Tips on creating accessible worship and congregational life for neurodivergent people.

# Accessibility Guidelines

* Assume that there are already many neurodivergent people in your congregation, they just haven’t announced it. Some may not even know it themselves. Increasing accessibility and inclusion will help people who are already showing up.
* Assume competence as a foundation, and that communication is always possible
* The Relational Model of disability asks us to meet the needs of the person in front of us, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis or if we know what it is; self-disclosure of diagnoses is not required
* Neurodivergence is complex and highly individual – no answer will work for everyone
* Relational safety is essential for many people before they will discuss specific needs
* Inclusivity includes having appropriate supports to participate, beyond being present

# Inclusive Practices to Try

* Ask about people’s needs, interests, and preferences
* Have congregants or guests preach on their own neurodivergent lived experience
* Regularly discuss covenant and covenant repair practices (functions of relational safety); making these social rules open helps make relational conventions clear
* Reduce uncertainty: Label all coffee-hour and event food/beverages with ingredients, use name tags, post orders of service on the website
* Normalize the idea of alternate social rules rather than conforming as a default; what is polite to one neurotype may be rude to another. Translation takes work for both parties.
* Engage neurodivergent youth and young adults to network with other congregants who are neurodivergent
* Provide access to quiet/retreat spaces without extra effort (quiet rooms, rooms that are darkened, carpeted area in the sanctuary, etc.)
* Offer video tours of your facilities on your website (including religious education spaces)
* Welcome fidgets like playing with stim toys or knitting during services, including having fidget toys available for anyone who wants one during services
* Be open to assistive technologies for communication. AC devices (assistive communication) may be specific technology, but text, instant messaging, or even writing in a notebook rather than talking may be more effective than speaking out loud.
* Plan backup communications for verbal instructions (follow-up email, written resources)
* Encourage congregants to attend to different modes of attention than eye contact or body position – looking at faces may make it impossible for some people to listen, for example, and eye contact may cause processing overload to the level of physical pain
* Ask about people’s interests as opportunities to witness people’s joy and delight, rather than needing to be about shared interests (though finding shared interests is great!)
* Many neurodivergent people are sensory sensitive or chemically sensitive, and even naturally fragrant essential oils may cause migraines or overwhelm sensory processing – consider going fragrance free or low fragrance as a congregation
* Provide written copies of sermons and readings on request or on your website
* Be patient and generous as people become more openly themselves. A lot of adults are being newly diagnosed after a lifetime of masking (hiding neurodivergent traits and trying to mimic neurotypical behaviors), and may be rightly anxious about how to be themselves in public after having been told for years that their self was not welcome in public. Others are newly neurodivergent and are learning how to navigate.

# Accessible and Inclusive Religious Education (RE)(children/youth)

* Ensure teachers and staff are oriented to each student’s needs – engaging parents or aides in planning is important, and also getting to know the child and their interests
* Parents may have different or additional needs around RE for their kids than the child expresses at their level – discuss how to accommodate the long-term perspective of the family in addition to the child
* Have alternate activities available to select from that are suited to a range of needs and relevant to the classroom. Dance party, going outside to explore, large motor activities, quiet breathing, coloring, making paper airplanes out of giant sheets of paper (or teaming up to make/color, make/throw, etc.), swinging, singing songs in ASL, sorting materials by colors or type, listening for different sounds, etc., may be useful options.
* Include all the kids in the alternate activities that meet core needs of neurodivergent kids – a change of plan to exploring nature or making paper airplanes or a dance break may be just what everyone needs
* Learn about stims and self-soothing behaviors that a child prefers, as well as sensitivities and situations that may overstimulate them
* Inclusion of support staff/aides in the classroom may be needed for some children – consider setting up a process or plan for students with aides
* Communicate class activities to families in advance, especially when particular clothing will be required (such as for painting or muddy outdoor activities)