Re-imagining church through autism: a Singaporean case study

Armand Léon van Ommen

To cite this article: Armand Léon van Ommen (2022) Re-imagining church through autism: a Singaporean case study, Practical Theology, 15:6, 508-519, DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2022.2080630

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2080630

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 15 Jun 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1560

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Re-imagining church through autism: a Singaporean case study

Armand Léon van Ommen

Department of Divinity and Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, Old Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT
Theological reflection on autism is a fairly recent development, although several practical resources for churches seeking to be inclusive of autistic people have been published since 2011. Even so, the emerging discussion lacks concrete examples and analyses of churches that practice inclusion and belonging. This article fills this gap by describing and analysing a church in Singapore, the Chapel of Christ our Hope, where autistic people are central. Themes that were identified in the fieldwork with this church were their ecclesiology (including a theology of belonging that strongly influences all this church does), the way autism reveals the meaning of liturgy, autistic participation, caring for differing needs, and different views of autism. The case study is not meant as a blueprint for churches to follow, but offers practical-theological insights for churches that want to create places of belonging for autistic and non-autistic people alike.

KEYWORDS
Autism; Chapel of Christ our Hope; liturgy; belonging; autistic participation; ecclesiology

Introduction

Theological reflection on church and autism is a fairly recent development. The first theological publications emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, preceded by some publications on spirituality and autism, and only in the past couple of years has there been an increase in publications (Stillman 2006; the collection of essays edited by Swinton and Trevett 2009; Gillibrand 2010; Bogdashina 2013; Macaskill 2019; Rapley 2021a; Tam 2021; Bowman 2021). Notably, some articles have been published in this journal (Barber 2011; Swinton 2012; Harshaw 2012; Howell 2015; Hills, Clapton, and Dorsett 2019; Burnett 2021; Rapley 2021b).

An in-depth overview of the debates in published scholarship is beyond the scope of this article, not least because they touch on multiple issues. However, one theme to highlight is that many of the above-mentioned publications point to the way that churches (and wider society) can exclude autistic people. At the same time, these publications make it clear that autistic people want to be part of the community and participate in worship. Whilst some publications offer practical suggestions for churches to become a
more inclusive place for autistic people (notably Arnold 2022; Bedard 2017; Memmott 2021; Newman 2011), few (if any) substantial examples exist of churches actually being such places beyond anecdotes and individuals’ stories. This article contributes to the discourse by presenting such an example.

This article presents an analysis of the Chapel of Christ our Hope; a church in Singapore that is centred on autistic people (as distinct from churches that have a special ministry for autistic people), many of whom are non-speaking. To my knowledge, this church is unique in the world because of this focus, and as such can be seen as a case study of what it might look like to be a church where autistic and non-autistic people belong equally, and where decisions are driven by what is in the interest of autistic members. This case study is not meant as a blueprint for all churches to follow, which would not be possible given the uniqueness of each context (in this case: Anglican, Singaporean, embedded in an autism centre, and so on). Nevertheless, as a church that puts into practice their desire to be inclusive of autistic and non-autistic people alike, there will be lessons to learn from the Chapel of Christ our Hope.

Two preliminary comments are required. First, the leadership team of this church in Singapore is the first to admit that they do not ‘get it right’ all the time. This article, therefore, is not meant to sketch an ideal picture of this church.

Second, I will use person-first (‘person with autism’) and identity-first language (‘autistic person’) interchangeably. In the Singaporean church, usually person-first language is used. However, writing from a UK context, I am attuned to the fact that many in the autism communities in the UK prefer identity-first language (Kenny et al. 2016; Botha, Hanlon, and Williams 2021). Using these interchangeably is an attempt to respect both views.

I will first give a short description of the Chapel of Christ our Hope (hereafter CCH), by way of background. Then, this article proceeds by first describing my methodology for researching the CCH, followed by the presentation of the themes that emerged from my analysis. The article concludes by drawing out practical-theological insights for churches that want to be communities of belonging for autistic people.

**Introduction to the Chapel of Christ our Hope**

CCH is part of St. Andrew’s Autism Centre (SAAC). The Centre consists of a school, daycare, a residential home, and in January 2022 another school was opened. SAAC focuses primarily on autistic people who have high support needs, who often have learning disabilities, and many of whom are non-speaking. CCH is on the SAAC school site, in a separate yet connected building. CCH’s chaplains are chaplains for SAAC, which means they are involved with SAAC staff, pupils, and residents on a daily basis. Many of CCH’s members with autism are also pupils in the school, which means that they and their families know the worship space and the chaplains well. CCH had its first worship service on Easter day 2012, a few years after SAAC had opened. Currently, about 130 people attend the services; this includes about 25–30 members with autism. Together with their families, they make up over half of the congregation. CCH is an Anglican congregation (Anglicanism in Singapore leans towards the Evangelical side of the Anglican spectrum), although many members come from other church backgrounds, but have found a welcome in CCH – often for the very first time.
Methodology

In February 2020 I visited CCH in Singapore for nine days, as part of a research project on liturgy and autism, funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities in Scotland. In line with case study methodology (Creswell 2013), I observed two worship services, had numerous conversations with church members and the clergy, conducted nine interviews, observed the premises, and collected several documents (such as service sheets). I kept a detailed field journal. All interviews were transcribed. They were analysed by myself and my research assistant, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Five interviews were with members of the leadership team (including the chaplains) and four with parents of members with autism. Of these four interviews, two included an attempt at interviewing their autistic child, but this proved to be difficult. One of the autistic people (an adult man, living with his parents) was encouraged to participate in the interview by his parents, but walked away after very briefly responding to a question and the response did not really answer the question. A sustained dialogue proved impossible at that moment. The other had difficulties answering my questions and might have been too uncertain. In an attempt to prevent this child (a teenager) from repeating what his mother said I asked a few interview questions of him first; however, he found it difficult to answer, and after a short while it started to cause distress, which is why I decided to stop asking questions and continued instead with his mother, although he wanted to remain present. The intention was to visit CCH another time, including participating in a weekend away with the church, which would have given more opportunities to build relationships with the autistic members. There was also the intention to create social scripts with the help of the chaplain and others, and so enable an interview format in which the autistic members could participate. However, Covid-19 prevented a second trip. Therefore, a significant limitation of this research project is that it does not directly include the voices of the autistic members of CCH, despite efforts to do so.²

In November 2021, I presented the results in a virtual workshop with members of CCH, with the aim of ‘giving back’ what I observed in the hope they would benefit from it and to check whether I had understood and interpreted the church correctly. Eight people participated, including four leaders, and four parents of autistic children. One person left after about 15 minutes, without having said anything, and two participants had to leave early after an hour. The format of the workshop was that I presented the themes (which are the result of the analysis of the entire fieldwork and are presented in this article) and after the presentation of each theme, I asked the participants whether I had understood CCH correctly with regard to that theme, and whether they wanted to adjust or add anything. I checked some details, and I included a question for them to think about or take away. The members confirmed that the analysis was exactly right, and said it was helpful for them to think about CCH in terms of these themes. Some of their feedback is included in the presentation of the themes below.

Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics and Governance Committee at the University of Aberdeen. All names of the participants in this article are fictitious, except for the Senior Chaplain, David. He would be identifiable easily, and agreed to be named in any research output.
Themes

My focus for this project was the ways in which the CCH’s focus on autism would impact its liturgy and worship. Two of the themes speak specifically to that focus, i.e. ‘autism reveals liturgy’ and ‘autistic participation’. However, the worship practices of a church are always embedded in the wider life of that church. To understand CCH as a church that has autistic people at the centre of their community, it is necessary to present the other themes that the analysis brought to the fore: ‘inclusive ecclesiology’, ‘care for differing needs’, and ‘views of autism’.

Inclusive ecclesiology

The two aspects of the CCH’s ecclesiology that need to be highlighted here are CCH’s vision and the community-formation of the congregation.

Vision for belonging

The vision of CCH is ‘To be a Church that brings people of EVERY ABILITY to love, grow and serve in Christ together’. Every ability can be interpreted as different kinds of disabilities, but the focus is clearly on autism. Importantly, the vision is multi-directional. The vision is not to ‘include’ autistic people in a non-autistic environment (which would be unidirectional), but the loving, growing, and serving is from all members towards all members. This vision runs through the entire life of CCH (and underlies all themes that this article presents) and is deeply theological, in which all members of the body of Christ have their God-intended place.

David, the senior pastor, says that this vision requires a paradigm shift. Instead of approaching worship and other aspects of church life from a normalcy perspective, governed by what the autism community often labels ‘neurotypicality’, taking autism into account changes how one thinks things should be done. Several people confirmed that autism is indeed taken into account at virtually every step the church takes, whether in the way the building is used, activities are run, or at leadership team meetings.

Interestingly, several people mentioned that placing autistic members central to the decision-making means that the non-autistic members of CCH need to change and adjust. For example, it is important for the autistic members to go to the same location and accommodation for the annual church weekend. Some (non-autistic) families would like to vary, but CCH nevertheless puts the needs of autistic members first. As simple as this example might seem, it is a profound choice that CCH makes. Often it is autistic people who need to adjust to and ‘fit in’ with a non-autistic world (which becomes clear for example in Bowman 2021; Rapley 2021b; in this regard the just-mentioned concept of normalcy is relevant, see Reynolds 2008). To change this around is counter-cultural (indeed, a paradigm shift), and not just in Singapore, but in any context where the group or societal culture is dominated by non-autistic people. It should be noted, more critically, that people with autism themselves do not sit on the leadership team, even though the team does deliberately include parents of children with autism. In the workshop, I asked about this, and some acknowledged that this could, and perhaps should be a next level in the paradigm shift that CCH has made already.
**Autism-driven community and theology**

One of the most outstanding features of CCH is the acceptance that its members show to everyone, which was noted by virtually anyone I spoke to, often in contrast to other churches. For families with autism, CCH is often the first place where they feel truly welcomed and accepted. As many commented, it is okay to jump, make noise, walk and run around, and so on. Therefore, the autistic children are more relaxed, and the parents do not feel judged. This makes for a safe environment for both children and parents, the latter sometimes being anxious about going out into the public realm with their autistic child.

Living out CCH’s vision impacts the church’s theology and spirituality. Paula, a non-autistic leader, comments that accepting others makes her realise that they are also accepted by God, which in turn helps her to accept others, and to know herself to be accepted by God. Analysing Paula’s comment, we can notice several things. First, we see that the driving factor is the vision of CCH to bring together people of all abilities, including autistic people, and make this foundational to the life of the church. Anyone who becomes part of the congregation is invited to share this vision. Second, we see that Paula appropriates the vision theologically: acceptance on the human level is understood as reflecting and communicating God’s acceptance. Paula’s comment demonstrates that the vision of CCH has an impact well beyond accommodations at the practical level or the acceptance of certain behaviours – bringing together people of all abilities in CCH leads to fresh theological insights.

Acceptance of every member can be related to St. Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ, in which each member has an indispensable place (1 Cor. 12:22). In the analysis of the interviews, this image led to further theological reflection on ecclesiology of CCH. For Winona, this image means that there is also a place for her child. Behind this seemingly simple comment lies a vast pastoral reality. Winona’s comment is almost painful, because implicitly it reveals the rejection she and her son must have felt elsewhere, and perhaps Winona’s own struggle of coming to terms with having an autistic son. The image means to her also that her son can transform someone else’s journey. ‘God knows the value of my child’. For Paula the image means that we have to be affected when an autistic person is treated unjustly. Indifference cuts off relationships. But it takes courage to be affected; it is much easier to run a church for people with autism and close the office door at 6 pm than to run a church with people with autism. Paula’s thoughts here underline the idea that CCH succeeds at least to some extent in living their vision, not to just accommodate autistic people in a non-autistic church, but to see autistic people as foundational and indispensable to the church. The image of the body of Christ provides a strong theological rationale for CCH’s vision, and the examples of Winona and Paula demonstrate the impact this theological vision has on creating a culture of belong in the actual praxis of the church (Space does not allow me to elaborate on this here; see further discussion in van Ommen and Endress forthcoming; see also Brock 2019, 201–224).

**‘Autism reveals the liturgy to us’**

If this statement in the title, by Paula, is true, then it is an incentive – and perhaps a theological obligation – to take autism much more seriously in churches and to discover how autism reveals liturgy.
Members of CCH expressed two interpretations of the worship service which, at face value, contradict each other. On the one hand, people were saying that CCH, including the worship services, was very different from other churches. On the other hand, some stated that CCH’s liturgy is the same as any other Anglican liturgy in Singapore, apart from ‘the signs and symbols we use [to] help them [i.e. autistic people] to know what is happening right now, and what’s next’ (Kim Gek). John, another leader, would concur, saying that the structure remains the same, but CCH has made some practical adjustments for their members with autism, for example, visually representing the structure, turning down the volume of music, and accepting a lot of movement and noises from some of those present. The difference with other churches, therefore, is not so much with the liturgical structure, as much as with the practical implementation, which again is due to the vision of CCH to think from an autistic perspective as much as possible.

In what ways, then, does autism reveal the liturgy? The presence of people with autism in the worship service makes the liturgy more lively; because of movement and regular noises it is impossible to be solemn in liturgy all the time. The liturgy’s liveliness causes the church to reflect on what the essence of worship is. In Paula’s words, liturgy ‘still sets the standard for the dogma, but how we implement it becomes more humanised’. She contrasts this to churches where one is expected to conform to the liturgy. Paula appreciates how the liturgy keeps the whole congregation on the same page, but on that page, people worship differently, and God meets them as they are.

Paula gives the example of confession, which many people with autism in CCH would not be able to say or remember, and it is hard to tell whether they would all understand the meaning of confession: The neuro-typical one can kneel down to articulate, to say the prayer of confession, or the prayer, the collect of purity. But other, those with ASD, they are, since we are one body, we presume that they are in the motion with us, though they may not display rationally’. One might argue about the terminology Paula uses here, but that would miss the profound liturgical-theological points Paula makes. The first point to note is that the structure is mostly unchanged compared to the official Anglican Liturgy. Paula evaluates this positively, because it provides a level of predictability that most people with autism appreciate, and because it keeps the congregation on the same page, giving unity to the act of worship. Within that unity, God can meet people just as they are, with their own levels of articulation, emotional response, or understanding. Both unity and diversity are valued, and both have their own place simultaneously in worship in Paula’s interpretation. The second point of note is related: even if people with autism and those not identifying with autism have different ways of expressing and engaging with each element of the liturgy, they are all in motion with each other. Paula’s insight turns around common views of the need to accommodate worshipers with autism and instead gives much more credit to their liturgical role in revealing what liturgy and worship are.

How, then, does the presence of people with autism change the worship service? As we have seen, worship in CCH reveals an interesting combination, and almost tension, of a rigid structure and adjustments at every point. The participation of people with autism encourages suspicion of any ‘this is how it must be done’ attitude, which helps to realise what the liturgy is about. Interestingly, whilst the structure is rigid to suit the autistic needs for routine and predictability, it is because autistic people themselves interrupt overt solemnity that the liturgy becomes lively. The congregation has learned to see and hear and worship past all kinds of distractions, and – what seems obvious from my
interviews and observations – people with autism in general have become more relaxed in the service due to the fact that they fully belong and are valued for who they are. Worshiping with people with autism in the context of CCH helps everyone to realise what the essence of worship is.

**Autistic participation**

Part of CCH’s theological vision is for their members with autism to actively participate in the life of the church. First and foremost, families that include autistic members worship together. This contrasts with some other churches where the children with autism would immediately be sent out to their own programmes and not participate in the ‘main’ service at all. Again, this looks like a simple observation, but more is at stake here. Some families will not have felt welcome in many churches and, for some, worshiping together as a family has not been a possibility for many years. To participate in worship together can be deeply meaningful for these families.

In addition, CCH’s vision means that CCH looks actively for ways in which their members with autism can participate. Some go around with the collection basket, one person sings in the worship band, some engage in the Scripture reading. One may need to be careful not to succumb to a normalcy model with this way of participation (as in: ‘look, they can do the same things as us’), but the importance of such ways of participating is not to be underestimated. Katie recalls that she was honoured when her son was asked to do readings, as it means that not only people without autism can serve and worship God, but also people with (any) disabilities. Participation is fostered further by the Rainbow of Hope group (the programme for members with autism, see more below) leading the service every fifth Sunday of the month. In the Christmas and Easter season, there is a vocal training group, who practice one or more songs to bring to the congregation on Christmas and Easter day. Katie emphasises that this group is not about perfect performance, but about creating a space where autistic people can participate. Participation is seen in unexpected ways, such as Dane who chooses to sweep the canteen. Pastor David interprets this as Dane finding dignity and meaningfulness.

When the members with autism do certain tasks, it may look a bit different from when others perform those tasks, and they might need some support. However, one could equally say that the congregation might need some support to appreciate the way in which the members with autism perform their task. A clear example that I observed was when an autistic reader ‘froze’ during his turn to give the Scripture reading. The worship leader and congregation had clearly learned to deal with such moments in patience, giving the person all the time he needed, without unnecessary fuss or intervention. To cite John, full participation of people with autism means that ‘the onus is on the neurotypical people to adjust, really’, which requires humbleness. Again, the foundational place of members with autism in the CCH, as full members of the body of Christ, is evident in the way participation is encouraged and welcomed, even if that looks different from the participation by non-autistic members.

**Theological and pastoral care for differing needs**

This case study would not be complete, and I would misrepresent CCH, without commenting on the question about full inclusion and differing needs of autistic and non-
autistic people. Even if the vision of the CCH is the full inclusion and belonging of people with autism, they nevertheless have their own programme, called Rainbow of Hope. Those who wish to do so, leave the chapel just before the sermon starts, and they re-join their parents or caregivers only half an hour after the service has ended. By this time, the congregation has moved to another building on the same premises, where a catered lunch is served. For the first half hour, they have had a meal without their autistic family members, after which they are joined by those from Rainbow of Hope, who then have lunch too.

A critical observer may ask whether this practice is a way of segregating some members with autism from the other members after all, despite CCH’s vision. Speaking with church members, it soon became clear that the lunch is a salient feature of Chapel’s church life. Carl and Winona comment that for some families with autistic members it is not always easy to eat out, one reason being the judgmental gazes from others. CCH gives a safe space for families eating together, but also, the thirty minutes at the start allows some families the opportunity to have fellowship with others without the constant care for their autistic family members. This respite time is clearly valued. Paula comments that when she started to attend the CCH, she noticed that many parents were exhausted, and also that CCH is a place where the parents are cared for just as much as their children.

In addition, this act of pastoral care serves the autistic members too. It was viewed positively by my interviewees that the members with autism have their own programme because there they hear the gospel in ways that suited their abilities. Full integration of members with and without autism does not necessarily mean that everything should be done together. Making sure that people of all abilities love, grow and serve together, as per CCH’s vision statement, may mean that certain activities are done separately, in order for each to engage with God and people in the ways that are most appropriate for them. Moreover, David emphasises that the lunch should not be seen as separate from the entire act of worship on Sunday. Viewed in that way, one can see that autistic and non-autistic members start and end the act of worship together.

Even so, whilst there may be good reasons to have times apart in separate groups, it is also acknowledged that it is important to strike the right balance between attention for people with autism and others. John says that is a difficult balance; one that the CCH has to monitor regularly.

**Views of autism**

Finally, it is worth noting that not all members in CCH have the same views on autism and how to think about autism theologically. This shows that CCH did not wait until everyone had the same view before starting the church. Instead, people are on a journey. Different disability paradigms seem to be at work simultaneously, often within the same person. Views differ as widely as to full acceptance of autism and the desire to overcome autism.

Lai Chan speaks openly about her struggle to accept her son’s autism. She wishes her son did not have autism. Like some others, she speaks in terms of overcoming autism, of improvement and progress. She loves testimonies that celebrate little milestones and achievements of people with autism, because they give her joy. She hopes one day her son will be able to join the worship band. A few parents even pray for miraculous
healing from autism, although such a faith-healing perspective is not widely shared by most members, and it is discouraged by the leadership.

Nevertheless, even with Lai Chan, and others like her, their wishes for overcoming autism or desire to see improvement is in tension with their own journey of accepting and loving their child. Even though some parents sometimes say things like, ‘Oh I wished my child was like [name of another child] because they can do this or that’, Lai Chan reflects: ‘Actually, it is not true … they are also the chosen ones’. Similarly, Jonah freely uses the language of ‘problem kids’ and ‘special needs kids’ versus ‘normal kids’, but he cries tears of joy when he talks about his love for his son and says that he is ‘all I have’. Lai Chan and Jonah hold to views and use language that many in the autism community would question (Botha, Hanlon, and Williams 2021). The point here is not to criticise their views, but to give an account of the tension between learned paradigms of autism and the love for and acceptance of autistic people that are present in the life and liturgy of CCH.

This tension notwithstanding, each person I spoke with said that the members with autism were a blessing to the church and that they were learning from them. To receive this blessing includes lessons in humbleness, as when the Rainbow of Hope groups lead the sermon, and non-autistic members need to have the humbleness to learn from the sermon, as John says, or to learn that high grades in school are ‘thrown out the window’ in Charm’s case, or to give up one’s pride and ask for help, as Winona admits. The point that people with autism are a blessing to the church should not be interpreted from a paternalistic point of view, but rather as a contrast to other churches that these families have been part of; in CCH they are not a burden but a blessing.

There are a few different ways to explain or make sense of the contrasting views of autism in CCH. First, the people in CCH come from a wide variety of church backgrounds. Their theologies and thinking on autism have been shaped by these communities. Secondly, there is the acknowledgment that different people simply have different understandings of autism. Thirdly, one participant in the workshop referred to the apostle Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’. This was suffering, but somehow turned into a blessing. This participant shared that some parents say that they are suffering because of their child with autism, but that at the same time blessing could come out of the situation. Finally, as a church, the members of this congregation are on a journey. Being part of a community that is counter-cultural in terms of its acceptance of people with autism, and indeed the way in which people with autism fully belong to the church, shapes people’s thinking and theology. Over time, some may change their views, and this might be a subconscious process. This would explain why at one point in an interview a person can express one view, and at another point in the interview another view. Regardless of the views people have of autism, all would agree on this: God loves and knows the members with autism, and as a church they are called to worship together with people of all abilities, to grow, love and serve together.

**Conclusion: practical-theological insights for the church**

Even if the context and history of CCH are unique (Teo and Leong 2021), churches that want to be places of belonging for autistic and non-autistic people alike can learn (theological) lessons from CCH. Firstly, a salient feature of CCH is that the vision of loving,
growing and serving together with people of every ability is felt in everything the church does. All decisions are taken through the lens of autism. Autism is not an afterthought or the business of a committee, but central to the church. This does require a paradigm shift, as David explained, where our norms and values are aligned with a theological vision of belonging rather than societal views of what is deemed ‘normal’ (Reynolds 2008, 46–101). When such a paradigm shift occurs, inclusion and acceptance become multi-directional, instead of a paternalistic inclusion of ‘them’ (autistic people) into ‘our’ (non-autistic) church (Waldock and Forrester-Jones 2020, 9). When adaptation is needed, according to John, the onus is on the non-autistic members. Participation means that the congregation may need support to value the contribution of autistic people – turning around the common understanding that autistic people need support to perform certain tasks (which they still may of course; the point here is the paradigm shift that is needed). On a more critical note, churches may want to think about ways in which autistic people can participate in leadership, even if they are non-speaking.

The second salient feature in CCH, related to the first, is the acceptance and belonging of all people. There is a genuine willingness to learn from each other and to grow spiritually, and many would say that they would not grow in the way they do if it were not for the presence of autistic members. Churches may learn from the vision to see every member as indispensable to the congregation, even if it is not always understood what their function in the body is – in any case, every member is a gift to the community (Brock 2019, 219–224).

Thirdly, becoming a place of belonging for autistic people does not require huge changes to the liturgy, although some (practical) aspects of worship may need to be reconsidered, such as sensory input. CCH does emphasise familiarity with the structure of the worship service. At the same time, it is exactly because of the presence of the many members with autism that their worship services become lively, which ‘reveals the liturgy to us’, as Paula says. Churches may learn from Paula’s liturgical-theological interpretation of their worship services, when she says that the liturgy helps the congregation to be on the same page, whilst on that page, each one may engage with the liturgy differently. In the body of Christ, all members are ‘in motion’ with each other.

Fourthly, different people have different needs. In the Singaporean church, some autistic people need spiritual input that they can engage with, and some families need respite. The underlying question that needs to be answered by each church individually is what their (theological) reasons are for having separate programmes or not, and whether that fosters or diminishes belonging and valuing each member for who they are.

Finally, the great variety of views about autism in CCH shows that church members do not need to have the same view before they can become a church where everyone belongs. That is not to say that differences should not be talked about – some views are theologically questionable and pastorally harmful. In CCH, people are on a journey together and some learned to accept their child’s autism precisely by being in a church that values their child for who he or she is. The different views notwithstanding, this results in a shared view that the autistic members are a blessing to the church, and that their worship, spirituality, and church life are enriched by the presence of autistic people.
Notes

1. Often people in CCH speak about the ‘children with autism’ to designate these members. It should be noted that some of them are adults, but none of them lives independently but instead with their parents and go to church with their parents. This creates a difficulty in terminology, because to speak of children may indicate under-18s or paternalistic views, whilst that is not the way this is used in CCH.

2. With CCH, I continue to look for ways to listen to the views of CCH’s non-verbal members and reflect on ways in which they can be even more central decision-making processes in CCH. At the same time, the Centre for Autism and Theology, with which I am involved, is actively exploring (participatory) methodologies to involve non-speaking autistic individuals in our research.

3. Cited from the church bulletin of 22 March 2020, including emphases.

4. This is not mere speculation on my part, as in the interview Winona openly talks about the struggle she had (and to some extent still has) to accept the fact that her son will not do well in terms of the success criteria of the Singaporean society.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Topher Endress for his research assistance on this project and to Erin Raffety and Henna Cundill for their invaluable comments on the first draft. All views are my own and do not necessarily represent those of the Carnegie Trust.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author thanks the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland [grant number RIG008599], which funded this project.

Notes on contributor

Armand Léon van Ommen is Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen, and Co-Director of the Centre for Autism and Theology.

References


