

FACILITATOR GUIDE: OFFERING A WIDER WELCOME WITHIN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Focus: Exploring how congregations can embody a wider welcome by listening to the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals and their families, and by cultivating practices of belonging, inclusion, and shared life in Christ.

Opening Prayer (Facilitator prays aloud)

Gracious and welcoming God,

You have created each of us in Your image, with minds, bodies, and ways of being that reflect Your creativity and love. As we gather, open our hearts to listen deeply—not just with our ears, but with compassion and humility. Help us to see the experiences of others more clearly, to recognize where barriers exist, and to imagine how Your Church might grow into a more faithful expression of welcome. Guide our conversation, that it may be honest, hopeful, and shaped by Your Spirit. In the name of Jesus, who made room for all, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Romans 15:7

Facilitator Notes To Share During Reflection (Optional)

- **We Reflect Christ—We Do Not Replace Christ:** In the Reformed tradition, the Church is called the Body of Christ, not because we are Christ, but because we are called to bear witness to Christ in the world. Our life together should make visible something of Christ’s love, justice, and welcome. You might say, *“We are not Christ, but we are called to reflect Christ. The question is: when people encounter our community, do they experience something that looks like Jesus?”*
- **Belonging Is Rooted in Grace, Not Conformity:** At the heart of Reformed theology is the conviction that we belong to God by grace alone—not by behavior, ability, or fitting expectations. If that is true, then the Church must be a place where belonging is not earned. You might share, *“In a grace-centered community, people don’t have to prove they belong. They belong because God has already claimed them.”*
- **Every Person Bears the Image of God (Imago Dei):** Reformed theology affirms that every human being is created in the image of God. That means neurodiversity is not outside God’s design—it is part of the richness of God’s creation. You can highlight, *“If every person bears God’s image, then inclusion is not optional—it’s essential to who we are as the Church.”*
- **The Spirit Is Still Reforming the Church:** The Reformed tradition holds to *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, which can be understood as “the church reformed, always being reformed” according to the Word of God. This means the Church is not finished—we are always being reshaped by the Spirit to more fully reflect Christ.

You could summarize by stating, *“Being the Body of Christ means being open to change. As we listen to new voices and experiences, the Spirit continues to reform us into a more faithful community.”* Jesus invites the church to be the body reflecting Christ’s compassionate love to all children, especially when others tried to keep them away. The disciples assumed children didn’t belong in the center of religious life—Jesus corrected them. Reflecting on his words, **“Let the children come unto me” consider whom we have unintentionally or intentionally kept away from being full participants in our congregational life today? Remember that for many neurodiverse children, barriers in our congregational life may not be intentional, but they are real.**

Key Terms For Understanding Neurodiversity

- Neurodiversity: Natural variations in how people think, learn, and experience the world. Difference, not deficit.
- Neurotypical: Describes people whose learning, communication, and behavior fit within social expectations.
- Neurodivergent: Refers to people whose brains process and interact differently—in areas like learning, attention, communication, or sensory experience.
- Neurotypical Bias: The assumption that neurotypical ways are “normal,” which can unintentionally exclude others.

Video Viewing

Show Big Faith Resources’ video *Real Faith, Real Stories, Real Change*, which can be found at <https://bigfaithresources.com/big-faith-resources-video>

Facilitator Instructions

Invite participants to jot down emotions or personal connections while watching. Lead group discussion. Lead with openness; don’t rush responses.

- What emotions or thoughts came up for you as you watched the video?
- What specific moments in the video made you feel connected to the child’s or family’s experience?
- Have you heard similar stories voiced within your own community or someone you know? How has their experience changed your perspective?

Quotes To Share To Deepen Reflection

1. Sarah Griffith Lund says, *“The church is called to be a place where all people can bring their full, authentic selves before God... we reveal more fully the body of Christ.”*
2. Michael Paul Cartledge shares, *“Inclusion is not simply an act of welcome; it is a theological commitment... reshaped by those it has overlooked.”*



Digging Deeper

The facilitator may want to lift up that *“Despite strides in inclusivity, neurodiverse children (and their families) often face exclusion in church, especially corporate worship, hindering their engagement in faith practices and fellowship. As a result, half of the parents of children with special needs skip religious activities due to a lack of support.”*

Use a piece of paper and engage in a Congregational Audit as you reflect on how to engage in offering a Wider Welcome, answering the following individually on your paper and sharing with a small group at a time for table discussions or a facilitator can lead as a larger group discussion.

Congregational Audit (After watching the video)

- Where are barriers present within your own community?
- What changes can be made?
- Where do you see hope flourishing?
- How can we shape what we do so more people can belong?

Transition Suggestion

The Facilitator reads aloud, “Having conversations like these help build awareness and encourage more support to address belonging and neurodiversity in our faith communities.”

Embracing Hope and Renewal (Facilitator continues to read aloud)

Each neurodiverse child is unique, with strengths and gifts they bring to the church. The Church has often been slow to adapt to the variety of needs, learning styles, and abilities of all God’s children. But today, we have heard stories of faith that celebrate hope—signs of the Spirit at work among us and how our churches can offer a wider welcome for all God’s children.

Facilitator Note

Thank participants for their time. Invite them to consider how to consider this discussion or when to reconvene for additional study and reflection as you learn together about neurodiversity in the Church.

Closing Prayer (Facilitator prays aloud)

God of welcome and grace,

Help us to be a Church where all belong. Make our churches places of radical hospitality, where no one is hindered from coming to You. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Additional resources, including handouts, additional videos, and downloadable materials, can be found at BigFaithResources.com.

