

A Guide for Pastors and Parents

AUTISM IN THE CHURCH

Julie A. Pratt

Foreword by Johan Mostert, PhD

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FOREWORD

I wear several hats as I write these words. For many years, I have stood in the classroom as a professor of graduate programs in psychology and theology. I have also stood behind pulpits in South Africa as a local church pastor, charged with shepherding God's people. And in more recent years, I have also been blessed with that most cherished role of all—being a grandfather of children with disabilities. Each of these perspectives has given me certain insights, but none of them prepared me for the way this book has unsettled me, challenged me, and reshaped how I think about the church.

Julie Pratt writes from a heart of lived experience. She is not content to speak in theories or abstractions; her words are anchored in the daily joys and struggles of parenting a child with autism. It is precisely this vantage point that gives her voice such weight. She invites us to pause and reexamine some of our most cherished assumptions about what “church” is supposed to look like. She is challenging us to rethink our ecclesiology.

As pastors and leaders, we often measure the health of a church by its programs, its music, or its ability to maintain a certain atmosphere on Sunday morning. But Julie asks us to look deeper. What does church look like when it truly embraces the brokenness and needs that surround us? What does discipleship look like when the body of Christ gives priority to the vulnerable people the prophet Zechariah identifies as close to God’s heart—the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the immigrant—and I would add children and families living with disability?

One of the most profound moments for me in reading this book was Julie's description of her child stimming in the middle of a worship service. To many, this might seem like an unwelcome distraction or disruption. But she dares to ask us: What if this is worship? What if this is the child's only way of expressing joy and reverence in the presence of the Lord? Are we ready, as churches, to receive such an offering with the reverence it deserves? Are we willing to let the kingdom of God break into our carefully scripted services in ways we did not plan for?

These questions are not comfortable. They press us to think about how we train the next generation of pastors, worship leaders, and volunteers. How do we equip them to prioritize the vulnerable without alienating or neglecting those who have long supported our ministry? How do we support the many families who live with disabilities and who feel like they are a burden to the church? How do we cultivate discipleship that may not be tidy or polished, but is profoundly faithful to the heart of Jesus, who said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

I was not prepared for the depth of Julie's insight, born of both pain and perseverance. I suspect you will not be either, but that is exactly why this book is so important. It will not let us remain where we are. It will stretch our theology of worship, broaden our vision of community, and push us to ask hard but holy questions about what it means to be the church.

I commend this book to you, not only as a resource, but as a prophetic word for our time. Read it carefully. Read it prayerfully. And above all, let it change you.

Johan Mostert, PhD

COMPACT Family Services and
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INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS

The Growing Need for Autism Awareness in the Church

If you’re reading this book, chances are you care deeply about the church and the people in it. Maybe you’re a pastor like me, trying to figure out how to make your church more welcoming to families affected by autism. Maybe you’re a children’s or youth ministry leader who wants to serve every child well, but you’re not sure how to meet the needs of individuals with autism in your ministry. Or maybe you’re a parent like me, who loves the church but has struggled to find a place where your child with autism is truly included.

Wherever you’re coming from, I’m glad you’re here. The reality is that autism is more common than ever, and many churches are unprepared to serve this growing part of their congregations. Statistics tell us that about 1 in 31 children is diagnosed with autism,¹ meaning there are likely individuals with autism in your church right now whether you realize it or not. Yet many families of children with autism find church one of the hardest places to be. Some leave because they don’t feel welcome. Others stay but struggle in silence. The body of Christ should not accept either scenario.

1. “Data and Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 27, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>.

I write this book from two perspectives: as a parent of a young adult son diagnosed with autism and as a church leader with more than 30 years of ministry leadership experience. I understand the joys and challenges of raising a child with autism, as well as the inner workings of the church—how ministries function, the pressures leaders face, and the good intentions that sometimes fall short when it comes to inclusion.

A Personal Journey: A Parent and Pastor's Perspective

Our personal journey began in the most ordinary of moments: I was standing at the stovetop stirring pasta sauce, trying to get dinner on the table for our family, when I noticed the youngest of our three children—our only boy—walking in constant circles from the kitchen, through the dining room, into the living room and back, snapping his fingers rhythmically as he went. Around and around. And for the first time, I whispered a question I never expected to ask: *Does he have autism?*

We'd noticed some struggles, especially at school, but that moment stirred something deeper. It led to a series of conversations, evaluations, and eventually, a formal diagnosis. Like so many of you reading this, we've navigated the disorientation of diagnosis, the grief of lost dreams, the weight of unknowns, and the deep hope that our churches can become places of understanding, not isolation.

I've also sat through services, acutely aware of my son's stimming behaviors and the potential distraction they might cause, all while feeling the weight of every meltdown. I've lost count of how many times we've made a slow, attention-grabbing exit from the auditorium under the gaze of staring eyes. I've felt the frustration of well-meaning church members offering advice that completely missed the mark—like the preschool Sunday School teacher who once suggested I needed to prioritize teaching my son to *sit still and be quiet* during Bible time. She also scolded me because my son was *still not potty trained*, which can be especially challenging for individuals with autism because it

involves sensory issues, communication delays, and a different developmental timeline.

As a pastor, I've carried these experiences into our church's ministry planning. I've felt the burden of wanting to do more and the overwhelm of not knowing where to begin. I've led teams with the constant worry of whether we had enough volunteers—let alone ones who felt equipped or confident enough to support an individual with sensory sensitivities or unpredictable behaviors. I've wrestled with how to ask the right questions of parents whose kids seem to have familiar struggles, how to explain the importance of inclusion and belonging to volunteers and church leadership without making people feel inadequate or guilty, and how to offer care that's both practical and Spirit-led.

I get what it feels like when a family visits our church for the first time and we're caught unprepared. Maybe we don't have a quiet space available. Maybe the volunteer that day isn't trained to respond with patience and flexibility. Maybe the student has a meltdown, and we scramble, doing our best in the moment but knowing deep down that we didn't make the family feel seen or supported. Those moments sting, because they remind us how far we still have to go, and how high the stakes are when a single Sunday visit could determine whether a family returns.

There have been times I've gotten it wrong—when I prioritized order over openness or comfort over compassion. But each misstep taught us something valuable. Through it all, I've come to believe this deeply: When we make space for families with autism, we aren't just accommodating; we're becoming more like the church Jesus envisioned.

The Biblical Call to Belonging and Compassion

At its core, this book isn't just about autism; it's about the gospel. The church is called to be a place of belonging for all people. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 that the body of Christ is made up of

many different parts, each one valuable and necessary. In verse 22 he writes, “Some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary” (NLT).

That means individuals with autism aren’t just people we need to “accommodate” out of obligation. They are essential to the life of the church. When we fail to make space for them, we’re not just failing those individuals and their families. We’re missing out on the fullness of the body of Christ.

Jesus consistently went out of His way to welcome and embrace the people society overlooked. He didn’t shy away from people who were different; He pursued them. That’s the example we’re called to follow.

What This Book Will Cover

This book is designed to help church leaders—pastors, ministry directors, and volunteers—gain a better understanding of autism, and more importantly, take practical steps to create an inclusive church environment. This book is also for parents navigating the joys and challenges of raising a child with autism while longing for a faith

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community where their whole family feels seen, supported, and spiritually nurtured. Whether you’re leading a ministry or walking this journey as a parent, this book offers both perspective and practical ideas to help the church become a place where every child and every family belong.

Each chapter will focus on a key aspect of autism and the church, including:

- Understanding autism from a biblical perspective
- Building a culture of belonging
- Developing a special needs ministry (even with no budget)

- Making worship and church spaces sensory friendly
- Training staff and volunteers
- Supporting families beyond Sunday mornings
- Teaching and discipling individuals with autism
- Overcoming common challenges and misconceptions

It's not my goal to overwhelm you or suggest that the only solution is complex programs or expensive solutions. It's to give you simple, effective ways to make your church a place where individuals with autism are not only welcomed but discipled, valued, and empowered to use their God-given gifts.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find reflection questions designed to help you and your ministry team process what you've learned and apply it to your specific church context. These questions will encourage self-examination, spark discussion, and guide you toward actionable next steps. Whether you're reading this book alone or working through it with a team, take the time to engage with these questions prayerfully and practically. Small, intentional changes can make a big difference in creating a church where all people—including those with autism—know they are vital parts of the body of Christ.

A Call to Action

You don't have to have all the answers. You don't need to be an expert in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to make a difference. You just need a willingness to learn, listen, and take intentional and consistent steps toward greater belonging.

My prayer is that by the time you finish this book, you'll feel equipped and inspired to make your church a place where individuals with autism and their families don't just feel tolerated, but know they truly belong.

Let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

AUTISM AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

Every Person Bears God's Image

At the heart of our faith is this unshakable truth: Every human being is made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NLT).

This includes individuals with autism. “In the image of God” (in Latin, *imago Dei*) isn’t about outward appearance or worldly ability.

God's image is revealed not in sameness, but in sacred diversity.

It speaks to the essence of being made by God, for God. It means every person reflects something of the divine, including those who move differently, process differently, and engage with the world in ways that stretch our understanding.

That question I whispered at the stove—*Does my son have autism?*—eventually grew into a deeper theological question: *Is autism also a part of Your image, God?* I didn’t ask it out loud at first. But it echoed through my thoughts at every pediatric appointment, every teacher conference, and especially in moments when I watched my son struggle to fit into spaces never designed with him in mind. It’s a question that opened my eyes to a bigger truth: God’s image is revealed not in sameness, but in sacred diversity.

What Is Autism? A Different Way of Experiencing the World

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological condition that affects how a person communicates, processes information, and engages with the world around them. Because it is not a linear condition, but rather a spectrum, each individual experiences a unique combination of strengths and challenges that shapes how autism presents in their life. No two individuals with autism are exactly alike. Some are nonverbal; others are highly articulate. Some have heightened sensitivity to sound or light; others seek out sensory input. At times, individuals with autism may be able to integrate into settings with relative ease—even while navigating hidden hurdles—while others with profound autism may need round-the-clock support to navigate daily life. Autism isn't a problem to fix; it's a unique way of experiencing the world.

Before my son's diagnosis, I had noticed things that didn't quite match up with other kids his age. He walked in circles, snapped his fingers, and struggled with eye contact and touch. He had tics and clear dislikes. I watched him play alone at school, lining up Lego bricks in color order while his classmates worked on math problems. But I didn't recognize what I was seeing. When he received his diagnosis, I felt guilty for missing what suddenly seemed obvious. Autism isn't invisible when you know what to look for. Most importantly, it doesn't diminish the divine image in a person. Autism reveals it, just in a different way.

How Individuals with Autism Reflect the Image of God

If every person bears the image of God, then individuals with autism reflect His nature in meaningful ways. Here are just a few examples:

Deep Focus and Passion. Many individuals with autism have an intense ability to focus on topics they love. There's a richness to this focus that mirrors God's intentionality.

Honesty and Integrity. Many people with autism are refreshingly—possibly brutally—honest. (Oh, the stories I could tell!) In a world where

communication can be filled with half-truths and social maneuvering, their straightforwardness is a reflection of God's truthfulness.

Creativity and Perspectives. Many individuals with autism see patterns, connections, and details others overlook. This creativity mirrors the God who formed the universe with complexity and beauty. It's like they notice the quiet whispers of God's creation.

Spiritual Insight. While some may struggle with traditional forms of worship or discipleship, individuals with autism often connect with God in profound ways. Their faith may be expressed differently, but it is no less authentic or valuable.

For those with profound autism who may not speak, engage in typical social interactions, or express their faith in conventional ways, the image of God is no less present. Their lives remind us that God is not only revealed in words or actions, but in presence, being, and belovedness. Their existence challenges our culture's obsession with productivity and performance, calling us instead to behold the sacredness of life itself. In their quietness or complexity, we are invited to encounter a God who sees beyond human ability and measures worth by His own perfect love.

Rather than focusing on what seems different, we should ask: *How does this individual uniquely reflect God's image?* When we shift our perspective, we move from mere acceptance to celebration.

Jesus' Example: Radical Inclusion

Jesus constantly welcomed the people others ignored. When His disciples tried to shoo the children away, Jesus responded, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). Jesus didn't wait for people to behave a certain way or follow unwritten rules before including them. He embraced them as they were.

Would Jesus welcome my son? Would He understand my son's vocal stimming that sounds like a cricket, his head tics, his deep love

for french fries yet his flat refusal to eat potatoes? (I know. It doesn't make sense.) I have no doubt that He would. And if Jesus would embrace my son as he is, shouldn't the church do the same?

The Church as a Place of True Belonging

Paul's description of the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12 is foundational: Every part matters. Every part is necessary. When churches see autism as a disruption rather than a reflection of God's image, they are not only excluding families, but diminishing the fullness of the body.

Belonging in a church is about more than being allowed to sit in a pew. It means being known, valued, engaged, and discipled. The church must ask: *Are we building environments where kids, teens, and adults like my son can thrive and grow as disciples of Christ?*

Addressing Common Misconceptions

Many churches want to be welcoming, but struggle due to misunderstandings about autism. Here are a few common ones:

1. "Autism is just a behavioral issue."

Autism is neurological, not a lack of discipline. Sensory overload, communication difficulties, and anxiety can sometimes look like misbehavior, but they are not intentional acts of defiance.

Belonging in a church is about more than being allowed to sit in a pew. It means being known, valued, engaged, and discipled.

When we mislabel neurological responses as bad behavior, we not only misunderstand the individual, but we also risk responding in ways that further isolate or harm them. Church leaders must be especially careful not to default to a moral lens when interpreting behavior. Instead, we must develop

compassionate curiosity: *What is this child trying to communicate? What sensory needs might be unmet? How can we adjust our environment to support*

them better? Recognizing that autism is not about discipline but about difference allows us to shift from judgment to understanding and from exclusion to inclusion.

2. “If they don’t participate like everyone else, they aren’t engaged.”

Worship and discipleship look different for different people. A child who avoids eye contact may still be listening. A nonverbal adult may worship deeply through movement rather than singing.

Recognizing that autism is not about discipline but about difference allows us to shift from judgment to understanding and from exclusion to inclusion.

Discipleship is not one-size-fits-all. When we place rigid expectations on how people should interact in church spaces, we risk mistaking neurodivergent expressions for spiritual apathy. God doesn’t need someone to walk down to

an altar, raise their hands, or repeat the right words to encounter Him. We must broaden our definition of engagement beyond traditional expressions and be open to how the Spirit works in every unique individual. He meets people in the quiet, the stillness, the stimming, and the pacing. Our job is not to force uniformity but to create environments where every form of worship is recognized as sacred. When we begin to see engagement through this wider lens, we create room for the full body of Christ to grow in faith together.

3. “We don’t have the resources to serve individuals with autism.”

Inclusion isn’t about budget; it’s about mindset. Small changes like volunteer training, sensory-friendly spaces, and flexible expectations can make a big impact.

When we place rigid expectations on how people should interact in church spaces, we risk mistaking neurodivergent expressions for spiritual apathy.

While specialized equipment or full-time staff might be out of reach, most churches already have what they need to begin making

Their presence may challenge our routines or stretch our definitions of reverence, but people with autism are not disruptions. They are part of the body of Christ.

a difference: willing hearts, a teachable spirit, and a desire to reflect Christ's love to every person. Remember that every step forward matters. You don't need to have it all figured out to start moving in the right direction. Start small. Have one conversation with a family, learn from one child's needs, adapt one part of your

service. Let those real experiences guide your growth. Often, it's not the size of our resources but the size of our willingness that determines how inclusive our ministry can be.

4. "Welcoming individuals with autism will disrupt the church."

Churches already make space for crying babies and energetic toddlers. Why not extend that same grace to individuals with autism? Their presence may challenge our routines or stretch our definitions of *reverence*, but people with autism are not disruptions. They are part of the body of Christ.

When we welcome those who move, vocalize, or process differently, we don't lose reverence. We gain a richer expression of worship. Individuals with autism bring raw honesty, authentic faith, and unique connection with God that remind us worship isn't performance—it's presence. Their inclusion helps the church reflect the fullness of God's kingdom, where every person, voice, and movement holds sacred value.

Every person with autism is created by God, known by Him, and designed for a purpose within His church. It is our responsibility and privilege to ensure they have a place to thrive and be discipled.

Moving Forward

Seeing my son through the lens of *imago Dei* has changed me. His diagnosis didn't reveal a problem—it revealed a new way to see God. Individuals with autism are not projects to be managed, but image-bearers to be loved and discipled. This challenges us to move beyond just *making room* for these precious image-bearers and instead to *fully embrace* them as part of the church body.

As we continue, let's keep this foundational truth in mind: Every person with autism is created by God, known by Him, and designed for a purpose within His church. It is our responsibility and privilege to ensure they have a place to thrive and be discipled.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to build a church culture of belonging—one where individuals with autism and their families don't just feel accommodated, but truly *at home*.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Does our church truly reflect the belief that all people—including individuals with autism—bear the image of God? What specific messages (spoken or unspoken) might suggest otherwise?

2. What common misconceptions about autism exist in our church? How can we address them and create a more welcoming and informed culture?

3. Jesus modeled radical inclusion by welcoming those whom society overlooked. How does our church’s approach to individuals with autism reflect (or fall short of) this example? What is one step we can take to move from accommodation to true belonging?

INTERVIEW

The Sibling Seat: Walking with Autism in the Church

College-Aged Sibling

Growing up with a sibling who has autism shaped me in ways I couldn't have named as a kid, but now I can see them clearly. It made me more aware, more sensitive to others, and more attentive to the unseen details in a room. When we were younger, I thought our family seemed like any other. *Autism* wasn't a word we used often at first. Our brother was uniquely smart and knew exactly what he liked and didn't like, and that just felt normal to us. It wasn't until we got older—when things like food preferences, overstimulation, and social differences started to feel more complex—that I began to see how different our family rhythm really was.

Church has always been part of our life, but attending often meant trying multiple congregations before landing somewhere that could meet *all* our needs. My parents didn't just look for a church that fed them spiritually or had fun programs for my sister and me. They had to find a place where my brother would be welcomed, not just tolerated. He needed a place where he could thrive. That hasn't always been easy.

We've experienced both ends of the spectrum. There were churches where my parents stayed, not because their own faith was being pushed forward, but because my brother seemed to do okay. We've also found places, like the church they attend now, that see his autism not as a barrier, but simply as part of who he is. This church encourages him to try new things, welcomes him as he is, and encourages him to follow God. Now, he looks forward to going to church each week and being seen as part of the community.

What I wish more people understood is that inclusion doesn't happen accidentally. It takes intentional conversation. People often assume they understand autism because they've encountered it somewhere before. But it's different for every person and every family. For our brother, things like food, scheduled routines, and sensory input are huge. Something as simple as being five minutes late or not eating on his timetable can cause major stress. And if you want to invite us into your space, it starts by being willing to ask questions—real ones.

Church leaders, please know this: A child with autism changes the rhythm of an entire family. Our meals, schedules, transportation, and even vacations revolve around what works best for him. That's not a complaint. It's just reality. And in ministry spaces, please don't assume the neurotypical sibling will automatically be the caregiver. Let us be kids. Let us be students. We love our brother—and yes, we take responsibility when needed—but we shouldn't be expected to carry the full weight of inclusion because a leader didn't take the time to learn.

There's something beautiful about watching my brother seek God. His relationship with Jesus is sincere, uncomplicated, and deeply personal. As his sister, I've seen firsthand how the church can either be a place of belonging or a place of burden. I pray we always choose the former.