Autism and the Church
A conference by local autism group, A2ndVoice

Saturday 28th November 2015
Tooting United Reformed Church, Rookstone Road, SW17 9NQ

Programme

09:30 Registration and Coffee
10:00 Opening Prayer
Rev Helen Matthews - Minister of Tooting United Reformed Church
A2ndVoice runs a weekly support group for parents caring for autistic children, located at Tooting United Reformed Church. Helen will open by explaining why autism is important to her and leading us in prayer.

10:05 Welcome
Venessa Bobb – A2ndVoice CEO
Venessa will introduce the work of A2ndVoice, explain what resources and support are available at the conference, and how to take part.

10:10 Delegate Introductions
Delegates will have the chance to introduce themselves and the church communities they represent.

Session One - A Wake Up Call to the Church

10:20 Ann Memmott – Keynote Speaker’s Address
Ann is an autism inclusion advisor. She will explain the inclusion issues autistic people face at church. There are many layers to the problem and friendliness isn’t always the answer. We will see what happens in autistic people’s brains in really friendly churches.
10:40 Naomi Jacobs
Naomi is conducting PhD research at SOAS. She is researching disabled people’s experience of inclusion and exclusion in the church. Naomi has several case studies from autistic people whom she has interviewed. Autism is a condition like no other and Naomi will present the particular issues she has found, that surround including autistic people in church.

10:55 Jonathan Swaby
Jonathan is pastor of Venessa’s church – God is Gracious, part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World group of churches. Churches have different styles of worship and serve different cultural communities. Jonathan will explain why the church needs to wake up to the issue of autism inclusion and will describe the particular inclusion issue for majority black churches.

11:00 Coffee (and gluten and dairy free biscuits)

Session Two - Why Good Intention Isn’t Enough

11:30 Caroline Henthorne and Venessa Bobb
Caroline will read a case study from her chapter in the book, ‘Lives with Autism,’ edited by Steve Mee. The case study details how a family with autistic members experience exclusion at a church which is trying to include them. Venessa will respond to the case study by describing her experience of taking her autistic son to a majority black church.

11:45 Caroline Henthorne – Interactive Workshop
Many people are well intentioned enough to do something about disability but are we all doing the right things? In this interactive workshop we discover that society and the church offer us a range of attitudes to disability. Are disabled people: scroungers, defective, excluded, no different to anyone else, being tested by God, being punished by God, spiritual gurus, vulnerable, ordinary, insightful, or something else? How do the attitudes of support services, family-member carers, and disabled people differ? Is autism a disability at all? What might Jesus say?

12:30 Lunch
- Gluten and dairy free catering
- Bookstall
- Network
Session Three - The Way We See It

13:30  James Dew
James is a young autistic man who is part of an independent evangelical church in Camberwell. He has also been part of a university Christian Union. James will share his experience of what faith means to him as an autistic man. James will describe how he is involved in his church where he is part of the worship band and volunteers at the youth group.

Session Four - Inclusion Dos and Don’ts

14:00  Ann Memmott – Autism Inclusion Advisor
Ann will outline the ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of making a church service inclusive for autistic people.

14:30  Panel Discussion
Have your inclusion questions answered.

15:00  Coffee (and gluten and dairy free biscuits)

Session Five: Autistic Friendly Worship

15:30  The Panel
What does autistic friendly worship feel like? You are about to find out as we end the day with inclusive worship, of our God who welcomes everyone.

16:00  Close.
Speaker Biographies

Helen Matthews
Helen is the minister of the Balham and Tooting United Reformed Churches. Tooting United Reformed Church is The venue for A2ndVoice’s weekly support meetings for the parent-carers of autistic children.

Venessa Bobb
Venessa is the CEO of the local parent-led autism voluntary group, A2ndVoice. A2ndVoice raises the voice of family-member carers who have ‘the second voice’, an indirect experience of autism. Venessa has a thirteen year old autistic son. Venessa has been raising awareness of autism in local churches for some time and has particular interest in raising awareness in black majority churches.

Ann Memmott
Ann has been researching how the church is responding to autism for over a decade. As an autistic person herself she is able to see how to make church a truly welcoming place for autistic people. Her guidance on making church services inclusive has been published by the Church of England, Diocese of Oxford, on their website, and is used across England.

Ann is also:
- Vice Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Autism - Advisory Board
- Trustee, Autism Berkshire
- Senior Trainer working with Autism Oxford

Ann’s autism access and consultancy work informs departments within:
The Houses of Parliament
The Royal Collection
National Trust
BBC
English Heritage
Church of England and Oxford Diocese
Churches for All
Royal College of Psychiatrists
Universities, schools and colleges
Thames Valley Police
Naomi Jacobs

Naomi is a PhD researcher at SOAS – the School of Oriental and African Studies. Naomi is conducting emancipatory research to discover how disabled people experience inclusion and exclusion in church. She has carefully interviewed disabled people in a manner which empowers them and given voice to case studies from autistic people. She is sharing with us her important emerging findings.

Jonathan Swaby

Jonathan is pastor of God is Gracious Ministries, a church in Tooting which is part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World group of churches. He is Vanessa’s pastor and has encouraged her as she raises awareness of autism in South London’s churches.

Caroline Henthorne

Caroline is an autistic Christian living in Brixton. She is conducting post-graduate research into how Christian disability theology works for autistic people. She has written a chapter in the book, ‘Lives With Autism’, edited by Steve Mee, published in 2014. The book is used to train people who will be employed to support autistic people, and who may find that one of their tasks is taking an autistic person to church. The chapter is based on interviews with family-member carers of autistic children and young adults, and interviews with church workers in a local community (not in South London).

James Dew

James is a local autistic man who is part of an independent evangelical church in Camberwell. Autism affects social communication. Men and women face different social expectations at church. James offers his experience of being an autistic Christian man. He also brings to the conference his experience of being part of a worship band and volunteering at his church’s youth group.
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