

Autism is a lifelong condition which affects the way a person interacts with and relates to others. Problems arising from these difficulties can lead to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

We want to welcome those with an autism spectrum condition to church, both to offer them, like everyone else, Christ's love and acceptance, and also to ensure that we don't miss out on what they have to share with us. These guidelines have been drawn up to assist churches as they think about their welcome, and the outline of '*what happens in a church service*' can be customised for each church, and go on a website or into a leaflet. Indeed, the information will be useful for anyone unfamiliar with a church service.

*What might be helpful and unhelpful?*

- Those with autism, like some others, often find it difficult to cope with change, unpredictable events and behaviour, and hidden assumptions. A different arrangement of the chairs in a church one Sunday, or a baptism which changes the usual order of service could be confusing for adults with autism. Clear and straightforward communication is particularly important.
- Those with autism are often very sensitive to light, noise and smell. For example, they would

appreciate a warning that there will be applause at the welcome section of a baptism. They may find physical touch difficult to interpret, perhaps not wanting to shake hands at the Peace, or conversely being exuberant with touch.

- Someone with autism (adult or child) may need to wear their ear defenders, and to leave the service for a time. It is good to identify a quieter area, maybe darker or with natural light, to which someone can go. He or she will want to know when the service is due to end, and may wish to leave early.
- People with an autism spectrum condition will usually prefer to sit at the end of a pew/row, and not somewhere busy. In the course of a service, they will appreciate clear directions about standing/sitting and indication of beginnings and endings. Sensitivities mean they may be challenged by the stimulus of both movement and singing during the administration of Communion, the light from a projector and coloured backgrounds to PowerPoint slides. They may need gluten free biscuits and Communion wafers and casein-free milk

## *Children with autism*

- Parents of children with autism will be anxious about whether they and their child will be able to cope with the service. They need information in advance so that they can prepare their child for a new experience.
- It can be helpful for parents to build up relationships with a range of people, so that one of them can offer reassurance, or care for a sibling while the parent supports a child with autism. An individual helper for a child would give parents some protected time in the service and this can be part of our care for parents.
- It would be very helpful to set up the hall for the children's ministry in the same way every week – and notify parents if it is going to be different, so that they can prepare the child. A child with autism may want to have their 'own seat' - and for this to be understood by other children and leaders.

## *Safeguarding*

Adherence to the diocesan Safeguarding policy is an essential part of making churches welcoming and safe places for all.

# Welcoming those with autism

Colchester Episcopal Area  
February 2018