and in present day life that God has been and is present in our actions toward one another. Yet it is accepted that people are estranged from God and from one another in all traditions. Thus, the call for evangelization to go forth into all the world and to all peoples is the most immediate form and purpose of hospitality- to share the message of God, Jesus or Muhammad to all people. If there is a community that is not feeling included and welcomed, and therefore not hearing the gospel/ good news/ teachings, there is a failure of the disciples of that tradition. Communities include people of varying needs, abilities, gifts, talents, tongue and any other manner of characteristic that shows differences and uniqueness among God's beloved children. In all traditions, the people are commanded by God to extend hospitality and welcome to ALL people, in all places and at all times.

There exists many examples of hospitality in the Old Testament. Strangers are to be welcomed and cared for as they are encountered. Some of the first century synagogues had guest rooms for the stranger or traveler. The Qur'an also shares stories of hospitality and outreach to the stranger. The idea of hospitality extends through the New Testament, with Jesus often breaking bread with strangers, and meeting with and speaking to those considered unclean, different, or outcast. Work and study with a specific intentionality to be in communion with one another is of benefit to the church, for Jesus was the teacher of love in community. The church needs to emphasize a ministry of hospitality and inclusion so that believers might share the Gospel message with all people. In Matthew (28.19-20), we read:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Through the centuries, many have expounded on this theme. St. Benedict and other religious taught hospitality and love for all. In *New Testament Hospitality* by John Koenig, an entire chapter, *Sharing the Feast of the Kingdom*, serves to remind of the welcome and inclusion Jesus offered as He ministered to the people. As the church seeks to honor the call for hospitality, it is realized that in today’s society, many strangers are those who live among us, yet with needs misunderstood or simply unmet. Strangers are no longer those that are travelling or recently relocated to the area.

We hear the word hospitality used in many ways. The field of hospitality is often associated with the restaurant and hotel industry. The southern states of the United States is said to be hospitable, welcoming and sugary sweet to residents and visitors alike. We expect hospitality in lodging when we pay for it, but hospitality among the general population seems to be rare, if not nonexistent. Strangers cannot travel into town and receive food and lodging. Unexpected guests at the door, even one’s neighbors, are often met with anything other than hospitality. The world seems to be coming a less hospitable place. Hospitality is not taught and personal space and individual needs seem to be emphasized as a way of life. This has not always been true in the world, in most cultures and lands.

Hospitality is more than friendship or courtesy. Hospitality is found in the demonstration of genuine care and concern for the well-being of another- especially concerning another you do not know or one who is greatly different from one’s self or community. Hospitality is reaching across lines or boundaries, real or imagined, to breach the barriers and fully receive the other. This reception can be physical, as in welcoming a person into one’s home, or relational, with

intentional action taken to become aware and respectful of another person, or another demographic of people. It can occur with passage of time that is spent in the presence of the other, exploring and discovering similarities and differences, or through an intellectual experience of gaining new information and insight that provides understanding and awareness.

It appears that the world suffers from a lack of hospitality. As the definitions of orientations and ethnicities grow more diverse, with new descriptions of how one might 'be' in this world, fear of the unknown and lack of understanding has led to a greater failure to be a hospitable person in this world. Perhaps, due in part to greater awareness of the diversity of other peoples, and a lack of awareness of how to interact with others, people tend to shy away from the unknown and that which brings discomfort; especially with regard to people who are different-different culture, ethnicity, abilities, orientation, citizenship, and abilities. The list of excuses to be inhospitable seems to be increasing in opposition to implementation of the long awaited dream of an end to segregation of all conditions. This is in stark contrast to the world of the past. Scripturally, traditionally and historically, hospitality was a critical component of life. It was expected and readily given.

Hospitality is the treatment of others in a way that demonstrates concern and respect. Examination of the definition of what hospitality is and represents begins with an accepted dictionary entry. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online) defines hospitality as hospitable treatment, reception, or disposition. This sends one to the definition of hospitable at the same source. The first definition is "given to generous and cordial reception of guests" followed by "promising or suggesting generous and friendly welcome", "offering a pleasant or sustaining environment" and finally "readily receptive". The question must be asked, how often are we

readily receptive to other people, those that are different in any way? Yet, this is exactly what we are instructed to do and how to be.

Many of the world's religious people speak of hospitality, including those of the major three traditions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It is likely the followers would discuss hospitality as a practice in group settings, such as the houses of worship of each tradition. It might be seen as an issue of being inviting and accessible to all visitors and seekers. This portion of the project will address a religious understanding of hospitality and teachings that might indicate the origins of this tenet.

All three major world religions share a patriarch: Abraham. Found in the holy writings of each tradition, the figure of Abraham plays a major role in defining basic beliefs and practices for their followers. Abraham is acknowledged as the model for demonstrating faithfulness to Yahweh, Allah, and God. Abraham, the Patriarch of the Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions is an early and strong example of hospitality. Reading in the Christian Bible and the Torah, the story appears in Genesis, the first book of both works. Abraham was speaking with the Lord at the door of his tent when three strangers appeared. In many interpretations, Abraham left his private time with the Lord to tend to the needs of these visitors. It almost sounds, no, it does sound, like a critically wrong decision- defiantly the wrong choice. Abram left the Lord to tend to total strangers. Nevertheless, the reality was that Abram knew it was more critical to offer water, a foot washing, food and rest than to stay in conversation with God. Hospitality was the normal behavior and Abram and Sarai, his wife, extended it. After Abram reached out to these three as was expected, the visitors offered a blessing in return. They told Abram he and Sarai would be blessed with a child. The example of welcome and

cordiality and the ensuing blessings received from reaching out in true and sincere hospitality are a call for true welcome in all three major religious traditions.

In the Quran, Abram receives messengers and feeds them a fine, fattened calf, which was the finest food for a feast. This is noted in Muslim teachings as the exemplification of how to act toward strangers. After an examination of hospitality in the Christian teachings, study will move beyond the walls of Christian Churches, to learn of the code of hospitality as it exists among other traditions, looking at how tradition and practice celebrate or ignore this call.

Christian

We find a call to community and family within the messages of the healings of Jesus in scripture. His healing miracles were not just the removal of the physical infirmities, but an act that allowed the individual to resume life into his community of family and village. After a healing, there is a renewed sense of belonging. This gift of belonging must be offered to every individual and we, the community of believers, should continually work to usher the healing of broken ties to those that may feel isolated due to the circumstances and realities of their lives.

In addition to the Great Commission in Matthew the 28th chapter, we find other relevant scripture.

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'*¹

1. Matthew 19.13-14 (NRSV)

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ²

These passages, and similar ones, call for a clear path for all to meet Jesus. Holy Scripture and religious traditions call us to be accountable for the way we might fail some of our members when we do not offer ministries to meet each person where they are as wonderfully created children of God. The church is called to invite all people into experiences of loving God, and in offering those experiences, we demonstrate love of our neighbor. Therefore, we need to learn the language, culture and unique characteristics of our brothers and sisters on the Spectrum so that we might welcome them in to the congregations and thereby into the kingdom

Exploring hospitality within Christianity would begin in their houses of worship. Christian churches often speak of hospitality. Each parish claims that hospitality is a central component of life in their community. Most churches claim to be hospitable- open and friendly. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence that many churches fail to be hospitable to all people. Some may discriminate on race, sexual orientation, education level, denomination or even physicality. Some churches feel great strides in hospitality was and is made when modification to their buildings were made to accommodate physical needs of some people. This was a great blessing to many, yet there are unseen needs and concerns. It is much easier to create a hospitable environment when the needs of the guests are readily apparent. However, hospitality goes much further than wheelchair ramps and automatic doors. It is necessary to think about hospitality and the meaning of being an open and welcoming congregation or group of people beyond structural modifications. The ultimate authority for Christian churches lies in the teachings of Jesus and other scriptural references.

2. Hebrews 13.1-2 (NRSV)

In the discussion of the Christian tradition of hospitality, one again turns to the scripture of the Holy Bible. Claiming Christian discipleship or membership is following Jesus. Following the teachings of Jesus is answering a call to radical hospitality. When questioned on the way to earn eternal salvation, Jesus answered the rich man with a request to repeat the two great commandments. The response that followed was this:

*“He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’”*³

This is not the answer the young man expected. He was no doubt surprised to learn that the way one treats others is the way to the kingdom of God, instead of adherence to the religious laws. The sinful tendency to put one’s self first is a very grave sin. Jesus teaches that treating others with utmost respect is equal to loving God. As Jesus instructs, one is to always consider the needs of the other. This teaching is echoed in the book of Matthew. In this pericope, the young man is a Pharisee, but the line of questioning is the same. The answer is also the same- the second of the two great commandments is “to love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴

In the New Testament, stories of hospitality continue. Jesus shared tales and teachings of hospitality in the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁵ Jesus tells of a traveler who is beaten, robbed and left on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite (a scholar) crossed to the opposite side of the road to avoid caring for the injured man. However, a Samaritan, a class of people considered substandard to the priest and Levite, was the one to demonstrate right action. In this parable, the one who showed hospitality to the stranger with his care and

3. Luke 10.27-28 (NRSV)

4. Matthew 22.34-40 (NRSV)

5. Luke, 10.29-37.

provisions for lodging was the one commended. The moral of the tale is clear; followers are to disregard differences and to speak always to the person and their needs. In this case, it was the one thought to be the least among the travelers on that treacherous road who dared to demonstrate love and concern.

The natural instinct of humanity seems to be to care for ourselves and selfishly so. In loving your neighbor as yourself, one is required to offer, share and invest equally with the neighbor so that every person is living in a hospitable and friendly world. The acts of living in Christian community require us to offer more than basic hospitality. In the book of Acts, the teaching is to offer unusual kindness. Following a shipwreck, the disciple Paul landed on foreign soil. On shore, the natives of the island met them. “The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us round it.”⁶ The needs were discovered and then provided for in the sharing of the warmth and protection from the elements. There is no want. The kingdom of God is a strong presence in the atmosphere of hospitality.

Paul reminds us of the need for hospitality in teaching on everyday life and business. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”⁷ Fiscal responsibility is one matter for attention, but of far more importance is this reminder: we carry a life-long debt owed to God. That debt is to love and show hospitality to all people. Remittal is required, and is more important than fiscal responsibility as this is the ultimate law to be obeyed.

⁶ Acts 28.2 (NRSV)

⁷ Romans 13.8 (NRSV)

“And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?”⁸

Other instructions for hospitality can be found throughout the New Testament, but the decisive guidance can be found in these exchanges between Jesus and his disciples. The inheritance of the kingdom of God will be granted to those that have cared for Jesus- Jesus in the presentation of each person, stranger, poor and alienated. As we serve the Jesus in each, we serve Jesus himself.

Jewish and Old Testament Hospitality

However, the notion of hospitality is older than the teachings of Jesus and the churches of Christianity. Almost all traditions have some expectation of required or expected hospitality. Jesus was following and enforcing the teachings of his people, living as He was taught throughout his childhood. The Hebrew people had traditions of welcoming the stranger in the earliest of written scriptures.

There are many references in the teachings written about the importance of hospitality in the Old Testament (as it is for Christians), the Torah (the Hebrew Bible, which contains the first five books of the Old Testament) and in the historical teachings of the Jewish people. There are numerous articles, books and dissertations on this subject. The Talmud (a work that preserves Hebrew oral traditions and accepted extra-Biblical material) also addresses this principle, even going as far as to state that hospitality to wayfarers is one of the acts which

⁸ Matthew 25.38 (NRSV)

will bring ‘fruit’, blessings in one’s life. It might be more important than prayer!⁹ A blessing received in the giving of hospitality is present in the beginning of the Bible and the Torah.

Within these scriptures, there are instructions regarding hospitality in addition to the stories of the characters sharing or giving hospitality. There commandments regarding the proper treatment of other people, one of the people in your own tribe or a stranger in one’s midst.

In the book of laws and regulations, as it is sometimes described, the book of Leviticus states, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”¹⁰ The commandment here is clear, not just to be polite but to love. To reach out and embrace the ones who may be the hardest to live near, or with, and then to go beyond that to offer love. A quick search of the computer quickly reveals eighteen or more verses in both the Old and New Testaments containing the phrase love thy neighbor. In the book of John, Jesus commands this love and says loving one another demonstrates being His follower.¹¹ The way one interacts with another person is the signature act Jesus commands to be the hallmark of discipleship.

Returning to the Old Testament and the Jewish traditions, we read in Leviticus, *“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”*¹²

⁹ “Hospitality,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed November 11, 2020.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19.18 (NRSV)

¹¹ John 13.34-35 (NRSV)

¹² Leviticus 19.33-34 (NRSV)

Not only are strangers, guests and all others to be treated well, they are to be made to feel as one of the hosts. There is to be no differentiation, no sense of giving or actions of providing for the “other” but a complete acceptance as though a new member of a family or tribe has arrived. Again, this is defined in the book of Numbers, also in both the Christian Bible and the Torah, “You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance”.¹³ Quickly the newcomer becomes one with the resident.

Beyond teachings and commandments are stories of hospitality. Along with the tale of Abraham, we see both Elijah and Elisha involved in tales of hospitality and blessing. Elijah prevailed upon a poor widow and she shared her meager supplies, only to find the blessings of demonstrating hospitality continually filled her stores so that there was more than enough to eat.¹⁴ In his travels, a rich woman gave Elisha regular hospitality of room and board. Elisha’s servant asked what she might want in return, and she shared though she had much, she was childless. To share his appreciation, Elisha shared the gift of a son, an act that is reminiscent of the story of Abraham and Sarah.¹⁵

In many tales of the travels and activities of the Hebrew people, there is evidence that hospitality was important, even in ways that seem difficult for us to comprehend. Sharing daughters in order to protect a visiting stranger is one of these classic examples. This is an act that immediately precedes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, though it is not the sin that brought about their destruction.¹⁶ Hospitality gone awry is no excuse for our failure to

13. Numbers 15.16 (NRSV)

14. 1 Kings

15. 2 Kings

16. Genesis 19 (NRSV)

embrace and emulate the strong and proper theology of caring for those that are strangers among us.¹⁷

Turning to the Talmud, the book of teachings and extra biblical traditions that accompanies the Torah, many teachings undergird the call for hospitality among those who practice the Jewish faith. The Babylonian Talmud states, “Welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence”.²¹⁸

Additionally, a portion of the Talmud is quoted

Judah b. Shila said in R. Assi's name in R. Johanan's name: There are six things, the fruit of which man eats in this world, while the principal remains for him for the world to come, viz.: Hospitality to wayfarers, visiting the sick, meditation in prayer, early attendance at the Beth Hamidrash, rearing one's sons to the study of the Torah, and judging one's neighbour in the scale of merit. But that is not so? For we learnt: These are the things which man performs and enjoys their fruits in this world, while the principal remains for him for the world to come, viz.: honouring one's parents, the practice of loving deeds, and making peace between man and his fellow, while the study of the Torah surpasses them all: [this implies], these only, but none others?³¹⁹

Hospitality within the Islam tradition.

Research into the origins and practice of Muslim hospitality all return one to the core of hospitality within the Christian and Jewish traditions. All three share the learned practice of the cultural expectations of the Middle East, and the scriptural and historical practice of hospitality

17. Ezekiel 16.49 (NRSV)

18. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/babylonian-talmud-full-text> (Shabbat 127a)

19. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/babylonian-talmud-full-text>

that stems from Abraham and his people. With the mutual ancestral line, it would be a logical discovery.

Following in the footsteps of the great patriarch Abraham, the prophet Muhammad was said to have said,

*“There is no good in the one who is not hospitable”.*²⁰

Practicing Muslims are to reach out to the stranger, and to welcome the stranger who crosses his or her path. Hospitality is a firm fixture in the culture of the Middle East, from where Islam originates. In the past and even today, hospitality can be the difference between life and death in the harsh environments that are found in the Middle East. Hospitality to all people in safer physical environments can also be seen as equally lifesaving. Without the foundation of belief and the pillars of Islam, one could be said to be lifeless. Therefore, beyond the lifesaving food and drink a nomadic traveler might need, all those who travel the physical journey of life need a spiritual life to be fully alive.

A study of language in the Qur'an discloses there is no word that translates as stranger. There is a word for foreigner, translated that means one is from a different land. It is not a word or concept that carries a negative connotation. It is a fact that carries no prejudice. This is an honorable thought. Strangers are merely apart from their native land, and not one who is different, culturally or otherwise. This suggests a deep sense of hospitality, with a lack of distinction and the understanding of caring for one another.

20. Mona Siddiqui, “Divine Welcome: The Ethics of Hospitality in Islam and Christianity,” ABC Religions and Ethics, July 29, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/mona-siddiqui-hospitality-as-welcoming-in-gods-name/12503800>.

Christian traditions and theologians

At the heart of this project are the teachings we find relevant in scripture to inform our interaction with and care for all of God's people. The teachings of our Christian theology lead to an understanding that all people need to experience the love of Jesus Christ in the fellowship of belonging to a worshipping community. Inclusion of all peoples is the core of theology that undergirds the desire to be aware and responsive to underserved populations.

To be an authentic Christian community, there must be radical inclusion of all people. This is more than simply an invitation or an open-door policy, a simple "all are welcome". Christian hospitality is doing the work required to insure the quality of the reception each person receives, following the teaching we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons, as worded in the baptismal covenant in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer [304]. This reception includes:

1. Recognizing that Jesus came to offer salvation to all people
2. Meeting each as they come and are equipped
3. Acknowledging, supporting and encouraging the gifts of each person
4. Providing a place for each to find and carry out their personal calling
5. Providing an environment that comfortably presents the presence of Christ
6. Assisting all people to live comfortably with one another, with greater understanding of the needs and gifts of all in the parish family and community at large
7. Celebrating the Biblical imperatives undergirding hospitality
8. Re-membering the Kingdom of God by embracing all members

In fact, Christianity can hardly thrive without a strong and authentic community. As one reads some of the leading theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks about Christian community

and the importance it plays in the lives of believers. Bonhoeffer states that “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer”²¹. This presence belongs to all Christians, who find not just joy and strength, but also comfort and growth. Greater hospitality to all individuals is a source of joy and growth to all who are gathered, as diversity brings what Bonhoeffer calls “visible fellowship”.²² (Quotes from Life Together). This fellowship allows the gathered to encounter God in the physical presence of one another. It is something easily taken for granted by those who can easily gather, and the importance of gathering is easily overlooked.

Henri Nouwen, writing in *Reaching Out*, defines our roles as hospitable hosts is to “plow the field, to cut the weeds and to clip the branches”²³ in order to make the path to meet Jesus clear and safe. Our ignorance of how to best prepare the field makes this task difficult. As community, we are to take the time and make the effort to create a safe and nurturing space for all people. In the book of Isaiah, the fourth verse of chapter four calls us to lift up the valleys, lower the hills and mountains and make the ground even. It is, indeed, a very sad time when the parish and its people prove to be the obstacles. However, knowledge and love are the very tools to remove barriers to Christian community.

21. Derek E Radney, ed., “Quotes from Life Together,” Word Press, September 20, 2010, <https://dradney.wordpress.com/2010/09/20/quotes-from-life-together-by-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>.

22. Derek E Radney, ed., “Quotes from Life Together”

23. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (UK: Crown Publishing, 1986). p. 108.

Summary

The name of an article written by Rabbi Pearce is entitled 'Judge a Society by Its Hospitality'. This is a strong statement- an excellent sermon title- a checkpoint for ministers in gauging their congregation. How is the hospitality really? This is worth some thought. The hospitality a congregation shows or fails to demonstrate is a benchmark for the health of the gathered and their reflection of community practiced and lived. Are all welcome and able, physically or mentally- to not only attend but also be involved in purposeful ministry and worship?

The concept of inclusion is proven when all people feel valued and accepted as they become engaged with the worshipping community. Communion is defined by the depth of the relationship between the members. Communion is when the people commune with becoming involved and aware of all people, forming a brotherhood/sisterhood in congregations and communities. Hospitality to all people would be offering a community that has sought to appreciate and understand that there are differences and different needs among all types of peoples, and seeking some understanding of those differences to better be open and friendly.

One typically, and somewhat sadly, discovers most places of worship claim hospitality as a benchmark of their deep faith and their desire to be approachable. Yet, few truly embrace hospitality if it requires any real change. It is a fact that there are some needed changes to create a worship environment and practice that enables greater participation in worship and involvement in the ministry of the congregation for those on the Spectrum and with other disabilities. The call is to seek out those who are not receiving the hospitality of the house of worship and honestly and eagerly invite those individuals into the midst of the believers.

Chapter Five: Awareness and Education

As the journey of spiritual growth continues, it is the responsibility of all to look and note not only at whom one is traveling, but to look and see who is missing from the journey. It is easy to seek out those with whom one has a relationship, or those that are similar to one's self, but those that are missing from the community that need assistance, care and most importantly, invitation. One's journey to spiritual growth and greater awareness does not take place in a vacuum; it is the wisdom, the friendship and the fellowship of others that make the journey richer and more complete. This can be an uncomfortable assignment, for there are those who are quite different and unique and sometimes one does not know even how to issue an invitation. This opens up the question for one of the growing populations in our world, those who live on the Autism Spectrum, with what is known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is painfully obvious in almost all places of worship that these individuals are not present in the same percentage as they are in our general population. Therefore, the task is understanding, education and finally, invitation.

In the movie *Inside Out* (a film released in 2015, created by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures), the feelings of the main character, a child, are brought to life and we watch them battle for control of the child's actions and memories. As the movie plays, it appears that it might serve as a metaphor for understanding children on the spectrum. Born with the same senses and feelings as any other children, the control and/or dominance of certain senses, feelings and abilities (talents?) is out of balance. The auditory senses might be elevated, making one very noise sensitive. Communication can be impaired, personal relationships can be a struggle, following directions a task of extreme difficulty. Intelligence may take dominance over normal thought, causing an intense focus on a topic or area of interest that makes a person

appear reluctant to engage with others or cause that person to be perceived as rude and a braggart. Confusion over behavior may cause the gifts and talents of the individual to be overlooked and not celebrated and utilized.

In addition to very real struggles with controlling emotions and focus, there may be an inability to control oneself physically. The person might be prone to speak out, shake, move around, or at times taking postures (lying on the floor, for example) that might be deemed inappropriate in certain places at certain times- such as at a worship service or in a religious education class. Some public awareness of life on the Autism Spectrum is increasing but it is still difficult for many to understand what it is to live as a person on the Autism Spectrum. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehension of what the spectrum is, what issues are encompassed, what life is experienced by the child and the adult, and how to interact with these sisters and brothers. Unless directly affected, most people have not pursued additional understanding. Therefore, when encounters occur, there is awkwardness and uncertainty as to how to proceed. Sadly, when one thinks about the religious communities that are currently engaged in worship, and the absence of these individuals and their families, it appears that all involved might be reluctant to attend. They may fear either causing a disruption or the reception of awkward stares and judgement. Just think of what insights and growth we are missing in our parish families!

The movie, *Inside Out*, has a happy ending. The ‘feelings’ learn each is important and has a role to play. A balance is found and the child’s behavior and responses are what we might expect from a child of that age. Peace within the child’s mind and heart is achieved and everyone lives happily ever after. In reality, peace and happily ever after often involve confronting our ignorance of conditions or situations, our inability to understand and sympathize and working

improve understandings so that any disparity, thereby awkwardness and inhospitable interaction is overcome.

In addition to learning to accept and tolerate neuro-diversity, there is cause for us to celebrate those on the Spectrum. Many scientists we have long celebrated are thought to have exhibited signs that would indicate an ASD diagnosis today, including both Albert Einstein and Sir Isaac Newton. Einstein repeated sentences continually, would fixate on one field of study and struggled with personal relationships. Michelangelo and Andy Warhol are thought to join the Spectrum population. Another important man, Thomas Jefferson, had some sensory issues, was obsessed with remodeling and wore bedroom slippers to meetings (shoes were too uncomfortable?). Today, we see how powerful change can occur when someone is so obsessed with an issue that is their fixation and they cannot stop fighting for their cause. The amazing environmentalist, Greta Thunberg, is diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum, and this has been a strength in her persistent battle for the earth and push for changes in environmental issues.

The reality of neuro-diversity is that life can present challenges for these individuals, and there may be some assistance and intervention needed to assist them with everyday life. However, the world is blessed with these same individuals who can think outside of normal paradigms and explore new avenues of research in the sciences. The Spectrum also gives us talented artists, in music and other forms of art, and they add to the world's culture and beauty. Autism Spectrum Disorder is not simply a disability to be cured or a problem to be solved; it is a different way of being that can be a valuable asset as the gifts and talents are realized and utilized for the good of all.

Chapter Six: Preparing to Welcome the Stranger in our Midst

Beyond the religious implications of religious hospitality resulting in inviting all people to participation in worship, there are other excellent reasons to invite the community of believers to engage with the ASD population. Often, it is a normal exercise to think of what new individuals can offer the church or temple in or out of worship. Leaders look for talents and gifts that can enhance worship, give a person a sense of belonging and ultimately benefit the church in some manner- like having a plumber in the community. However, it is true that the church, mosque or temple has more to offer individuals than a place of worship or a tool on the path of one's spiritual journey. There are gifts present in the worshipping community that can change the lives of people. These gifts are not found in Holy Scriptures, or theological teachings, or even in the words of the sermons or the lessons in classrooms. They are found in the lives of those sharing their journey with the worshipping community. Simply said, true hospitality and acceptance can improve the lives of others, specifically looking at the lives of those living with ASD and similar syndromes.

Why worshipping communities should get involved

The responsibility of the religious community to spread the message of love and acceptance goes beyond the 'front door ministry'. It is much more than being kind, welcoming and understanding. The organization has, within its normal methods and modes of operating, the ability and perhaps the command to help all people grow in to their full potential, to discover their talents and gifts, and to aid in the carrying out that call in the community. Therefore, the worshippers in the community are called to be part of the team to help individuals on the Autism

Spectrum to grow, to achieve and to flourish. Moreover, as is true with all ministry the community offers, the entire assembly benefits and flourishes in this work. The church, mosque or temple and all their members profit when all of God's people are encouraged and supported in finding their personal ministry and assisted in offering their gifts. In this outreach or perhaps better said, in-reach, the community realizes the net gain of the work, even though it may seem to be a ministry focused on helping these individuals. That is often the case. People who are doing mission work think they are helping the other; often and even usually, the real benefit is given to the one involved in the ministry as they grow in love for all brothers and sisters. Additionally, all people involved in helping others experience God as the 'helpers' focus less on themselves and thereby experience the revelation of all the places and in all the people where God is present and working in the world.

The benefits of belonging to a community of believers is great for all people; it has special and greater benefits for individuals on the Autism Spectrum, as with others that might experience a sense of being an outcast in the general culture. There are certain aspects of the assembly that can assist all individuals with self-confidence, grant a strong sense of belonging, and give purpose, a sense of being needed. All people want to feel, and need to know, that they are contributing to the community and the world, and have their gifts recognized and celebrated. This is especially true for Autism Spectrum individuals, as they often feel at odds with the neuro-typical world, and struggle to participate in group activities. In a church or temple setting, or any setting- work or school- having the people around you aware of your personal unique needs and gifts allows for a true sense of unity and an enhanced self - identity. Everyone needs to feel safe as they discover how best to use their talents and how to become the unique person God created.

It begins with relationship. In relationship with others, we learn who people are and develop a kinship as fellow believers. A worshipping community is the ultimate place to develop relationships. There is a common mission and goal- to bring about the kingdom of God and share the good news of the gospel, the teachings of the prophet, or the communal worship of God in temples. It is hard to be an effective member of a worshipping community when the very person next to you is unknown. Religious worship and spiritual growth are achieved in community. This puts houses of worship in a unique position to make those who feel they are ‘outcasts’ or ‘different’ or ‘unloved’ or ‘unwelcome’ to be brought into community, loved, welcomed and celebrated.

Worshipping communities are often greatly involved in mission work, seeing it as fulfilling the mandate to care for the needy (as Jesus directed):

“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”¹

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish people read and hear in Isaiah and other places:

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

1. Matthew 25.41b-45 (NRSV)

*your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard.* ²

Regarding the mandate to care for others, one Muslim writes, “

Muslims believe that everything we are given is bestowed upon us by God (Allah) and therefore, nothing, not even our bodies, belong to us, but to God. We are merely of trustees of these bounties and we are to use them in the best of ways, as God wills, to uplift the rest of His creation. ³

While most of these references focus on distribution of funds or goods, they are closely related to simply caring for the other. Care of the other is empty if consideration is not given to the individual and their personal needs, be it spiritually or an improved sense of self and value to the world.

Recently, we have seen an increase of sensitivity to minorities and others poorly treated in our world. Some minorities are easy to identify. The color of their skin, their accents or culture, or other characteristics that are not seen in the majority of the population (or the ones who suppose themselves to be the ‘norm’ or the mainstream population) comprise a minority. However, there are many who do not exhibit the very characteristics that may cause them either public or private abuse, neglect and/or discrimination. The population of people living on the Autism Spectrum would be in this demographic. They are among the needy and neglected, perhaps even ignored. These individuals are in need of their own pastoral care and support from the worshipping community. While it may not be a visible need, there are needs that need to be met by those who are living under mandates and commandments to care for all people.

2. Isaiah 58:7-8 (NRSV)

3. Paola Garcia, “Inside Arabia,” Inside Arabia.com, May 16, 2020, www.insidearabia.com/charity-the-third-pillar-of-islam-is-at-the-heart-of-the-islamic-faith/.

It is simple to bring in canned food or clothing to meet the needs of some of our brothers and sisters. It is not complicated to understand the needs of someone with an illness or another who needs basic supplies. It is harder to understand the needs of people with other conditions, such as a mental illness or an abusive past. It is equally difficult to understand the needs of someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder if you are not personally involved with a friend or family member on the spectrum. However, religious communities need to work together to reach out to this population that is noticeably absent from our worshipping communities.

The ministries of worshipping communities can be the perfect venue to allow all people to receive encouragement in discovering their gifts and talents, to fill a need in the work of ministry, and to increase in their own sense of self-worth and personal value. In return, the community is blessed with more people involved in ministry. Interestingly, ASD people who do not work are available during the day (and they need activities and work that is meaningful). There are also pastoral considerations and needs that the church can provide. The ASD community is filled with people in all walks of life, all ages, and with many different needs. The families of these individuals also need pastoral support and care, and to find worshipping communities that are aware of their unique circumstances and readily accept, love and support the family in its entirety.

How worshipping communities can reach out and support

For many people, Autism Spectrum Disorder is a vague and confusing disorder. Many times, it is associated with myths that confuse the reality of the spectrum and its greatly differing

manifestations. The media, including television and film, generally portray the far ends of the spectrum- either a genius type or a low functioning person, maybe even nonverbal or dissociative. Just as all neuro-typical people differ greatly in temperament, ability and interests, so too, do all of our brothers and sisters on the Spectrum.

As the movement toward awareness and acceptance grows, it is quickly realized that the steps taken to increase ministry to Autism Spectrum Disorder individuals is applicable to all people who are underserved in many churches today. The move toward reaching out to this population begins with education. Just as the work of dismantling racism and dismantling all ‘isms’ begins with learning the truth about the situations and abuses, so it is with becoming a community that is open to and willing to be a safe and welcoming place for those on the Spectrum. Learning facts, destroying myths, and exploring what is known about the reality of Autism Spectrum Disorder and what life might be like for those on the spectrum is an important first step. After learning about the disorder, it is possible to begin to form relationships with individuals and families living with the Spectrum. With relationship comes an awareness of the needed care and support and importantly, the understanding of the beneficial relationship of individual and the worshipping community.

With relationship also comes the knowledge of how and why to make the environment and practices of the community more friendly and accommodating to these individuals. Some changes are minor, perhaps less lighting; some will require decisions to be made to greater accommodations- such as quieter music (though headphones will help this issue). It may be that some find the physical contact of a handshake or hug unbearable, and others need to be prepared to find their advances spurned, and be understanding with that occurrence. A change in the

arrangement of the worship space might be traumatic and unsettling to an ASD individual; changes might need to be made gradually and with advance notice. Small accommodations can bring about great comfort and acceptance for our autistic brothers and sisters, such as a quiet corner in which to sit and feel secure.

Education will also assist the community to understand an ASD person's need to stand and walk a bit during the service, or to have a fidget gadget in their hands, and in one case shared, a child needing to attend while laying underneath a pew. Initially, these behaviors may be thought to be inappropriate or disrespectful, yet it is quickly learned and accepted this is a true need of that individual, and one learns to ignore or, better yet, accept this small quirk. The hope is that behaviors such as these become quite unimportant; what is important is that the individual and their family members are loved and welcomed into the community.

More importantly are the gains that can be made with an ASD individual within the normal operations and activities of a worshipping community. The opportunities for peer interaction are vital to development. Here one can hope that peers and other individuals will be focused on acceptance with this population that often finds its members bullied or ignored. Being bullied is a very common problem for children, teens, young adults and even adults on the Spectrum. Teasing and abuse, both physical and mental, are commonly directed at children with disabilities. Here, the worshipping community can be the tool to break down barriers, teach proper respect of all people outside of the community, as well as offering safe and healthy friendships among peers.

The assemblies of worshippers can be places where individuals can practice their communication and interpersonal skills without pressure and judgement. All people want friends.

The church, synagogue or temple should be a place where it is safe to make friends and engage in activities with those friends with someone who understands you might do things differently or communicate differently. An individual might have fixations on certain items or activities, or be a poor loser in games. Someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder might fixate on exact adherence to rules as everything is generally taken literally. Still, they have the desire to be accepted and feel liked and loved as they were created.

The focus of this ministry should go beyond the needs of the individual living with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Indeed, the entire family is living with this disorder. For many years, we would only speak of children on the spectrum. Now, those children have grown up, and as they marry, have children and age into their senior years, the entire family needs that same acceptance, love and welcome that is being offered to the individual. It is believed that 50,000 children on the Autism Spectrum graduate from high school each year. It is imperative that there are communities to assist these young people into adulthood beyond their immediate family.

Worshipping communities can offer mentors to assist those transitioning to independent living, or navigating a career search or the college years. The children of a father (it much more often affects males) on the Spectrum might be embarrassed by some of the quirks or different actions of their father and they may need a community that understands their struggles. Pastoral care is needed for all those impacted by Autism Spectrum Disorder, be it the individual, members of their families, and perhaps even friends. A support network and a caring community can make for richer lives and success in all the aspects of life.

Parents are often quite upset and perhaps overwhelmed when their child is diagnosed as being on the spectrum. Those parents need a loving community to support them as they discover

what this means for their child, themselves and siblings. Parents may find their hopes and dreams for that child will be changing, and may be frightened and worried. Parents of school-aged children on the spectrum may need extra support, and maybe even respite help, perhaps at the beginning of a new school year. This is often a time of concern as their child stresses over new teachers, different classes and new fellow classmates. The honest truth is there are times when all people need extra care. Adolescence, college, becoming an independent adult, all these are times which can be overwhelming and stressful, and even more so for those on the Spectrum. The worshipping community can be ready with peer support, small groups, and pastoral care from leadership.

Music is a wonderful gift for many situations and conditions. Music plays a vital role in worship for many people, as they sing their prayers and praises. Music can be calming, relieve stress and improve cognition for those on the Spectrum. Importantly, use of personal musical gifts are an outlet for the use of personal talents to the beautification of life for others. Music is a wonderful tool for individuals on the Spectrum. In different settings, such as the classroom and in gatherings of youth groups, and in the music of worship itself, participation in singing or playing music can enhance communication skills and encourages self-discovery. It also may provide an outlet for the individual's gifts as they are encouraged to join choirs and play instruments in worship and other events. Music has even been seen to give voice to those that are nonverbal with the spoken word; music can aid in speech development and being in a group develops self-confidence.

Another thought regarding families with a member on the Autism Spectrum: there are worship services or programs that are designed to serve individuals with sensory issues, or other special needs. These can be beneficial to that individual, but this is also a segregation of ASD

individuals from the rest of the congregation. Not only does it take away an opportunity to learn some flexibility and tolerance of others, it keeps peer interaction opportunities with neuro-typical parish members at a minimum. It also tends to segregate the entire family. The choice have to be made for one parent and the ASD child to worship separately, or force the entire family to worship at the special and separate service. Often, siblings and parents of one with Autism Spectrum Disorder find a great deal of their lives directed by the needs and issues of their ASD family member. If relegated to a special service, the siblings miss the other activities of their peers, and the parents are not able to make contacts and relationships that could lead to stronger care and support for themselves. While these options might be the best choice for a small population, encouragement for the entire community to worship together might be a better way to show hospitality and care. If parents are worried about objections to the possible disruptive behaviors of their child, they should be assured that, with proper education and explanation, all are welcome to worship and are welcome to be authentic with their needs. Above all, churches and other entities thrive when the gifts of all are realized and utilized and all people can be met as they are, as they were created to be.

However, change is difficult in many aspects of life, and this is a fact in worshipping communities. It is unusual and even rare to make changes to which the entire congregation agrees. Changing worship facilities can be helpful to some of the membership while upsetting others. The inabilities of churches to allow change is so well known there are many jokes and memes regarding the resistance of the membership to change anything from a lightbulb to style of worship. The question arises of how to facilitate change that will allow greater hospitality to those on the spectrum and continue to satisfy other members who may resist the changes.

Lighting may be a difficult change. Some of the older members of the congregation may require strong lighting as their eyesight changes. That bright lighting may overwhelm someone on the spectrum. Negotiations may need to occur between the musicians and the congregation to determine a volume of music acceptable to all people without detracting from the talents of the music ministers. The same debates occur over many things when a group of multiple ages gathers, for example, over the room temperature. Now, some places of worship offer knitted shawls if the air conditioner is too cool for a member, or hand held fans if they are too hot. Compromise is possible if there is open and honest planning, conversation, education and trial implementations.

There are several questions and advance inroads made that can lead groups into successful changes. This requires actually sitting down together and thinking through the changes and steps needed to be successful. First, we ask, what change do we want to make? Actually write down the what and the why. Then ask, who needs to be involved in this decision? Gather the people involved. Next ask, how can we work this out and implement it in the easiest and most positive manner. In the next step, think about who will be affected. Who will find this a positive and who will find this undesirable? Talk to the people requesting this change or that it will benefit. Help them to understand why others might resist. Actually make a list of names who will be unhappy with this change. Visit them. Share the reason for the change. Ask for input and truly listen, even if their objections or thoughts will not change the final action. Let everyone be heard. Look for alternate solutions. Do not be surprised if a viable option appears that was not discovered in the earlier planning sessions. In the gathered community new thoughts and ideas can appear.

Then it is time to make a decision. It is best if the community's leadership is onboard and ready to present a positive team front. Take time to educate as the plan is shared. Share the why and the how. Think about the presentation of the change. Does this affect the entire congregation or the education teams? How will we share this change, and help everyone to understand why this decision was made and who it benefits. Present it as a celebration of hospitality or improvement. Have someone who will benefit be present to share his or her perspective. Make it about people, not things, and resistance tends to ebb (though it may be slow).

Have a trial period established. Share a timeline for re-evaluation. It is always helpful to be somewhat open-ended and allow people to feel there is a chance for another decision in the future. Quite often, as people become used to the change that was made, the evaluation shows that most are accepting of that change and may even be enthusiastic about the direction it has taken the congregation. It must be remembered that all need to tread lightly.

Harder are people's opinions regarding behavior. While many understand that an adult may need to walk around at times during worship, there will be others who find this terribly distracting. Some understand the fidgets while others frown. This is similar to the debate over babies and young children in worship- some welcome the occasional cries and babbling as the sound of the next generation; others want noisy children removed and even kept in a nursery or a special room that allows parents to participate while keeping their children segregated. Neither is right or wrong. Two worship services in the same morning with one designated as the 'quieter' serve and one as the family service can solve the issue of the noise of children. Sometimes, everyone has to give a little and be reminded worship services are for everyone, all ages, all walks of life and this will always be a place of compromise. It is hard to please everyone but if

effort is made to acknowledge everyone's feelings, comfortable and uncomfortable, frustrations and successes, there are more wins than losses.

Before ending a discussion on welcoming individuals on the spectrum, it must be addressed that there are some on the spectrum who are severely affected by autism. This would be the Level Three individuals. Individuals who are severely affected by other developmental issues or mental health issues may be part of the worshipping community. This study notes and recommends that volunteers who are not professionally trained in these disorders or needs not be placed in positions of leadership, pastoral care or as ministers of programs that will result in frustration, a sense of failure or even fear. Parents of children with severe difficulty will most likely not expect accommodations for their child without assistance. The parents (or professional aide) can be encouraged to join in the class, choir or other activity so that the child may be welcome to participate with skilled help available to make the involvement a success for all involved. If the community is in a location (such as near a school or hospital that specializes in this profession) that may attract a number of children or adults with serious needs, they might wish to hire some professionals (teachers or trained aides) to work in that ministry at times of worship or program activities. This could create an excellent way to safeguard all involved and provide incredible hospitality to those in need of being part of a worshipping community. At no time should a volunteer be placed in a position in which they are uncomfortable or concerned.

Appendix 1 Discussion Participant Guide



*Reaching out
and
making room in
our
worshipping
communities
for
those on the
Autism
Spectrum*

Participant Copy

Forward

Thank you for undertaking this discussion on welcoming people of all ages who live with Autism Spectrum Disorder into your religious community. Thank you for taking the time to learn the facts on this disorder, and understand the benefit to everyone, you and those on the spectrum, to sharing worship space and experiences. Many with family members on the spectrum will not and do not come to worship, fearing judgments on their loved one's behavior, and their special needs. With education and expanded expectations, all can worship together and benefit each other in shared gifts and talents.

This project was put together by a priest, not an expert in the field. I became concerned with the absence of this population in my churches and throughout other congregations of all denominations and traditions. This material was carefully vetted to be factual and I hope, helpful. You may find some changes may need to be made for our friends on the spectrum, and your own expectations of worship may shift a little, but our ultimate goal is to expand the reach of God's love to all and together, we can reach out a little further.

Discussion One: The importance of reaching out and embracing the other; facing our prejudices and myths

Hospitality: How do you define hospitality?

Definition of Hospitality in Merriam-Webster Dictionary online

1: hospitable treatment, reception, or disposition

When looking around at your congregation, does true hospitality exist?
Hospitality is more than a warm welcome, though that is the beginning.

Definition of Hospitable

1 a: given to generous and cordial reception of guests;

Who is welcome at your church/temple/mosque? Are there people who might be made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable? Discuss.

b: promising or suggesting generous and friendly welcome

What is a friendly welcome?

c: offering a pleasant or sustaining environment

One thing we will look at is the environment, physical and social. When we open our doors and arms to receive others, we must be prepared to give them a healthy place. What needs do we need to meet?

2: readily receptive:

Are the members of your congregation ready? A portion of this training is to give honest information on what behaviors might be encountered and have a chance to talk about the impact of personal and corporate worship.

First Discussion: A Theological look at Hospitality

The roots of hospitality run deep, and not just through Christian teaching. It is essential in the Jewish scriptures, as well as prevalent in other traditions.

Has the story reached you of the honored guests of Abraham?

Behold, they entered his presence and said: "Peace!" He said: "Peace!" (and thought: "They seem) unusual people." Then he turned quickly to his household, brought out a roasted fattened calf, and placed it before them. He said: "Will you not eat?" (Quran 51: 24-27)

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' (NRSV Bible, Genesis 18.1-8)

This is one of our early stories, and emphasizes hospitality

For discussion: the Lord was with Abraham and Abraham left Him and went to tend the strangers. To make people feel truly welcome, we may have to sacrifice some of our worship time, (think nursery or Christian Education) or step out of our comfort zone.

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. (NRSV Bible, 1 Peter 4.8-9)

How to love? Sacrificial hospitality might be needed at times.

"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (NRSV Bible, Leviticus 19:33–34)

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (NRSV Bible, Hebrews 13:16)

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (NRSV Bible, Galatians 6:10)

"You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (NRSV Bible, Exodus 22.21)

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'*¹⁹

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (NRSV Bible, Hebrews 13.1-2)

A Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reminds us of the fact that being Christian requires community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer". Greater hospitality to all individuals is a source of joy and growth to all who are gathered.

Another theologian, Henri Nouwen, writing in *Reaching Out*, defines our roles as hospitable hosts is to "plow the field, to cut the weeds and to clip the branches" in order to make the path to meet Jesus clear and safe.

¹⁹ Matthew 19.13-14, NRSV.

Second Discussion The characteristics of my worship

There is no right or wrong. To grow in understanding, we must look at what obstacles we may have to deal with in ourselves and in others.

In worship:

- A I prefer Quiet I can tolerate a little noise
 I'm not distracted by others Children can be a distraction
- B I believe children _____
- C I need strong lighting
- D The organ never bothers me
 The music can be too loud at times
 I prefer a spoken service only
- E Children should be removed from the service if noisy
 Noisy children are to be celebrated and welcomed
 I can deal with a little noise from children
- G I am easily annoyed when _____
- H A visitor might encounter _____
- I When passing the peace, we _____
- J We expect visitors to _____
- K Please share what is important to you at worship, what you 'need' to invoke
 the holy and what causes might cause you discomfort at worship.

It is important that we are able to share honestly without judgement. It is helpful to not only clarify what you like or need in worship, but to help understand other's needs and concerns.

Third Discussion What is the Autism Spectrum Disorder and how does it affect people?

The population of children on the Autism Spectrum is showing growth in many countries, including the United States. From the group Autism Speaks and the Center For Disease Control statistics, it is possible to see this increase. The numbers we have reveal that in the year 2000, there were one in 150 diagnosed children, and in March of 2020, one in 54 (Autism Speaks 2020)²⁰. Additionally, Autism Speaks states that approximately 70,700 to 116,000 children on the spectrum will enter adulthood, and 50,000 young adult on the spectrum graduate high school each year. Worshipping congregations, and the world, needs to be educated and prepared for a world of neuro- different people.

Definition of Autism:

Today, many definitions of Autism or the Autism Spectrum exist, yet this one by a counselor, teacher and engaged hands on director, Alan Yau, is helpful especially for those who are trying to understand and engage with individuals on the spectrum. “Autism is a life-long disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and to make sense of our social world.”²¹

One can not write an easy definition of autism as it manifests differently in each individual. Each child and adult has varying degrees of different symptoms or characteristics. Some individuals on the spectrum function so well an outsider would not realize their diagnosis. Some struggle a little more, and their struggles and characteristics may be more obvious. An interesting new development of this period of time is that adults who struggles with social interactions and other issues are being diagnosed later in life as being on the spectrum. Therefore, from newly diagnosed toddlers to senior citizens, many are coming to understand this disorder, how it affects them, and their families and friends learn about life with someone on the spectrum. Additionally, the autism spectrum is now a preferred term tot any single syndrome. The spectrum has absorbed such other conditions as Asperger’s and is a broad reaching umbrella.

²⁰ Autism Speaks, “Autism Statistics and Facts”, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics>.

²¹ (Yau 2012)

This is an abbreviated list of some characteristic that one might see in someone on the Autism Spectrum:

- a struggle to read body language and facial expressions
- problems in engaging conversation
- an honest disinterest in other's interests or opinions
- regular interruptions occur in discussions
- being corrected in an insulting way by due to an honestly high intelligence, but lack of tact
- nonverbal individuals
- short attention spans, may need to use fidget gadgets to assist with focus
- hypersensitivity to noises, smells, touches by other people and aversions to certain textures
- some may not be able to filter out background noises, and in loud situations, may need to run away or they might shut down due to over stimulation
- sensory processing difficulties, which can lead to strange behaviors and judgements on actions taken to protect themselves
- inability to control their own emotions, and could suddenly shut down, explode or get anxious and rigid
- may need quiet times and space to gather themselves, or need to leave a situation
- may struggle to communicate easily or effectively, which can magnify into a misunderstanding
- Struggle to understand unwritten rules of conversation (give and take) and in relationships

- An honest insensitivity to other's interests or feelings and may blurt out remarks which can be hurtful
- May ignore other's interests or opinions, and may think they are always correct
- May speak out of turn, ignoring another's time to speak
- May exhibit signs of obsessive compulsive disorder
- High intelligence, often greater than the general population, which might be missed due to other traits that may seem to indicate low intelligence (communication issues, for example)
- May struggle to sit still, or need to sit or stay in one particular place- this is often perceived as poor behavior or disrespect
- The world is perceived as literal and concrete, so innuendos, idioms and slang terms are often lost
- Note: most people have one or more of these traits; remember, autism is a spectrum on which many people reside

It is important, as with all people, to look past differences and even annoying characteristics to know and appreciate the individual. Remember, though it may not always appear to be a fact, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder do genuinely desire relationships and friendships; they simply struggle to make these bonds and to maintain them.

This is how people on the spectrum are, to one degree or another, and truthfully, we all have some of these traits ourselves. What is needed is acceptance and genuine and honest hospitality.

Fourth Discussion How the church can be part of the autistic community, and how the autistic community can benefit the church

List the ministries of your worshiping community

Ministries of worship (music, readers, etc.)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List the other ministries of your community or in which the group participates

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

First, as with all people, those on the spectrum need to feel needed

Next, the community can be part of the intervention team with offering and encouraging involvement in all ministries, each according to interest and gifts/ talents.

Beyond simply being hospitable, offering and encouraging participation can be beneficial.

For example: team ministry encourages interactions with someone who understands this might be difficult or remembers their partner is on a learning curve

Music has been shown to assist in communication and many on the spectrum have special talents of music-

If there a special talents that might be needed. Then think of all of the members of your congregation. For example, we gift wrap at Christmas. Someone with a need to be precise might enjoy wrapping (and may put others to shame).

Many adults on the spectrum are seeking job skills. Interaction with congregation members may help with interview skills, and a new ministry could develop- mentors to young adults and all ages as they navigate what presents as a confusing world.

Involvement in a worshipping community may not only enhance the confidence and abilities of those on the spectrum, may allow those outside of this community to see the value and ability of our brothers and sisters on the spectrum. It may lead to a stronger resume!

In the religious and spiritual world, these concrete thinkers need extra support navigating an unseen spiritual life, worshipping unseen figures. Involvement in teaching children's classes, for example, may assist with comprehension as lessons are prepared.

Pastoral Considerations

Charity is a hand in hand tradition with hospitality. We care for those in need. The same needs to be true for those on the spectrum and their families. For many years, the focus of the Autism Spectrum was on children. Early diagnosis and intervention was in the forefront as the children aged into school. We still need to support parents, and offer them pastoral care. There are times that are more difficult for families- greater tension at the start of the school year, when faced with a major change like a move or a death; these occurrences can affect those on the spectrum much harder than a neuro-typical person.

What might your community offer in the way of pastoral support for these families, both parents and siblings, children and spouses?

Now, we have young adults who grew up on the spectrum, trying to figure out this world. There is a need for a community that understands and embraces these individual as they struggle, as most young adults do, as they leave the house, find work, set up independent living, and seek relationships,, romantic and friendships. Individuals on the spectrum do get married have children, and then their families need support as they love their family member, but have special needs for community support themselves. If your dad (far more males are affected by this disorder) is on the spectrum, there may be times when autism makes life harder, when your friends don't understand your parent's issues, or their inability to communicate easily.

What might your community offer in the way of pastoral support for these adults, families, both parents and siblings, children and spouses?

Knowing that sensory processing might be quite different, take a look at your buildings. Florescent lights are a problem for many with autism disorder, hyperactivity, migraines and other light sensitive issues. Do lights flicker, or are they extremely bright?

Is the music at a good level for all members of your community? Is there a place in your main worship space and in the classrooms where a person on the spectrum could be apart from others? Is there a way to set apart a corner with a soft pillow, fidget gadgets and other tools?

What might your community do to accommodate people on the spectrum, much as we added ramps and elevators for those with physical needs? What other concerns do you think might need to be addressed to increase hospitality to all people?

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Nouwen, Henri J.M., , 1986. Reaching Out, New York: Doubleday.

2020. Autism Speaks. Accessed October 20, 2020.
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics>.

For further reading on Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism, A Practical Guide for Parents, written by Alan Yau, is a basic introduction to life with an autistic child. An excellent resource for exploring autism further, and to give to people who have recently had a loved one diagnosed.

Understanding Autism in Adults and Aging Adults, written by Theresa M. Reagan, is a deeper look at this new phenomenon in our culture and offers approaches for those living with an adult on the spectrum, or wanting to be involved with ministry to them.

For children living with a parent on the spectrum

Growing Together Across the Autism Spectrum, by Elizabeth Marks, is a good resource for those ministering to children of autistic parents, and a good resource book to provide to those families.

General

Autism Spectrum Disorder, The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism, by Chantal Sicile-Kira, is a good manual for those looking for a more thorough understanding of the Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Children's books:

What it is to Be Me! Written by Angela Wine

Ina's Walk. Written by Laurie Lears

In Jesse's Shoes, Appreciating Kids with Special Needs, written by Beverly Lewis

Inside Asperger's Looking Out, by Kathy Hoopman

My Friend has Autism by Amanda Doering Tourville

Appendix 2: Discussion Moderator's Guide



*Reaching out
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This project was put together by a priest, not an expert in the field. I became concerned with the absence of this population in my churches and throughout other congregations of all denominations and traditions. This material was carefully vetted to be factual and I hope, helpful. You may find some changes may need to be made for our friends on the spectrum, and your own expectations of worship may shift a little, but our ultimate goal is to expand the reach of God's love to all and together, we can reach out a little further.

Thank you for being the moderator of this discussion series. The discussions are might to spark interest and invite exploration of hospitality to those who live on the Autism Spectrum. There are a few additional notes in this guide, printed in red that might assist with directing further discussion.

Discussion One: The importance of reaching out and embracing the other; facing our prejudices and myths

Hospitality: How do you define hospitality?

Definition of Hospitality in Merriam-Webster Dictionary

1: hospitable treatment, reception, or disposition

When looking around at your congregation, does true hospitality exist?
Hospitality is more than a warm welcome, though that is the beginning.

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Who is welcome at your church/temple/mosque? Are there people who might be made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable? Discuss.

b: promising or suggesting generous and friendly welcome

What is a friendly welcome?

c: offering a pleasant or sustaining environment

One thing we will look at is the environment, physical and social. When we open our doors and arms to receive others, we must be prepared to give them a healthy place. What needs do we need to meet? *Many of us have dealt with this with regard to physical limitations and have worked to remove some physical barriers for mobility, but what about other barriers? Entertain a discussion as to what barriers might be present to friends on the spectrum and those with other needs.*

2: readily receptive:

Are the members of your congregation ready? A portion of this training is to give honest information on what behaviors might be encountered and have a chance to talk about the impact of personal and corporate worship.

First Discussion: A Theological look at Hospitality

The roots of hospitality run deep, and not just through Christian teaching. It is essential in the Jewish scriptures, as well as prevalent in other traditions. We will look at different traditions and some of their teachings on hospitality. Please adjust the discussion to best fit your group.

Has the story reached you of the honored guests of Abraham?

Behold, they entered his presence and said: "Peace!" He said: "Peace!" (and thought: "They seem) unusual people." Then he turned quickly to his household, brought out a roasted fattened calf, and placed it before them. He said: "Will you not eat?" (Quran 51: 24-27)

The patriarch Abraham and this story of hospitality is found in all three traditions: Christian, Islamic and Jewish. All three traditions use Abraham's story in their teachings on hospitality. Entertain what this shared story means to the truth of hospitality and our commonality.

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' (Genesis 18.1-8)

This is one of our early stories, and emphasizes hospitality

For discussion: the Lord was with Abraham and Abraham left Him and went to tend the strangers. To make people feel truly welcome, we may have to sacrifice some of our worship time, (think nursery or Christian Education) or steep out of our comfort zone.

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. (1 Peter 4.8-9)

How to love? Sacrificial hospitality might be needed at times.

"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:33–34)

Strangers are not only those from another land. Who might we find to be strangers to be in our church, community and families?

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (**Hebrews 13:16**)* Including sharing our worship space and expectations- which will be covered in greater detail in another discussion.

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (**Galatians 6:10**)* In what ways do we do good? In what ways might we, unintentionally, do harm?

“You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22.21) At times, we are all strangers, even in our own land.

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’ (Matthew 19.13-14) We are all children of God. When others feel they are not welcomed or understood, it is painful to them.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13.1-2)
Strangers are not just those from far away lands, just those who are not like us.

A Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reminds us of the fact that being Christian requires community. In fact, Christianity can hardly thrive without a strong and authentic community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer”. Greater hospitality to all individuals is a source of joy and growth to all who are gathered.

Henri Nouwen, writing in *Reaching Out*, defines our roles as hospitable hosts is to “plow the field, to cut the weeds and to clip the branches” in order to make the path to meet Jesus clear and safe. We can easily substitute God or Allah for Jesus, or better yet, include YHWH, Allah, God and Jesus so as to expand our thinking of hospitality. Our ignorance of how to best prepare the field makes this task difficult. As community, we are to take the time and make the effort to create a safe and nurturing space for all people. In the book of Isaiah, the fourth verse of chapter four calls us to lift up the valleys, lower the hills and mountains and make the ground even. It is, indeed, a very sad time when the parish and its people prove to be the obstacles. However, knowledge and love are the very tools to remove barriers to Christian community.

Second Discussion The characteristics of my worship

There is no right or wrong. To grow in understanding, we must look at what obstacles we may have to deal with in ourselves and in others. The hope here is for people to examine their personal ideas of what is required for meaningful worship, and begin the thought process of how they might be able to adapt to be more inclusionary of people on the spectrum. This should bring about a lively discussion.

In worship:

- A I prefer Quiet I can tolerate a little noise
 I'm not distracted by others Children can be a distraction
- B I believe children _____
- C I need strong lighting
- D The organ never bothers me
 The music can be too loud at times
 I prefer a spoken service only
- E Children should be removed from the service if noisy
 Noisy children are to be celebrated and welcomed
 I can deal with a little noise from children
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- K Please share what is important to you at worship, what you 'need' to invoke the holy
 and what causes might cause you discomfort at worship.

It is important that we are able to share honestly without judgement. It is helpful to not only clarify what you like or need in worship, but to help understand other's needs and concerns.

Third Discussion

What is the Autism Spectrum Disorder and how does it affect people?

The population of children on the Autism Spectrum is showing growth in many countries, including the United States. From the group Autism Speaks and the Center For Disease Control statistics, it is possible to see this increase. The numbers we have reveal that in the year 2000, there were one in 150 diagnosed children, and in March of 2020, one in 54 (Autism Speaks 2020). Additionally, Autism Speaks states that approximately 70,700 to 116,000 children on the spectrum will enter adulthood, and 50,000 young adult on the spectrum graduate high school each year. Worshipping congregations, and the world, needs to be educated and prepared for a world of neuro- different people.

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Today, many definitions of Autism or the Autism Spectrum exist, yet this one by a counselor, teacher and engaged hands on director, Alan Yau, is helpful especially for those who are trying to understand and engage with individuals on the spectrum. “Autism is a life-long disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate and to make sense of our social world.”²²

One can not write an easy definition of autism as it manifests differently in each individual. Each child and adult has varying degrees of different symptoms or characteristics. Some individuals on the spectrum function so well an outsider would not realize their diagnosis. Some struggle a little more, and their struggles and characteristics may be more obvious. An interesting new development of this period of time is that adults who struggles with social interactions and other issues are being diagnosed later in life as being on the spectrum. Therefore, from newly diagnosed toddlers to senior citizens, many are coming to understand this disorder, how it affects them, and their families and friends learn about life with someone on the spectrum. Additionally, the autism spectrum is now a preferred term tot any single syndrome. The spectrum has absorbed such other conditions as Asperger’s and is a broad reaching umbrella.

²² (Yau 2012)

This is an abbreviated list of some characteristic that one might see in someone on the Autism Spectrum: allow some discussion and anecdotes as the list is read. Perhaps have people take turns reading a characteristic from the list and allow time to share.

- a struggle to read body language and facial expressions
- problems in engaging conversation
- an honest disinterest in other's interests or opinions
- regular interruptions occur in discussions
- being corrected in an insulting way by an honest intelligence
- nonverbal individuals
- short attention spans, may need to use fidget gadgets to assist with focus
- hypersensitivity to noises, smells, touches by other people and aversions to certain textures
- some may not be able to filter out background noises, and in loud situations, may need to run away or they might shut down due to over stimulation
- sensory processing difficulties, which can lead to strange behaviors and judgements on actions taken to protect themselves
- inability to control their own emotions, and could suddenly shut down, explode or get anxious and rigid
- May need quiet times and space to gather themselves, or need to leave a situation
- may struggle to communicate easily or effectively, which can magnify into a misunderstanding
- Struggle to understand unwritten rules of conversation (give and take) and in relationships

- An honest insensitivity to other's interests or feelings and may blurt out remarks which can be hurtful
- May ignore other's interests or opinions, and may think they are always correct
- May speak out of turn, ignoring another's time to speak
- May exhibit signs of obsessive compulsive disorder
- High intelligence, often greater than the general population, which might be missed due to other traits that may seem to indicate low intelligence (communication issues, for example)
- May struggle to sit still, or need to sit or stay in one particular place- this is often perceived as poor behavior or disrespect
- The world is perceived as literal and concrete, so innuendos, idioms and slang terms are often lost
- Note: most people have one or more of these traits; remember, autism is a spectrum on which many people reside

Note: at this point in the discussion, one or more people may recognize traits in themselves or a loved one. This can be startling, and can end with a positive or negative perception with this new understanding. Support anyone that appears to be confused or scared, and please do refer them to a professional.

It is important, as with all people, to look past differences and even annoying characteristics to know and appreciate the individual. Remember, though it may not always appear to be a fact, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder do genuinely desire relationships and friendships; they simply struggle to make these bonds and to maintain them.

This is how people on the spectrum are, to one degree or another, and truthfully, we all have some of these traits ourselves. What is needed is acceptance and genuine and honest hospitality.

Finally, the truth of ASD individuals is that they live and work in a very concrete world. Spiritually, worship, the presence of unseen and untouchable beings- these concepts can be

extremely difficult for ASD (and many other) individuals. Celebration of their very presence in a church or temple is cause for joy, seeds are planted and God has some soil on which to work. Every person in the world has their own gifts, struggles and deserves to be loved and accepted as they are.

At this point, it is a great time to have someone read aloud some of the children's books suggested in the bibliography. They offer remarkable insight into life on the spectrum in a unique and touching way. New books are available all the time, and easily found on Amazon or at your local bookstore.

Fourth Discussion How the church can be part of the autistic community, and how the autistic community can benefit the church

List the ministries of your worshiping community

Ministries of worship (music, readers, etc.)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List the other ministries of your community or in which the group participates

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

First, as with all people, those on the spectrum need to feel needed

Next, the community can be part of the intervention team with offering and encouraging involvement in all ministries, each according to interest and gifts/ talents.

Beyond simply being hospitable, offering and encouraging participation can be beneficial.

For example: team ministry encourages interactions with someone who understands this might be difficult or remembers their partner is on a learning curve

Music has been shown to assist in communication and many on the spectrum have special talents of music-

If there a special talents that might be needed. Then think of all of the members of your congregation. For example, we gift wrap at Christmas. Someone with a need to be precise might enjoy wrapping (and may put others to shame).

Many adults on the spectrum are seeking job skills. Interaction with congregation members may help with interview skills, and a new ministry could develop- mentors to young adults and all ages as they navigate what presents as a confusing world.

Involvement in a worshipping community may not only enhance the confidence and abilities of those on the spectrum, may allow those outside of this community to see the value and ability of our brothers and sisters on the spectrum. It may lead to a stronger resume!

In the religious and spiritual world, these concrete thinkers need extra support navigating an unseen spiritual life, worshipping unseen figures. Involvement in teaching children's classes, for example, may assist with comprehension as lessons are prepared.

As we have discussed, this population is missing in church. The unspoken practices are confusing- even for neuro-typical visitors! We are called to celebration the very presence of a truly diverse congregation, each person in the gathering brings joy, presence allows seeds of belief to be planted, and nourishment as belief and participation grow. Every person in the world has their own gifts, struggles and deserves to be loved and accepted as they are, and to be supported as they participate in the community.

Pastoral Considerations

Charity is a hand in hand tradition with hospitality. We care for those in need. The same needs to be true for those on the spectrum and their families. For many years, the focus of the Autism Spectrum was on children. Early diagnosis and intervention was in the forefront as the children aged into school. We still need to support parents, and offer them pastoral care. There are times that are more difficult for families- greater tension at the start of the school year, when faced with a major change like a move or a death; these occurrences can affect those on the spectrum much harder than a neuro-typical person.

What might your community offer in the way of pastoral support for these families, both parents and siblings, children and spouses?

Now, we have young adults who grew up on the spectrum, trying to figure out this world. There is a need for a community that understands and embraces these individual as they struggle, as most young adults do, as they leave the house, find work, set up independent living, and seek relationships,, romantic and friendships. Individuals on the spectrum do get

married have children, and then their families need support as they love their family member, but have special needs for community support themselves. If your dad (far more males are affected by this disorder) is on the spectrum, there may be times when autism makes life harder, when your friends don't understand your parent's issues, or their inability to communicate easily.

What might your community offer in the way of pastoral support for these adults, families, both parents and siblings, children and spouses?

Knowing that sensory processing might be quite different, take a look at your buildings. Florescent lights are a problem for many with autism disorder, hyperactivity, migraines and other light sensitive issues. Do lights flicker, or are they extremely bright?

Is the music at a good level for all members of your community? Is there a place in your main worship space and in the classrooms where a person on the spectrum could be apart from others? Is there a way to set apart a corner with a soft pillow, fidget gadgets and other tools?

What might your community do to accommodate people on the spectrum, much as we added ramps and elevators for those with physical needs? What other concerns do you think might need to be addressed to increase hospitality to all people?

Please Note:

Before ending a discussion on welcoming individuals on the spectrum, it must be addressed that there are some on the spectrum who are severely affected by autism. This would be the Level Three individuals. Individuals who are severely affected by other developmental issues or mental health issues may be part of the worshipping community. This study notes and recommends that volunteers who are not professionally trained in these disorders or needs not be placed in positions of leadership, pastoral care or as ministers of programs that will result in frustration, a sense of failure or even fear. Parents of children with severe difficulty will most likely not expect accommodations for their child without assistance. The parents (or professional aide) can be encouraged to join in the class, choir or other activity so that the child may be welcome to participate with skilled help available to make the involvement a success for all involved. If the community is in a location (near a school or hospital that specializes in this profession) that may attract children or adults with serious needs, they might wish to hire some professionals (teachers or trained aide) to work in that ministry at times of worship or program activities. This could create an excellent way to safeguard all involved and provide incredible hospitality to those in need of being part of a worshipping community. At no time should a volunteer be placed in a position in which they are uncomfortable or concerned.

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For further reading on Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism, A Practical Guide for Parents, written by Alan Yau, is a basic introduction to life with an autistic child. An excellent resource for exploring autism further, and to give to people who have recently had a loved one diagnosed.

Understanding Autism in Adults and Aging Adults, written by Theresa M. Reagan, is a deeper look at this new phenomenon in our culture and offers approaches for those living with an adult on the spectrum, or wanting to be involved with ministry to them.

For children living with a parent on the spectrum

Growing Together Across the Autism Spectrum, by Elizabeth Marks, is a good resource for those ministering to children of autistic parents, and a good resource book to provide to those families.

General

Autism Spectrum Disorder, The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism, by Chantal Sicile-Kira, is a good manual for those looking for a more thorough understanding of the Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Children's books:

What it is to Be Me! Written by Angela Wine

Ian's Walk. Written by Laurie Lears

In Jesse's Shoes, Appreciating Kids with Special Needs, written by Beverly Lewis

Inside Asperger's Looking Out, by Kathy Hoopman

My Friend has Autism by Amanda Doering Tourville

Appendix 3: Volunteer/ teacher guide

Helpful hints for religious instructors and all those who work with individuals on the Autism Spectrum

First: knowledge of some common characteristics you might encounter is beneficial. The following list, while not exhaustive, shares some of the situations and/or behaviors you might see in the classroom or group setting.

- a struggle to read body language and facial expressions
- problems in engaging conversation
- an honest disinterest in other's interests or opinions
- regular interruptions occur in discussions
- being corrected in an insulting way by due to an honestly high intelligence, but lack of tact
- nonverbal individuals
- short attention spans, may need to use fidget gadgets to assist with focus
- hypersensitivity to noises, smells, touches by other people and aversions to certain textures
- some may not be able to filter out background noises, and in loud situations, may need to run away or they might shut down due to over stimulation
- sensory processing difficulties, which can lead to strange behaviors and judgements on actions taken to protect themselves
- inability to control their own emotions, and could suddenly shut down, explode or get anxious and rigid
- may need quiet times and space to gather themselves, or need to leave a situation
- may struggle to communicate easily or effectively, which can magnify into a misunderstanding
- Struggle to understand unwritten rules of conversation (give and take) and in relationships

- An honest insensitivity to other's interests or feelings and may blurt out remarks which can be hurtful
- May ignore other's interests or opinions, and may think they are always correct
- May speak out of turn, ignoring another's time to speak
- May exhibit signs of obsessive compulsive disorder
- High intelligence, often greater than the general population, which might be missed due to other traits that may seem to indicate low intelligence (communication issues, for example)
- May struggle to sit still, or need to sit or stay in one particular place- this is often perceived as poor behavior or disrespect
- The world is perceived as literal and concrete, so innuendos, idioms and slang terms are often lost

Note: most people have one or more of these traits; remember autism is a spectrum on which many people reside. Truthfully, when one understands that this disorder is a spectrum, you can find many people reside on the spectrum to varying degrees, and some of these behaviors are common to all children.

There are some techniques that have been developed to aid in your students/ participant being successful in the classroom or group setting. I found that most of these techniques improve ministry with many ages, such as the need for clarity and organization, displayed schedules and well laid out expectations and consequences. Please note that it is important that all the participants in the class be given a general idea of what Autism is, and what behavior might be witnessed. It is also important they understand it is simply the way Autistic brains are wired and is not wrong or weird- Just different. **Spend time with the parent or family member of the person on the Spectrum- this is where the best source of information on how to be successful with this person will originate.**

First: the environment. It may be that our traditional ideas of classrooms are not only counterproductive to children (and adults) on the Spectrum, but for all participants.

1. Lighting- many individuals with Autism struggle with extreme sensory stimulation. Fluorescent and overhead lighting is not recommended; perhaps a few table lamps or the natural light from a window is a better idea. Indeed, it has been found that fluorescent lighting increases attention deficit and restlessness in all children, and it is no longer recommended for schools.
2. Paint colors: yes, this can make a difference for all people. Calming colors work better in classrooms, though one might be tempted to go for bright and fun colors. A muted wall color inspires calm participation. Soft yellow or blue are good choices.
3. Fidget gadgets/ stress relievers- many children have trouble being still; having a small gadget (think fidget spinner) can bring calm. There are many items on the market that are available for purchase, and a basket of those both in groups settings and worship can aid in all children being able to squirm and fidget less.
4. Seating- it is a bonus if you can offer different seating options. Hard chairs or seating with rougher textures might cause an issue. Some people on the spectrum might prefer to participate seated away from the crowd by themselves, maybe even in a corner with pillows or a beanbag chair. Some school rooms are now offering exercise balls or chairs that bounce and allow movement are improving attention spans and accommodating children's natural needs to wiggle. Standing desks are coming into favor. Can your tables be raised to allow some to stand?
5. Signage- teachers and leaders often have equipment and activities that are only to be used at certain times (for example, art supplies) or are for teacher's use only (a marker board). Crafting a sign with a 'no' icon, or a friendly 'hands off' removes the need to continually redirect students away from those activities until permission is given. Some classes even use sheets or large pieces of fabric hanging from the shelves to visually block off items not in use.

6. Schedules- routine is a critical component of comfort, not only for those on the Spectrum but for many people. Having a simple schedule posted, (for younger children one could use pictures that show the order of activities) will be a positive step toward welcoming the autistic. It is helpful that any changes to the schedule or routine is explained as far in advance as possible, and as often as possible.
7. Consistency- consistency is critical. The same consequences, the same routine, using the same schedule as much as possible, and having consistent staff, at last one adult who is weekly, these are elements of success in settings for all children, especially for those on the Spectrum.
8. Sound- often a noisy environment overwhelms a person on the spectrum. Both background noise and classroom activities might need to be muted or kept at a lower volume.
9. Interruptions- as a lesson is being taught or activities begin, someone on the Spectrum may interrupt to correct the instructor, or correct others involved in an activity. This is normal and try not to consider it as rude or disrespectful. Try to quietly remind the person to try to not speak out of turn, but realize this is just a normal response from the autistic.
10. You may find the Autistic person is more successful drawing or writing responses to discussions or question than trying to verbalize their answers.
11. As much as it appears the Autistic person does not want to be involved, or associate with others, that is most likely not true. They just struggle with how to accomplish this so it is important to help them with relationships and even with the group as a whole.
12. Autistic people may have a fixation on a topic or object. It is best to try to use that when creating a lesson for that individual. For example- if a child is obsessed with trains, we might entertain what trains a religious leader, ay, Jesus, might have taken and where He would have traveled. Could the stories from scripture have occurred at a train depot? It teaches without a battle with the child to 'focus' or leave behind his thought proves. It can be a fun exercise for everyone in the class.

13. If you are getting a new person into the class or ministry, they might be very nervous and stressed. Providing a time to meet with the individual before they visit the class can be very beneficial. Allow exploration, questions and share as much as possible with them to ease fears.

Before ending a discussion on welcoming individuals on the spectrum, it must be addressed that there are some on the spectrum who are severely affected by autism. This would be the Level Three individuals. Individuals who are severely affected by other developmental issues or mental health issues may be part of the worshipping community. This study notes and recommends that volunteers who are not professionally trained in these disorders or needs not be placed in positions of leadership, pastoral care or as ministers of programs that will result in frustration, a sense of failure or even fear. Parents of children with severe difficulty will most likely not expect accommodations for their child without assistance. The parents (or professional aide) can be encouraged to join in the class, choir or other activity so that the child may be welcome to participate with skilled help available to make the involvement a success for all involved. If the community is in a location (near a school or hospital that specializes in this profession) that may attract children or adults with serious needs, they might wish to hire some professionals (teachers or trained aide) to work in that ministry at times of worship or program activities. This could create an excellent way to safeguard all involved and provide incredible hospitality to those in need of being part of a worshipping community. At no time should a volunteer be placed in a position in which they are uncomfortable or concerned.

Resources for further information:

You're Going to Love This Kid!

Authored by Paula Kluth.

This book is filled with information and tips on working in an inclusive classroom, and even includes a "Comfortable Classroom" checklist.

101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's, and Sensory Processing Disorders.

Authored by Taya Delaney

The games and activities in this book are applicable to all teachers and counselors.

How to set up a Classrooms for Students with Autism

Authored by S. B. Linton

A good source for someone interested in offering a positive environment.

Appendix Four

For volunteers with Children:

These strategies offered are helpful for working with all children, not just those on the spectrum. For specific work with children in a ministry setting, this and another book, 101 Games and Activities with Autism, Asperger's and Sensory Processing Disorders, there are planned out activities that interaction. While they are not specifically planned for religious activities, it is an easy step to adapt these games for teaching scriptures or traditions, much as any religious instructor finds they have to do to have a productive and happy classroom. People Bingo, designed to assist autistic children to pay attention to the traits of a face, can be adapted to use the faces of Bible Characters, improving both communication among the students, while introducing characters that are important to know as one studies their faith traditions. A worshipping community working with children would do well to add these two books to the library of materials given to any volunteer working with children. Indeed, a music minister working with children could use a bingo game to teach the value of musical notes, rests, and even introduce instruments or composers. As said before, the activities and suggestions for classroom management will benefit anyone working with young people in any ministry that involves young people.

Classroom management goes beyond tips to furnish and arrange a classroom to encourage success and eliminate problems with children on the spectrum and all children who might be distracted by other games or toys on shelves for use at another time, or prevent invasion of personal space or personal items of each child. Covering the toys shelves with a sheet during story time, for instance, or posting signs of yes and no on group items leads to success in the time spent in the room, with the children. Throughout most of the books introducing the

spectrum or written for parents in learning about how to be successful in their home, tips are embedded. It is a way to build help into chapters that recognize needs and behavioral issues. For example, time and again, one finds the tips to have schedules. Each book read that is not a clinical text will offer positive ideas for improved interactions. These translate to the classroom and the actual worship setting.

Appendix 5: Institutional Change Worksheet

The change being considered: _____

Why: _____

Success will be if: _____

Who needs to be involved with the planning: _____

Gather the people involved.

Start planning: How can we work this out and implement it in the easiest and most positive manner: _____

Who will be affected: _____

Who will find this a positive: _____

Who will be opposed: _____

Why will they be opposed: _____

Actually make a list of names who will be unhappy with this change. Visit them. Share the reason for the change. Ask for input and truly listen, even if their objections or thoughts will not change the final action

Are there are options to achieve the same goal:

How will this be presented to everyone involved: _____

Have a trial period established. _____

Evaluation Share a date for re-evaluation. _____

It is always helpful to be somewhat open-ended and allow people to feel there is a chance for another decision in the future.

Appendix 6: Introducing children to the Autism Spectrum Disorder

Introducing Children and Youth to Autism Disorder:
in preparation for integration in worship, religious education, life

Before this session, please purchase some storybooks written for children to understand their friends on the spectrum. Some suggestions are below, but there are many available. There is also a workbook available if autism strongly impacts your community.

Opening:

Have all the children line up in the middle of the room. Say we are going to see how we are the same and how we are different. Start with simple items:

Do you like Chocolate ice cream to that wall (point out one side of the room)

Or vanilla- point to the opposite wall

Call the group back together in the middle

Pepperoni pizza- again point to one side of the room..... or cheese only, pointing opposite` Call the group back together in the middle

You can continue this game for a while, favorite colors, favorite juice flavor, better at painting or drawing, sports or art, etc.

This can be tailored to the age group as well. With older children and teens, you can begin to mix in some personal traits- like to talk to strangers, or shy with strangers, etc. bringing out introverts and extroverts, people who prefer quiet or always have music playing, and so forth

For younger children: At this point, you can gather the group together and talk about how people are all different but still we all like most things: like ice cream, or pizza, etc. However, we all are different. Some people like to talk, some like to be quiet. We are all created differently and are good at different things. That is what makes the world more fun. It would be boring if we were all just alike. However, everyone wants to be liked and have friends. Isn't this right?

Some people are born different. We see people with crutches or in wheelchairs because their bodies are different. You will probably have to allow some discussion here. Our brains are different, too. The things that makes us who we are or what we are- like a talker or someone who is quiet, or really smart, or really good at art, or someone who has a hard time making friends. There is something called autism that some people were born with and it makes them act differently sometimes.

These are friends who might act different- they have a hard time sitting down in class, or fidget a lot, or maybe talk when they are supposed to be quiet.

Their brain operates differently, not wrong, just different. I want to read you some books that teach us about autism and about these special and important people, so you will be able to understand and be their friends, or maybe their mom or dad has autism and they act a little different.

Depending on the level of maturity in your group, you might introduce some of the specific characteristics and entertain discussion.

For older children

Discuss how people are different and the same. Allow the group to lead the discussion. Most of them have probably heard the term Autism, but may need to be taught about the spectrum and the varying degrees of the characteristics. If they are an open and somewhat close group, ask them to share some of their own habits that others might find annoying or distracting.

Read them the list below of some of the characteristics and allow discussion. They may realize they know people on the spectrum, or parents of their friends who may share some of the characteristics. Remind them of the call to hospitality, and share that some people can't express their need for friendships, everyone wants and needs friends and a safe community. Also, share that many children on the spectrum are bullied and how we must protect all people from ever being bullied. Remind the group the differences between all people make the world interesting. Additionally, differently abled people also have different gifts and talents which the human race needs. You can discuss the intelligence levels and the abilities to see the world differently open up areas of research and discovery.

Finally, you might also read some of the children's storybooks to the older youth- they are remarkably insightful materials and create good understanding of people on the spectrum.

Storybook suggestions:

What it is to Be Me! Written by Angela Wine

Ian's Walk. Written by Laurie Lears

In Jesse's Shoes, Appreciating Kids with Special Needs, written by Beverly Lewis

Inside Asperger's Looking Out, by Kathy Hoopman

My Friend has Autism by Amanda Doering Tourville

The Autism Acceptance Book by Ellen Sabin (hands on workbook)

This is an abbreviated list of some characteristic that one might see in someone on the Autism Spectrum: allow some discussion and anecdotes as the list is read. Perhaps have people take turns reading a characteristic from the list and allow time to share.

- a struggle to read body language and facial expressions
- problems in engaging conversation
- an honest disinterest in other's interests or opinions
- regular interruptions occur in discussions
- being corrected in an insulting way by an honest intelligence
- nonverbal individuals
- short attention spans, may need to use fidget gadgets to assist with focus
- hypersensitivity to noises, smells, touches by other people and aversions to certain textures
- some may not be able to filter out background noises, and in loud situations, may need to run away or they might shut down due to over stimulation
- sensory processing difficulties, which can lead to strange behaviors and judgements on actions taken to protect themselves
- inability to control their own emotions, and could suddenly shut down, explode or get anxious and rigid
- May need quiet times and space to gather themselves, or need to leave a situation
- may struggle to communicate easily or effectively, which can magnify into a misunderstanding
- Struggle to understand unwritten rules of conversation (give and take) and in relationships
- An honest insensitivity to other's interests or feelings and may blurt out remarks which can be hurtful
- May ignore other's interests or opinions, and may think they are always correct
- May speak out of turn, ignoring another's time to speak
- May exhibit signs of obsessive compulsive disorder
- High intelligence, often greater than the general population, which might be missed due to other traits that may seem to indicate low intelligence (communication issues, for example)
- May struggle to sit still, or need to sit or stay in one particular place- this is often perceived as poor behavior or disrespect
- The world is perceived as literal and concrete, so innuendos, idioms and slang terms are often lost
- Note: most people have one or more of these traits; remember, autism is a spectrum on which many people reside

- *Note: at this point in the discussion, one or more people may recognize traits in themselves or a loved one. This can be startling, and can end with a positive or negative perception with this new understanding. Support anyone that appears to be confused or scared, and please do refer him or her to a professional.*

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