

May 2023

## Online Worship and the Autism Community

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### Recommended Citation

Bedard, Stephen J. (2023) "Online Worship and the Autism Community," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 15.

DOI: [10.9707/2833-1508.1121](https://doi.org/10.9707/2833-1508.1121)

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol4/iss2/15>

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## Online Worship and the Autism Community

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge the congregations that I have pastored at that have continue to stream their services online: Queen Street Baptist Church and Brookfield Baptist Church.

# Online Worship and the Autism Community

**Stephen Bedard**

**A**s a Christian clergyperson, the intersection of autism and religious faith is of much more interest to me than just academic curiosity or the running of an outreach program. Three of my five children are autistic and we have experienced the challenges of including them in the life of the church. More recently, I have received my own diagnosis of autism and have begun to reflect on my own experiences of inclusion and exclusion. I come to this topic as a pastor, as a father of autistic children, and as an autistic self-advocate.

While there is some evidence that belief in God is lower among autistic individuals, religious faith is important to some (Norenzayan et al., 2012). The actual number of autistic people who attend religious services is not known but there are autistic people found within every major religion, and this can be a very meaningful experience for them. Unfortunately, as with many other aspects of diversity, there have been experiences ranging from harmful ignorance to outright rejection (Gillibrand, 2010).

A blog post on CNN recounts an experience in Cambridge, England that highlights both the reality and fear of autistic individuals and their families.

Paul Rimmer intended to celebrate the end of Father's Day at church with his two young sons in tow. But their time together was cut short for what the church considered a disruption and Rimmer considered "rejection." The family was to attend Sunday's Evensong, a mostly sung-through evening service, at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England.

The event was particularly thrilling for Rimmer's 9-year-old son, Tristan, who loves the 16th-century church's ceilings and famed Latin chorales. And because he has autism and is nonverbal, he expresses his excitement primarily through laughter and calls, his dad explained. But before the end of the service, an usher asked Tristan and his family to leave on the grounds that he was disrupting fellow parishioners, Rimmer said. (Andrew & Ries, 2019)

Sadly, there are many more examples of this, ones that are not publicized on major news networks. David V. Urban shares his experience of bringing his son to church and recognizing: “It became apparent that the pastors were worried that Daniel was scaring off visitors.” This led to a meeting in which it was strongly “hinted” that the family should leave the church (Urban, 2021, p. 13).

While people are not removed from churches and other places of worship on a regular basis simply for being autistic, I have spoken to several parents who have been asked to leave a church because of their autistic child. This exclusion is not limited to children. Theologian Summer Kinard tells of an autistic man named Garrison who asked persistent but important questions about the absence of disabled people in congregations. His inquiries were not welcomed, and he exclaimed: “I’m looking for a church that won’t ask me to leave” (Kinard, 2019, p. 50).

Most often, the problems of accessibility are much more subtle than a formal request to leave. We have a young adult son with autism who lives in a group home. He has indicated an interest in faith and enjoys attending church when he can. The group home where he lives wants to support him in this for his personal flourishing and had made arrangements for him to attend a local Christian church where one of the people who work at his house attended.

We were under the impression, based on conversations with the group home, that the situation was working well. Our son was enjoying the services and seemed interested based on their knowledge of him. Our son is minimally verbal and so it is more complex than just asking him to describe the quality of his church experience. Evaluation must happen within the context of a relationship which can recognize his subtle forms of communication.

And so, I was contacted by the minister of the church, who knew that I was the parent as well as a fellow clergy person. The minister expressed concern about sounds that my son was making during the worship service. Our son tends to hum at various levels throughout the day. Church leaders interpreted this as stress and the minister suggested that they take our son from the main worship service and place in a group of junior high children, even though our son was a young adult. This was completely unacceptable, and we made it clear that another solution would have to be found.

It was in the midst of this that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world. In our country, all the faith communities had to suspend in-person worship services and those that could, moved to online options. Our son was given the option to either watch the services of the church he had been attending or to watch the services at the church where I was a minister. The choice was quickly made to watch the services from “Dad’s church,” and this became an enjoyable part of his routine.

At the same time as this, I was doing research for my Doctor of Ministry thesis on how congregations can be more welcoming and inclusive of people with disabilities. While not a formal part of the questions in my qualitative research, families that experienced either physical or intellectual disabilities expressed their appreciation for online services and the changes that made for accessibility. The intersection of my academic research with the experience of my son led to further reflection on the benefits and challenges of online services for autistic worshipers.

## **The Rise of Online Worship Services**

Faith communities have had some online presence for almost as long as there has been an internet. While the initial offerings have evolved from simple text versions of sermons to weekly podcast feeds to elaborate video productions, both live-stream and pre-recorded, faith communities have adapted to the evolving technology. Equipment has become more affordable and the potential with just an iPhone and wifi is far beyond what was available just a decade ago.

While many congregations saw online services as either an interesting gimmick or a useful marketing tool, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of buildings brought the question of online services to the forefront. It quickly went from a minor consideration to an absolute necessity (Bryson et al., 2020).

My experience from talking to people in the faith community, both my own and other congregations, was that it was a necessary but unfortunate development in how we offered our services. For some it was better than nothing and for others, there was a desire to see such online services terminated as soon the health regulations would allow the opening of

buildings and the gathering of groups in sufficient numbers. A person at a previous congregation requested that we stop all our online services as she saw them as a barrier to people returning to the building for in-person services.

These complaints were in stark contrast to the stories I was hearing from the disability community. A hearing-impaired person talked about the joy of being able to control the volume on his computer headphones and being able to hear the services for the first time in years. A parent of children with both intellectual and physical disabilities spoke of their family being able to worship together at home in a peaceful setting. There was a benefit to online services that some within the faith communities had been missing.

## **The Benefits**

Thinking specifically about the autism community, what is the benefit of online worship services even in a post-pandemic world? Research has demonstrated that online communication is found to be a comfortable and useful medium for some autistic individuals (Benford & Standen, 2009). While we must be careful not to generalize about the preferences of all autistic people, there is enough evidence to establish that online interaction is valued by many in the autism community.

However, there may be more benefit to the autistic community than just the provision of comfort. Anecdotal evidence has been offered to suggest that not all autistic people feel welcomed in faith communities. Some research has shown that especially among children, there can be significant barriers for attending faith communities for a host of diversities, including autism (Whitehead, 2018). My experience as a father has, unfortunately, supported this feeling of exclusion. Despite being the pastor of the church we attended when our children were young, I could see the growing difficulty in bringing them to church. By my last few years at that church, our autistic children stayed home with my wife on Sundays. Even as I look back to my own experience growing up in church, long before my diagnosis, there were subtle forms of exclusion.

I do not want to suggest that churches or other faith communities are actively trying to exclude autistic people from their congregations. Most

congregations are loving communities that want to welcome new people, including autistic people. They may even feel a level of frustration that people with autism are not attending, and they wish they knew what steps could be taken to be more welcoming. However, it takes more than putting up an “All Welcome!” sign up or even acknowledging Autism Awareness Day.

The barriers that autistic people encounter when attempting to join a faith community are numerous. One challenge for some autistic people is trying to understand the often perplexing rules of social interaction. Daniel Bowman, Jr., an autistic professor of English, shares the internal debate in response to being asked “How are you?” at church: “I don’t know, and I’m not sure if they want a real answer. I tend to take things literally, overthink these exchanges” (Bowman, 2021, p. 109). A person may want to hear the prayers and reflect on Scriptures without having to navigate informal conversations before and after the worship service. An online service can provide exactly what they need.

One of the most significant barriers are the sensory needs of the autistic person. Theologian Grant Macaskill observes: “The church is a sensory space, to an extent that persons with typical senses seldom register” (Macaskill, 2021, p. 117). Autistic people experience sensory sensitivities in different ways, but the presence of such sensitivities is common (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 55-60). It may be that an autistic person would like to join a faith community and that the faith community is eager to welcome the autistic person. But it also may be that sensory sensitivities of the individual and the sensory space of the building are such that participation is insurmountable.

An online worship service is one way provide an accessible means to participate that gives the autistic person more agency in terms of their sensory encounter. A person who is overwhelmed by large groups or having to face casual conversation can choose the setting in which they watch an online service. They can choose to gather with a small group they are comfortable with around a large screen television, or they can watch the service privately on their own computer. If the music is too loud or too quiet, they can adjust the volume. If the visual stimuli are too intense, they can fast forward or walk away without fear of judgment. If there has been a break in routine or something that has caused emotional dysregulation, they can pause the video and wait until they are better able to participate in

the service. Online worship services put agency back into the hands of the individual and provide better overall experience for what they are seeking in the worship service.

Another benefit of online worship services is that it can help prepare autistic individuals who do desire to participate in-person in the future. Social anxiety when attempting to visit a new place can be significant. This is equally true for people looking to visit a faith community for the first time.

On the surface, it would seem that I would be the most comfortable person visiting a church. I am an ordained minister with four seminary degrees. I have been a part of three denominations and multiple congregations, both as a member and as a pastor. And yet as an autistic person, I experience tremendous social anxiety when considering a visit to a congregation for the first time. What do people wear, and will I stand out as someone who does not belong? When do people sit and when do people stand? What are the expectations that are never announced, that everyone else knows about, and are a complete mystery to me? It takes much self-talk to push past the anxiety for trying anything for the first time.

An online worship service can be used to introduce potential visitors to as much of the desired information as possible. Online services provide a window into what happens, what the expectations are, and provides a sense of familiarity before the person ever physically steps into the building. Something similar is sometimes done with autistic children who are starting at a new school or other program. Videos that introduce the child to the layout, the classrooms, and teachers help to prepare the person for their first physical visit. Online worship services can act in an expanded version of this helpful practice.

## **The Dangers**

While online worship can be a benefit to the autism community, it does come with a danger. If faith communities see online services as an easy alternative to making their in-person services accessible, this could lead to a new segregation. Back in 1964, in the context of racial segregation, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated: “Everyone knows that 11 o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American life” (King, 1963). This was wrong when

it came to race, and it is also wrong when it comes to neurodiversity. We do not want to see neurological segregation.

It is human nature to seek the easy way out. There is a danger that faith communities will avoid the hard work of creating fellowships that celebrate diversity. It is possible that if a family has an autistic child who makes noise during a service that they are pointed to the online service where no one will be disturbed. An online service should be an accessible option and not a ghetto to send those who are seen as disruptions to the enjoyment of the neurotypical congregation.

The other danger of online services is that it can be an easy alternative to autistic people to socializing with others. It is a myth that autistic people do not value community and interpersonal relationships. The key is that these interactions need to happen on their own terms. Online services can be helpful during times of emotional dysregulation but they could develop into excuses for not trying to spend time in a physical community.

## **Conclusion**

Society in general has been moving toward more online resources and even online communities for the past two decades. The COVID-19 pandemic took the trend and increased the speed of it dramatically. Faith communities, while known for holding onto tradition, have not been immune to these technological advancements. Many communities have moved to streaming their worship services online in addition to the in-person services held in their buildings.

While some worshipers may rejoice at the return to in-person services, and perhaps even hope for the cancellation of online services, there is still a need for this option beyond pandemic safety measures. Online worship services are an important and helpful option for autistic people, and they should have continued access to this opportunity.

Although not without its dangers, online worship services can provide a safe place for autistic worshipers who may struggle with sensory issues or social anxiety. For those whose faith is an important aspect of life, online worship services can be an accessible means of flourishing in their religion. This

does not mean that faith communities are free from doing the hard work of making their in-person services autism-friendly, but online services can be a valuable part of their accessibility vision.

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