

United by Neurodiversity: Postgraduate Research in a Neurodiverse Context

Armand Léon van Ommen, Henna J. Cundill, Krysia Emily Waldock, Catherine Tryfona, Grant Macaskill, Christopher Barber, Sarah Douglas, Bryan W. Fowler, Harry Gibbins, Ian Lasch & Brian Brock

To cite this article: Armand Léon van Ommen, Henna J. Cundill, Krysia Emily Waldock, Catherine Tryfona, Grant Macaskill, Christopher Barber, Sarah Douglas, Bryan W. Fowler, Harry Gibbins, Ian Lasch & Brian Brock (2023) United by Neurodiversity: Postgraduate Research in a Neurodiverse Context, *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 27:4, 537-551, DOI: [10.1080/23312521.2023.2276112](https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2023.2276112)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2023.2276112>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 14 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 495



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

United by Neurodiversity: Postgraduate Research in a Neurodiverse Context

Armand Léon van Ommen^a, Henna J. Cundill^a, Krysia Emily Waldock^b, Catherine Tryfona^c, Grant Macaskill^a, Christopher Barber^a, Sarah Douglas^a, Bryan W. Fowler^a, Harry Gibbins^a, Ian Lasch^a and Brian Brock^a

^aDepartment of Divinity, Centre for Autism and Theology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK;

^bTizard Centre, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; ^cCardiff School of Technologies, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the discussion of neurodiversity and theological education by presenting a self-reflection by a group of researchers affiliated with the Centre for Autism and Theology at the University of Aberdeen. Literature on postgraduates' experiences is missing from the current discussion on neurodiversity in higher education. This article offers first-hand accounts as a start to address this gap in the literature. Through the self-reflection exercise, it became clear how this group goes beyond policy documents on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) by embodying what it means to be a neurodiverse group and what working together looks like in practice. This was characterized by the following themes: all are valued, students feel well-supported, and space for multiple perspectives enabled challenging the status quo in churches, theology, and the wider autism discourse. Theologically, the group interpreted their experiences along the images of the body of Christ and the *imago Dei*.

KEYWORDS

autism; Centre for Autism and Theology; higher education; neurodiversity; postgraduate research; theology

Introduction

This article contributes to the discussion of neurodiversity and theological education by presenting a self-reflection by a group of researchers affiliated with the Centre for Autism and Theology (CAT) at the University of Aberdeen. The Centre aims to be an international and interdisciplinary hub for research on autism and theology. Throughout the academic year, a neurodiverse¹ group of postgraduate students and academic staff from Aberdeen and other universities gather weekly to discuss articles, book chapters, their own writing, or a specific theme of common interest. The neurodivergences include mainly autism, but also ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and possibly more. Typically, slightly over half of the people

CONTACT Armand Léon van Ommen  leon.vanommen@abdn.ac.uk  Department of Divinity, Centre for Autism and Theology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

gathered for any one meeting identify as neurodivergent; the others identify as neurotypical. The focus of the discussions is usually on autism, as the group comes under the purview of the Centre for Autism and Theology.²

To our knowledge, the Centre is a unique platform for bringing together an international, interdisciplinary, and intentionally neurodiverse group of researchers who are all interested in autism (or other forms of neurodivergence), theology, and church. Through the self-reflection exercise, it became clear that this group goes beyond ticking the boxes of policy documents on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); it *embodies* what it means to be a neurodiverse group and what working together looks like in practice. Furthermore, rather than privileging either neurodivergent or neurotypical voices, the Centre for Autism and Theology explicitly encourages dialog across neurotypes. The wider autism discourse has historically, and sometimes is still, divided between the voices of (neurotypical) parents and/or researchers on the one hand, and autistic people on the other. At the Centre, we are convinced that the discourse needs both, and to put it in theological terms, that reconciliation between these groups is needed.³ This group of researchers seems to be unique in the way that they embody these values—at least, those involved in the group say that it provides a sense of acceptance, safety, and valuing of neurodivergent voices that they seldom find elsewhere. It should be emphasized here, however, that members are invited to participate based on their common interest in autism and theology rather than because of their specific neurotype. It is perhaps this shared interest that facilitates dialogue and brings about reflection within the group, where the voices of both neurodivergent and neurotypical people are shared and considered in an open and welcoming environment. Where differences emerge, these are regarded as opportunities to share experiences and foster greater understanding.

Therefore, it was proposed that an in-depth self-reflection would be a worthwhile contribution to this issue on neurodiversity and theological education. The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the group's practices against the Centre's values but to show how one group of researchers tries to embody the values of in-depth, mutual listening across neurotypes, strengthening each other's research, and valuing each person's voice and experiences with regards to the discourses and practices surrounding autism and faith. In this, the values of the Centre and those held by the group's members overlap. By presenting this self-reflection exercise, we do not intend to provide a blueprint for other groups, but we trust that other groups might take inspiration from this example, and apply what is relevant to their own context.

Our self-reflection focuses on the experience of being researchers in a neurodiverse research context or group and how we might reflect on this theologically. In what follows, we briefly explain our method for this

reflection exercise. We then present the themes that emerged from the reflection exercise. The last of these themes concerns theological reflection in particular.

Methods

Inherent to the topic of neurodiversity are multiple perspectives. This is our experience at the Centre for Autism and Theology, and to enable every group member to participate in the process of writing this article, the following method was designed. First, we held early discussions in the group to review existing literature on autistic experiences of higher education (of which there is a dearth⁴) and to formulate questions to guide our self-reflection:

1. What is the experience (practically or otherwise) of studying, supervising, researching, and interacting with researchers (students and staff) in the neurodiverse context of the Centre for Autism and Theology?
2. How do CAT members reflect on this experience theologically—in other words, what does neurodiversity (in the context of CAT) bring to the study of theology?

All of the group members were invited to write a personal response of ~500 words to these two questions and send them to the first author. Responding in this way was taken to be an indication that one wanted to contribute to this article and to the further process of collaborating on it. These responses were then sent to those group members who had written a response (not everybody chose to participate). These participating group members ($n=8$) were asked to identify common themes across the responses. The group members were then invited to a meeting to discuss the themes that had been identified. Due to the timing (Holy Week in the Western Christian tradition) and short deadlines, only four people could attend the meeting, although two others had sent the themes that they had identified beforehand so that those themes could be included in the discussion. The analyses of the group members were remarkably similar. One member had created a visual representation of the themes that she had identified, which covered most of the themes identified by others. After refining that visual representation in light of the analyses of the group members, this became the basis for writing the Themes section below. Two group members sent their responses after this meeting, but these confirmed our analysis and did not add new elements.

The first author wrote a first draft and sent that to the three members who were present at the meeting. They provided feedback, which the first

author integrated into the article, which was then circulated to all participants for comment. In this way, the article reflects a whole group collaboration. The final version includes feedback from the editors of this journal issue and the anonymous peer feedback.

The method that we designed to write this article has a few limitations. First, a collective self-reflection may not have the same “status” as a research article. For example, if an independent researcher had conducted interviews with the group members, they might have found slightly different themes—perhaps including more negative responses that participants would have felt more comfortable to give anonymously. However, given the dearth of research on the experience of autistic researchers, and especially *postgraduate* students, we consider the format of a self-reflection project to be a worthwhile contribution to the small body of existing research, because it foregrounds the experience of a group that is intentionally neurodiverse and that makes neurodivergent perspectives central.⁵ Second, as a collective self-reflection, it will become clear in this article that all the researchers currently involved identify as Christian and/or work within a Christian framework. That does not mean that the group would not welcome people of other faiths and religions, on the contrary, it is simply a reflection of the current constellation of the group. Finally, given that the first author, who is also the supervisor of a number of the students that contributed to this article, took the lead in organizing this self-reflection and drafted the first version of this article, one may critically note the power dynamics inherent in this set up. We acknowledge these dynamics. Again, at this point an independent researcher might have gotten additional or different comments and reflections from the group members. Whilst we cannot put aside the power dynamics entirely, Sarah (an Aberdeen Master of Theology by Research student who identifies as autistic) commented: “I have noticed that the attitude amongst the research community at CAT is one of generosity, a willingness to share research ideas and mutually supportive. Supervisors encourage and are appreciative of student reviews of their work and this as well as the CAT and PT [= Practical Theology] meetings have a sense of democracy and respect underpinning them.” Other responses echo Sarah’s observation, as will become clear throughout this article.

Themes

Four main themes emerged from our individual analyses and subsequent discussion. The first theme is “All are valued” and includes three sub-themes: “All-embracing community,” “Neurodiverse conversations,” and “Sensitivity to power in landscape.” The other themes are “Well-supported,” “Challenging the status quo,” and “Theological framework.” All themes are

related to each other, but we will highlight some specific relationships between the themes that are particularly noteworthy.

All are valued

One theme that stands out across all responses to the two questions is that the group members feel that every participant is valued in the Centre for Autism and Theology's research group. Not only is each member valued as a person, but their disciplinary perspectives or theological differences are also valued. As discussed below, this ethos has a theological underpinning, which gives it additional force (see "Theological framework").

Various (autistic) group members contrast this welcoming ethos with previous experiences of other groups, including churches. Harry (an Aberdeen PhD student who identifies as autistic) notes:

People belong [in churches] only on certain conditions in which belonging becomes a reward for adherence to a moral code. What is clear from the plethora of research undertaken by members of the Centre of Autism and Theology is that it is this misguided apprehension of difference that is to be addressed within the context of being an autistic person.

He also speaks about the need to "mask" differences to adhere to a community's norms and belong. Many autistic (or otherwise (neuro)divergent) people "mask" or "camouflage" (Cook et al., 2021). Sarah speaks about this in relation to her studies as an undergraduate student quite a few years ago. At the time, she did not know she was autistic. Despite "muddling through" she achieved good grades, "albeit at a huge cost to my mental, spiritual and physical health and a vow to never to pick up an academic book again." Other differences can be equally difficult to navigate. For example, one might do research on a religious topic in a social science context, where that topic is not always understood or appreciated by colleagues. In the words of one researcher: "I feel people in spaces that share the same interests and passions as me will always end up being more fruitful than places where I cannot be authentic." As a research group, we try to value differences and all disciplinary perspectives, hoping that all members feel that they can be authentic and valued. The following subthemes provide more texture as to how we try to live this ethos.

All-embracing community

Whilst research on neurodivergence unites the group, the members' positionalities differ significantly. Consequently, it is accurate to describe the group as "all-embracing" as to acknowledge the variety of member's experiences. It is not simply that each person's contribution is valued, but a

recognition that their lived experience is unique, is to be embraced, and that it enriches the conversation. Most members are theologians, but the group includes social scientists and a computing scientist, and some join as theologians but also have degrees in other disciplines. Some are ordained clergy. Various members identify as autistic or otherwise neurodivergent, but some are neurotypical. Some are parents of neurodivergent children (this is true for both autistic and non-autistic group members). Regarding sex and gender, the group is fairly balanced.⁶ The group ranges in age from early twenties to sixties with a good balance between decades. Usually, most people who join the weekly meetings are students, but various academic staff members from different universities, including the University of Aberdeen, are part of the group. Group members come from various countries, although less diversity is found when it comes to ethnicity.

Finally, some members can see each other in person, especially those staff and students based in Aberdeen, other students join for the annual Postgraduate Research Symposium in Aberdeen, whilst yet others only know each other through virtual interactions. Being a distance student is a “double-edged sword,” as Chris (an Aberdeen PhD student who identifies as autistic) explains: “[O]n the one side being a distant learning student can be very isolating and lonely whilst on the other I value the solitude inherent in being a distant learning student, my space where I do not have to perform or engage socially if I do not want to.” As all these differences show, this research group is indeed an all-embracing community, but a community nevertheless, for which it is even more significant that each person and positionality is valued.

Neurodiverse conversations and communication

Such an all-embracing community, with its ethos of valuing and welcoming each other, creates a unique context for conversations between and across neurotypes. Several autistic members commented in their responses that they feel that they can more easily be themselves in this group than in some other groups that they are part of because approximately half of the group members identify as autistic or as neurodivergent in some other way. In the words of Ian (a PhD student who identifies as autistic):

While I was greatly looking forward to my studies, it never occurred to me that I would find community along the way (in part because I've only ever felt tangentially connected, at best, to other communities I've ostensibly been a part of). Finding a place and a group of people where I feel as though I belong has been a great source of learning, and even beyond that, of joy.

Ian comments that he feels understood by the group, partly because of having autistic peers in the group but also due to the understanding of

autism that non-autistic group members share. Harry comments about this understanding too:

CAT helps me to be myself because I get to whittle endlessly about theology and how much I love it. They take me seriously when I speak for the eighteenth time about how *Dungeons and Dragons* can be a theological tool for understanding creativity and storytelling. They do not tell me to stay on topic if I begin telling them niche trivia about *Doctor Who*. Instead, I am free to the creative, explorative, and formative process of theological study at a pace and a tone which make sense to me.

It seems that the people in this group feel more free to contribute to the conversation than might be the case in other settings. The result is a level of authenticity that is necessary for good research, as Krysia (a PhD student at another university) commented. They also speak about conversations across neurotypes: “I have personally had a variety of stimulating discussions with colleagues who identify as neurodivergent, and those who do not. I enjoy the quality of interaction I have with autistic colleagues, but also deeply value the neurodiverse conversations with non-autistic identifying peers.”

At the same time, neurotypicals also value being part of a neurodiverse community, where they can regularly check their understanding and interpretation of autism. Henna (an Aberdeen PhD student who identifies as neurotypical) commented:

The regular contact means that my research and writing is embedded in an ongoing process of feedback and refinement, which helps me to avoid pathologizing neurodivergence or making assumptions based on my own experience of the world. I value getting feedback both from those with first person, lived experience of being autistic/neurodivergent, but also from those who are in caring roles, as I have often found these two perspectives to be quite different.

Similarly, Léon (Aberdeen academic staff who identifies as neurotypical), wrote in his response:

For me, as a non-autistic supervisor working in the area of autism and supervising autistic students, it is a hugely enriching experience to spend much time with autistic students and academic staff. Through my contact with all these students and researchers, I learn much about autism, including how it works out in the lives of people on a daily basis. This helps to go beyond stereotypes and to see each person for who they are.

These conversations across neurotypes help to improve our own writing and publications, in part because they elicit feedback from this group of

researchers that (mostly) study similar topics. Discussing work in progress with those who identify as neurodivergent in various ways helps to expose where such work is being unconsciously governed (and weakened) by the assumptive world of one particular viewpoint. The non-autistic researcher gains the viewpoint of the autistic researcher, and vice-versa, as to how various theological propositions might be heard and understood by those who think differently, and how proposals related to the Christian life might work out in practice. In this way, our discussions help to mitigate issues arising due to the double empathy problem. The double empathy problem states that the communication partners better understand communication between members of the same neurotype, as well as each other's experience of the world, than when the conversation takes place across neurotypes (Milton, 2012). Discussing our research in a neurodiverse group allows researchers to engage "in an ongoing process of feedback and refinement." Also, too often misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic people has caused alienation and pain. Reconciliation is needed; the research group embodies this.

Sensitivity to power in landscape

Weekly conversations about neurodiversity inevitably lead to discussions of masking (as noted above), fitting in, marginalization, and power dynamics. Autistic people often feel like a stranger in a world in which the social rules seem self-evident to everyone else. This is sometimes illustrated by the analogy of visiting a country in which you do not speak the language. Inevitably, that leads to social exclusion, insecurity, anxiety, and awkward situations (see e.g., Rapley, 2021, pp. 27–28). To fit in, autistic people feel they need to adapt to the social norms and "mask" their own autistic behavior and thinking (Miller et al., 2021; Sedgewick et al., 2022). It is clear how this leads to power imbalances. The conversations in our group make us more aware of these dynamics in the context of the academy, church, and wider society. These conversations also form us as researchers and as human beings, in turn shaping our research. One example of this is that there is a keen sense in the group that research about autism should be done in consultation with autistic people, leading some students and staff to use methodologies that suit that way of working. This includes the use of Participatory Action Research, a method of enquiry in which researchers and stakeholders work collaboratively to gain an understanding of a situation or phenomenon, with a view to implementing a positive process of change (Cameron et al., 2010). Another researcher within the group is using creative ways to include autistic people within the design of their research (e.g., critical friends, see Kember et al., 1997) to "tap into" reflexivity of their own social position and identities. Another

example is that this awareness helps us to keep in view the question of how our research will benefit neurodivergent people. We will return to this subtheme when discussing the themes of “Challenging the status quo” and “Theological framework.” For now, it suffices to say that the conversations in the research group help to readdress the power imbalance, and hopefully provide a space safe enough so that masking is not necessary.

Well-supported

The second theme follows from the first, and from its subthemes: group members report that they feel well-supported. Being valued *as you are* is arguably a form of support in itself. In addition, some group members made specific comments about the support that they experienced from being part of the Centre for Autism and Theology’s research community. For example, students feel that their supervisors are knowledgeable about autism. Supervisors are not perfect, but students see and appreciate that they do the best that they can to support their autistic (and other) students, including trying to understand what it means to be an autistic researcher.

Another form of support that both staff members and students receive from being part of this research community is related to the specific constellation of the group (see “All-embracing community” above): theologians in the group benefit from the input of other disciplinary perspectives and vice versa. Each discipline has its own paradigm, and having conversations across those paradigms as well as listening to debates in a discipline other than one’s own sharpens our research. Such discussions can be fruitful in our context, where everyone feels valued and where there is a common focus and interest in autism, church, and theology.

Challenging the status quo

Two defining characteristics of the Centre for Autism and Theology give the research that emerges from the Centre a particular outlook that challenges the status quo in theology and other disciplines. First, the research group is keen to do research *with* autistic people and encourages autistic researchers to embrace their positionality as being autistic, reflecting on how that plays out in their research. Moreover, the group encourages non-autistic members also to be aware of their positionality as non-autistic which is again related to the double-empathy problem that we mentioned above (Waldock & Keates, 2022). Second, the Centre takes a non-pathological approach to autism, which means that autism is not seen primarily as a disorder, but as a particular way of being in the world, which can result in unique experiences and perspectives. That is not to say that the

group takes a dismissive approach to the challenges that autistic people may face, but it questions whether those challenges are always inherent to autism, or are a function of the way society and communities are structured. To be sure, the researchers in this group do not agree on all aspects of how to evaluate the medical, social, or other models of disability. However, these two characteristics of the Centre for Autism and Theology do give a certain perspective on autism and how autism relates to theological discussions.

The centrality of autistic people themselves in our research projects, and the non-pathological approach that we encourage, result in critical questions that the research group brings to the table in theological discussions more broadly. These relate to faith communities and their practices, and to the academic discourse around autism. In the words of Grant (an Aberdeen staff member who identifies as autistic): “To work in a group where autistic leadership is recognized, such that the ‘normalcy’ of the neurotypical is never presumed, itself frames the issues in very different ways to most contexts.” For example, Bryan (an Aberdeen PhD student who identifies as non-autistic) notes how “our readings and discussions at the Centre for Autism and Theology have shaped my theological thinking, giving me insights that I would not have received from my [church] tradition and enabling me to see the world the way God sees it.” In a similar vein, Henna comments:

Within my own project it has become apparent how much existing theology is (to quote one of my research participants) “neurotypically coded” – i.e., it assumes a neurotypical experience of language, cognitive/physical wellbeing, social profile/preferences. It has highlighted to me how much ‘spiritual scorekeeping’ is centered around practices which are essentially social, e.g., weekly church attendance or vocalized extempore prayer.

One means by which these new perspectives are gained, and in which questions are raised, is through the specific interest that theology has in how language functions to describe but also to construct realities. Hence attention is given by various group members to the language we use around autism (Macaskill, 2019, pp. 9–10; Van Ommen, 2023, pp. 22–29). At the same time, given that an estimated 25–35% of autistic people do not use spoken language as their primary way of communication (i.e., they are non- or minimally speaking; see Norrelgen et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2019) the perspective of this autistic sub-group provides yet another important angle from which to consider the (theological) questions that the research group tries to discern and to address.

Attention to language, dehumanizing theories of autism, power dynamics, and more, questions the “normalcy” that is operant in most academic, religious, and societal contexts. In that regard, the research group benefits

from being embedded in the Divinity department at the University of Aberdeen, with a longstanding practice of paying attention to those who are marginalized by society because of disabilities, mental health challenges, dementia, or otherwise. The research group provides an opportunity to “practice what we preach” in terms of becoming a community where each person is valued and belongs. Living the vision of what we preach, however imperfectly, has the potential to challenge the status quo beyond mere policy documents on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion.

Theological framework

The fourth theme, “Theological framework,” can be seen as the theme that underpins all of the above. In the responses that the group members wrote to the two initial questions, the theological underpinning was particularly evident in the reflections on how “All are valued.” As noted in the discussion of that theme, the theological underpinning gives additional force to the welcome that the group gives to each member and the valuing of multiple perspectives, because that ethos is not just a social nicety but is in fact deeply rooted in the theological notion that God values all people. It was remarkable that many members referred to St. Paul’s image of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31) and applied that to how the research group functions. The group members, especially those who identify as autistic, seem to find a place where they feel that they can fit in and belong, in ways that they do not always experience in other places. In the words of Grant: “The biblical image of the body is not intended to convey the complexity of anatomy, but the vitality of physiology, of a body that lives because it has lots of different parts.” The research group is a place where in some small way St. Paul’s image is embodied.

There is a prophetic edge to the Pauline image of the body of Christ that we often blunt unwittingly, a disruptive challenge to value each part of the body, particularly those parts that wider society and the academy often functionally regard as “weaker.” Ian wrote in his response:

I have long considered Paul’s language of the Body of Christ to be much more than just metaphor, and I think this is a part of what’s been missing sometimes from experiences of Christian community that I have found before. If we really are going to value every member of the Body, and for the unique part that it happens to be, then I think that we need to have a much greater appreciation for diversity *per se* than it seems to me most Christian communities, including higher education communities, do.

In a similar vein, Léon wrote:

Autistic people have too often been excluded from church (and society and academy). The hand has said to the foot too often that it didn’t need the foot. CAT

provides a platform or context in which autistic researchers and their allies are encouraged to take their rightful place in the body of Christ – academically and otherwise – and even to show the hand that it was wrong in thinking it didn't need the foot.

Chris, reflecting on what he brings to the table as an autistic researcher, sums up this prophetic approach nicely when he writes that he brings his “ability and calling to be a dreamer and a fighter.” We should note that the research group meetings are not an exercise in being critical of church, theology, or the academy. Out of a position of being marginalized as neurodivergent people, and as neurotypicals trying to be good allies, it is inevitable that the pain and disappointment of being marginalized is shared in our discussions. All members, however, are also appreciative of initiatives by various communities, including the church and the academy, that support neurodivergent people to reach their full potential. The discussions in the group and the research undertaken emerge out of a passion to see God's reign breaking into the various contexts of which we are part. Naturally, that means being critical where needed, but only because many in the group would echo Chris' self-description of being “fighters and dreamers.”

Other theological images or notions provide further underpinning to the research and ethics of the group. In particular, the notion of being created in the image of God is important to various group members. Bryan reflects: “Moreover, CAT has demonstrated how my theological tradition has often failed to consider the diversity of others' ways of thinking and being. I have found it disturbing to hear from some in my tradition who do not acknowledge that a person bears God's image because of a diagnosis or neurodiversity.” Similarly reflecting on diversity and the image of God, Sarah writes:

Theology, like church communities, needs neurodivergence to inform, challenge and enrich its neuro-normative systems of belief, dogma and praxis. It needs different minds and ways of experiencing the world, faith and belonging in dialogue with respectful non-autistic academics to inclusively broaden its relevance and representation of what it means to be human and made in the image of God.

Obviously, the notion of diversity is included in the body of Christ image, and it is interesting to see how some group members connect this also to being created in the image of God. Hands, feet, and all other parts are needed in the body of Christ—are needed to do good theology—together reflecting the image of God, as body of Christ, who is the image of God (Macaskill, 2019, pp. 93–97).

Finally, under this theme, we should state the perhaps obvious yet unique feature of the Centre for Autism and Theology's research group, which is the space it creates for the interplay between autism and theology.

All the research projects that the group members conduct have neurodiversity or a particular neurodivergence as their focus (mostly autism). These projects are approached theologically, or when set in another disciplinary context religion is in view. Moreover, the research questions are addressed through an autistic lens—where the researcher is neurotypical, they go to great lengths to adopt an autistic lens to whatever extent that is possible. This will result in an increasing number of publications that can be classified either as autistic theologies or theologies of autism (and possibly autistic theologies of autism). At the same time, the theological context of the group results in theological perspectives on autism, providing a unique disciplinary perspective to the wider autism discourse. As theologians, we can reflect on what it means for autistic people to be created in the image of God or to function, as a group, as the body of Christ, in ways that would be beyond the scope of other disciplines.

Conclusion

On the surface, one sees a small group of researchers who meet weekly to chat, drink coffee, share their works-in-progress, and discuss the various topics and questions that arise from their research. However, that same group embodies the aspiration for equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) that is written into policy documents, showing that documents in itself are not enough—EDI is only a reality when it is embodied. Part of that embodiment is the intentional mutual cooperation between, and listening across, neurotypes, living the kind of reconciliation between different voices and experiences that the Centre for Autism and Theology seeks to promote—values that are shared by the group's members. This reconciliation was recognized in one image this group used in this self-reflection exercise: “the body of Christ”—in which no preferential treatment or exclusion is conferred on stronger or weaker members. As our thematic analysis has identified, members feel that their contribution is welcomed and valued, regardless of their neurotype, age, or status within the academy. This contributes to the well-being of group members, especially those who may feel excluded from some other social facets of university life. Moreover, different disciplines and research interests are brought to the table each week. This not only enriches the research but enriches the researchers, creating opportunities to explore different perspectives on the work that they do.

Although we seek not to give a list of recommendations or a “tick list,” in terms of what other groups might seek to embed from our approach, an intentionality surrounding acceptance and reflection on the social position each individual occupies is key. A list of recommendations could be applied in an insensitive manner with an output expected. Furthermore, our critical reflection highlights the importance of our theological

standpoint, which in many ways grounds and shapes how our group works. Where “normative modes of belonging” within church spaces have been critiqued (Waldock, 2023), perhaps the same questions remain of how appropriate a goal of “being inclusive” is in theological education spaces. However much of an oxymoron it may sound, it is no exaggeration to say that the group is “united by (neuro)diversity”—diversity is just about the only thing that unites this bunch of “dreamers and fighters.” And yet it emerges that diversity brings many benefits both to researchers and to their research.

Notes

1. Following Nick Walker, we define “neurodivergent” as “having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal.’” A neurodiverse group includes people who “differ substantially from [each other], in terms of their neurocognitive functioning.” As such, a neurodiverse group can include both neurotypical and neurodivergent people (Walker, 2021, pp. 33–46, quotations on pp. 38, 42).
2. Some people who identify with other neurodivergences than autism have pointed out that in some discussions neurodivergence seems to be equated with autism. That is not the intention here. The only reason the focus of our work, and hence this article, is on autism is because that is the focus of the Centre for Autism and Theology. At the same time, the Centre welcomes people who identify with other neurodivergences, which is why these are mentioned here too.
3. <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/centre-for-the-study-of-autism-and-christian-community-1725.php#panel2095>, last accessed on April 21st 2023.
4. Existing literature on this topic was found to relate only to undergraduate experience. For example, we discussed an article by Van Hees et al. (2015). We also reviewed the following two websites providing toolkits and resources: <https://imageautism.com>; <https://www.autism-uni.org>.
5. A recent article on autistic researchers in academia foregrounds the voices of autistic academics, but this is not based on postgraduate researchers (Jones, 2023).
6. Insofar as known—people are never asked to reveal anything about their identity in this group that they do not want to share. It should be noted that a relatively high percentage of neurodivergent people identifies as other than cisgender. Similarly, we have never asked group members about their sexual orientation.

Disclosure statement

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

References

- Cameron, H., Bhatti, D., Duce, C., Sweeney, J., & Watkins, C. (2010). *Talking about god in practice: Theological action research and practical theology*. SCM Press.
- Cook, J., Hull, L., Crane, L., & Mandy, W. (2021). Camouflaging in autism: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 89, 102080. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102080>

- Jones, S. C. (2023). Advice for autistic people considering a career in academia. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 27(7), 2187–2192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613231161882>
- Kember, D., Ha, T.-S., Lam, B.-H., Lee, A., Ng, S., Yan, L., & Yum, J. C. K. (1997). The diverse role of the critical friend in supporting educational action research projects. *Educational Action Research*, 5(3), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799700200036>
- Macaskill, G. (2019). *Autism and the church: Bible, theology, and community*. Baylor University Press.
- Miller, D., Rees, J., & Pearson, A. (2021). “Masking is life”: Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood: Challenges and Management*, 3(4), 330–338. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0083>
- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The ‘double empathy problem’. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>
- Norrelgen, F., Fernell, E., Eriksson, M., Hedvall, Å., Persson, C., Sjölin, M., Gillberg, C., & Kjellmer, L. (2015). Children with autism spectrum disorders who do not develop phrase speech in the preschool years. *Autism*, 19(8), 934–943. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361314556782>
- Rapley, S. (2021). *Autistic thinking in the life of the church*. SCM Press.
- Russell, G., Mandy, W., Elliott, D., White, R., Pittwood, T., & Ford, T. (2019). Selection bias on intellectual ability in autism research: A cross-sectional review and meta-analysis. *Molecular Autism*, 10(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-019-0260-x>
- Sedgewick, F., Hull, L., & Ellis, H. (2022). *Autism and masking: How and why people do it, and the impact it can have*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Van Hees, V., Moyson, T., & Roeyers, H. (2015). Higher education experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder: Challenges, benefits and support needs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(6), 1673–1688. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2324-2>
- Van Ommen, A. L. (2023). *Autism and worship: A liturgical theology*. Baylor University Press.
- Waldock, K. E. (2023). The impossible subject: Belonging as a neurodivergent in congregations. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2023.2249452>
- Waldock, K. E., & Keates, N. (2022). Autistic voices in autistic research: Towards active citizenship in autism research. In S. Ryan & D. Milton (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of critical autism studies* (pp. 288–302). Routledge.
- Walker, N. (2021). *Neuroqueer heresies: Notes on the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic empowerment, and postnormal possibilities*. Autonomous Press.