

Making Room Is Not Enough: Inclusive Discipleship and the Belonging of Neurodivergent People

Most churches want to be welcoming.

We say it in our bulletins, on our websites, from our platforms, and in the way we greet people at the door. We want people to know they're invited. We want families to feel comfortable. We want children, teens, and adults to know there's a place for them in the body of Christ.

But over time, I've become convinced that there's an important difference between making room for someone and helping someone belong.

And that difference matters deeply for autistic and neurodivergent people in our churches.

A church can make room for a child in children's ministry, but still leave that child sitting off to the side. A teen can be present in youth group, but still feel like they're watching community happen from the outside. An adult can attend worship every week, but never quite find a place in the relational life of the congregation. A family can be welcomed warmly at the door, but still carry the quiet exhaustion of wondering whether their loved one will be understood, included, or merely tolerated.

And most of the time, this doesn't happen because a church is unkind.

Many congregations are full of people who genuinely care. The problem is that we sometimes confuse welcoming with belonging.

Welcoming says: "You can be here."

Belonging says: "We're not whole without you."

That's a much deeper kind of community.

Disability Ministry as a Bridge

Disability ministry can be a beautiful and necessary gift.

Churches may need sensory rooms, buddy systems, modified classrooms, quiet spaces, trained volunteers, visual supports, accessible worship practices, and individualized care. Those supports can make participation possible for people who might otherwise be excluded.

So, the concern isn't that churches offer disability-specific support. The concern is when those supports become the only place where disabled or neurodivergent people are expected to belong.

A separate space can be helpful. Sometimes it's necessary. But it should never become a substitute for shared life in the body of Christ.

That's where churches have to ask a deeper question.

Are our disability ministries serving as bridges into the broader life of the church, or have they unintentionally become destinations that keep people separated from the rest of the congregation?

A support person, for example, can function like a guard or like a bridge.

A guard keeps someone quiet, managed, and out of the way.

A bridge helps someone participate, connect, understand, contribute, and be known.

That difference is enormous.

The goal isn't simply to keep an autistic child calm in a classroom. It isn't just to make sure a neurodivergent adult has a quiet place to go. Those things may matter, and sometimes they matter a lot. But the larger goal is discipleship. It's belonging. It's helping each person participate in the worship, relationships, service, and formation of the church in ways that honor how God has made them.

From Access to Belonging

One way to think about this is through a simple movement:

Access. Accommodation. Inclusion. Participation. Belonging. Flourishing.

Access asks: "Can this person be here?"

That's important. If a person can't enter the building, tolerate the environment, understand the expectations, or safely remain in the space, then belonging is going to be difficult. Access may include physical accessibility, sensory awareness, clear communication, predictable routines, and environments that don't overwhelm people before they ever have a chance to participate.

Accommodation asks: "What support does this person need?"

For an autistic child, that might mean noise-reducing headphones, a visual schedule, flexible seating, or a trusted helper. For a teen, it might mean a clearer explanation of what to expect in youth group. For an adult, it might mean permission to participate in fellowship, small groups, or worship without being forced into uncomfortable social expectations. Accommodation isn't special treatment. It's hospitality that removes unnecessary barriers.

Inclusion asks: "Have we considered this person as part of the community?"

This is where churches begin to move beyond reaction. Inclusion means we're not surprised that neurodivergent people are here. We plan with them in mind. We train volunteers. We listen to families. We ask adults what helps them participate. We build systems that expect difference instead of treating difference like an interruption.

Participation asks: "Is this person sharing in the life of the church?"

This may look different for different people. Participation doesn't always mean sitting still, answering out loud, making eye contact, joining every activity, or engaging in ways that look typical. A person may participate through art, music, service, technology, prayer, presence, movement, silence, or careful observation. The question isn't whether everyone participates identically. The question is whether each person has a meaningful way to share in the life of the body.

Belonging asks: "Is this person known, valued, and missed?"

This is where the church moves from program to relationship. Belonging means people aren't merely assigned to a room or supported by a volunteer. They're known by name. Their gifts are noticed. Their absence matters. Their presence shapes the community.

Flourishing asks: "Is this person growing as a disciple within the community?"

The goal of inclusion isn't simply presence. The goal is formation. Neurodivergent people aren't only people to be served. They're people who can worship, grow, serve, teach, bless, and reveal something of God's grace to the church.

The Whole Body Needs the Whole Body

Paul's picture of the church as the body of Christ reminds us that the members who may seem weaker are indispensable. The church doesn't become more faithful by placing some members at the margins. The church becomes more fully itself when every part of the body is honored, included, and allowed to contribute.

This means neurodivergent belonging isn't only a children's ministry issue. It isn't only a special needs ministry issue. It's a whole-church discipleship issue.

Children need to be incorporated into the life of their classes and peer communities.

Teens need spaces where they don't have to mask their way into acceptance.

Adults need churches that recognize their gifts, not only their needs.

Families and caregivers need congregations that don't leave them to carry the weight of inclusion alone.

Pastors and ministry leaders need to ask whether our churches are merely making space for people to attend, or whether we're cultivating communities where people can truly belong.

This is holy work.

It's not peripheral to the mission of the church. It's part of what it means to be a sanctified people shaped by the love of Christ.

Holiness isn't only personal purity. It's love made visible. It's the life of Christ embodied in a people who refuse to treat anyone as extra, inconvenient, or outside the reach of discipleship.

A Better Question

Churches often ask: "How do we make room for people with disabilities?"

That's a good question, but it's not the final question.

A better question may be: "How is our church incomplete without them?"

That question changes everything.

It moves us from management to mutuality.

From accommodation to participation.

From ministry for people to life with people.

From making space to making family.

Disability ministry can be a beautiful bridge. But the destination is belonging.

The goal isn't simply to create better programs. The goal is to become the kind of church where autistic and neurodivergent people of every age are present, invited, welcomed, known, supported, befriended, needed, loved, and disciplined.

Making room is a beginning.

Belonging is the calling.

About the Author

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As the father to a son with autism, Adam's work is shaped by both pastoral ministry and lived family experience. His writing and continued graduate work explore the intersection of general mental health, disability, discipleship, belonging, and the life of the local church.

To continue the conversation, you can visit www.brightstarministries.org to find free resources that will help support individuals and churches with mental, spiritual, and neurodivergent well-being.