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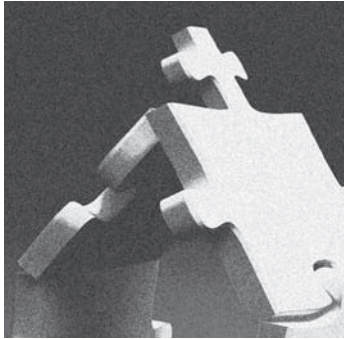


AUTISM

and your church

Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

BARBARA J. NEWMAN



Grand Rapids, Michigan



Friendship Ministries is an interdenominational, international ministry for people with intellectual disabilities. Through consultation and with the help of resources that encourage spiritual development and relationships, Friendship Ministries helps churches to include people with intellectual disabilities in fellowship and service as members of the body of Christ.

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Contact Us

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In memory of my precious mother, Mae Ruth Bandstra, who not only taught me about knitting but also how to respect and honor God's knitting pattern in the people who surround my life. While I miss your physical presence every day, your lifetime investment of godly words and actions continues to instruct and guide me.

To my dear father, Andrew John Bandstra, who not only teaches me about Scripture and theology in helping to edit all that I write but also continues to model that the people around me are gifts from God to be respected and cherished. You have given me a lifetime of unconditional love and support, and I love you so much!



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—BJN

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PREFACE

Everyone Welcome!

I am fairly certain that most churches have created a new staff position. Although many already have deacons, Sunday school teachers, and a host of other positions, my drive from home to work convinces me that many churches are now employing the services of a person responsible for one-liner signs. Signs like these are often the topic of conversation in our car:

- Know God, know peace. No God, no peace.
- God replies to knee-mail.
- Free trip to heaven—details inside.
- Best vitamin for a Christian? B1

One sign that many churches display is made up of only two words: *Everyone Welcome*.

Is it really possible that *everyone* is welcome at these churches? I drive by and imagine a long line of people at their doors: some people are in wheelchairs, others in business suits. Some have Down syndrome, others walk while spinning a toy and rocking back and forth. Some people appear to have a lot of money, and others seem to have very little. The people in line display a rainbow of skin colors, abilities, and ages—but in my imagination, everyone is welcome.

In reality, it's likely that many persons with disabilities would not necessarily feel welcomed at these churches. Children with autism may not be included in Sunday

school. Youth in wheelchairs may not be able to attend youth group functions for accessibility reasons. Parents presenting their child with a disability for baptism or dedication hear a pledge of support from the church, but that word is often not translated into action. Unsure how to handle such rejection, some parents take turns going to church while one parent stays home with the child. Some choose to have the entire family stay home. "*Everyone Welcome*" isn't meant for them.

I've observed that many persons with disabilities feel more support and inclusion from public schools and government agencies than they do from the body of Christ. At school the child is usually welcomed with open arms and tender loving care; adults are treated with dignity at work sites. A specialized program is designed for the child or adult, and a network of service providers ensures that each one's individual needs are met.

In contrast, the church may be a source of pain for many persons with disabilities. Most churches don't set out to exclude or isolate an individual. I've placed several phone calls to pastors and children's leaders on behalf of the children in my classroom. They are often eager to make some changes to allow families to worship together and offer appropriate support for children who may need something a bit specialized. In these situations, the problem was not a lack of acceptance—rather, the church simply didn't know what to do.

I believe that in order to be obedient to God's Word, the line at the church door must represent all kinds of people, including those with disabilities. *Everyone Welcome* is God's invitation, not ours. The acceptance, warmth, and sense of community that an individual feels on Sunday at church should make the Monday school or work experience pale in comparison. It is this vision that has prompted the writing of this book.

Although many resources are available in the area of ASD, very little is specific to equipping churches. It's my hope that God will use this resource to allow you and your church community to feel more confident in displaying and living out the invitation *Everyone Welcome*.

INTRODUCTION

Getting the Picture

Let's first take a look at the prevalence of ASD in our church communities. Then we'll outline how this resource is designed to help churches become welcoming places to those with ASD and also set some boundaries for using this resource.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Church Community

How many people attend your church on a given Sunday? If 100 people attend, chances are great that at least one of those individuals has Autism Spectrum Disorder. If your church has 300, 500, or 5,000 people in attendance, divide that number by 100 to come up with the approximate number of persons in your church family who likely fall on that spectrum. And don't forget to count those in your community involved in outreach programs your church offers. While the number of persons with ASD has been growing dramatically over the past few years, an estimated 1 percent of our population currently falls somewhere on the autism spectrum. That number alone should make us realize that a church community that welcomes everyone will need to become familiar with strategies and ideas for including persons with ASD.

In reviewing a variety of church attendance statistics, it's obvious that persons with disabilities are vastly underrepresented in our congregations. I believe that God



Although Autism Spectrum Disorder will be discussed in detail in section 2, an introductory definition is in order here. ASD refers to a diagnosis an individual receives when certain differences are noted in that person's life beginning in infancy or early childhood. Children and adults with ASD exhibit a wide spectrum of differences in language understanding, social skills, repetitive themes and behaviors, desire for routine, perspective-taking ability, and sensory responses.

These differences will be discussed in section 2.

desires to use us to change these statistics. Jesus gave us numerous examples when he reached out to a person with seizures, to a person who was blind, to those unable to speak or hear, to those who were sick or lonely, and to the friends who walked with him each day. Jesus concluded his parable of the lost sheep with these words: "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matt. 18:14).

I've seen this parable lived out in totally contrasting ways in the lives of two friends with ASD. One family whose young son has ASD was asked by an elder to leave him at home. Even though the rest of the family was welcome, the *one* was not. The family left this church and never

went back. In my own church, a man diagnosed with ASD is a faithful friend and coworker in children’s ministry. He fills his leadership role with great insight, impeccable attendance, and outstanding care for those who work under him. Knowing that he has ASD allows him to realize that at times he might need to ask about a social judgment call he must make. He handles that with wisdom, humility, and even humor.



When I graduated from college in 1984, I left school with a paper that listed the current incidence of autism as 1 in 10,000 people. Twenty-two years later, when the first edition of this book was released in 2006, the incidence was 1 in 166 individuals. That estimate, however, has already changed. Even though specific numbers currently range from 1 in 150 to 1 in 91, depending on the age groups and studies, most agree that the current number is approximately 1 percent of the population, or 1 in 100. What a call to churches to grow in our understanding of ASD!

Autism and Your Church: An Overview

This book has been written to help your church become that kind of welcoming and enfolding place. Join me for a quick overview.

This is not necessarily a book for those well-versed in special education or psychology. Its intent is to equip church leaders and members to better understand ASD and to select strategies that allow each individual to grow in Christ and to be more fully included within your church body.

We will begin by looking together at God’s handiwork (section 1). Using my mother’s knitting as an analogy, we’ll reflect on the words of Psalm 139:13-14:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

In section 2, we’ll explore ASD in detail. We’ll emphasize that labels and phrases we use to describe persons on the spectrum are only helpful when they allow us to better understand and support a child or an adult who is part of our faith community. We will also discuss six common areas of difference characteristic of persons with ASD. We’ll learn to appreciate how this wide spectrum of differences makes each person unique in God’s family.

Section 3 describes ten strategies I’ve found helpful when working with people with ASD. We’ll look at how these strategies can be applied with people of various ages and in a variety of situations and encourage you to use those that work in your specific setting.

Section 4 offers suggestions for working with persons with ASD who demonstrate challenging behaviors. Besides learning some of the reasons for some of these behaviors, you’ll find a “Plan A” to follow if at all possible, as well as additional strategies to try.

Section 5 will equip your church to develop a long-range action plan as you strive to more fully include persons with ASD in the life of your church family. Suggestions will be given for forming a planning team, selecting a coordinator for ministry with children and adults with disabilities and for developing a *spiritual* IEP (Individual Education Program).

The reproducible resources include forms and other information referred to in sections 1-5. Sample forms will help you gather information about the children and adults in your church family with ASD. Job descriptions and other information will help you plan and carry out your ministry more effectively.

Before You Use This Resource

Before you begin reading and using this resource book, I want to share what you can—and cannot—expect from it.

- **This book is only the beginning to better understanding individuals with ASD.**

I will propose general trends and ideas that have worked with many individuals, but these trends and ideas won't substitute for the task you have of knowing, understanding, and appreciating this unique person God created and brought into your body of believers.

- **This book is not intended to be a diagnostic tool.**

Only psychologists, psychiatrists, or a school educational team are truly equipped to make a diagnosis of ASD. The information may make you think of a child or an adult that you know. Although God may guide you to encourage a child's parents or an adult to seek a professional assessment, this must always be done with extreme caution and must be couched in love, humility, patience, and prayer. Share only what you have observed, and avoid discussing your suspicions concerning the nature of the individual's condition.

- **The strategies listed in this book are helpful for many people, including those who do not have ASD.**

You do not need to wait for a clinical label before using helpful strategies. For example, one strategy describes writing stories for children before they attend a Sunday school class. I use this strategy for all of the children in our church under the age of ten before we switch to summer programming. Parents and children each take a small booklet home with them to read before we switch to a new method of doing children's ministry during the summer months. That way, children can practice and understand what different routines will be in place before that first summer Sunday. Of the one hundred children age ten and under in our church, two children have ASD. The booklets are a great help for all of the children.

- **Numbers and names change over time.**

To the best of my knowledge, the facts, figures, and labels included in this book are correct based

on information currently available. Although I pray that this resource will be helpful for years to come, God gives new insights to researchers that will only enhance how we interact with one another.

- **Given the great number of people who have ASD, many treatment options are available.**

It does not seem appropriate for a church to put together a large behavior program designed to teach a child more language skills. It does not seem appropriate to become a clinical treatment center. We as members of Christ's body are called to include and honor each person in the body. A church is called to touch each person with the love of Jesus, to nurture that individual in his or her relationship with Christ, and to offer opportunities to serve and grow in him. The strategies I suggest will be based on how we can best understand, communicate, and relate to one another.

- **No one strategy included in this book will work with every individual or in every situation.**

When I observe a child in a classroom setting, I often leave ten to fifteen ideas for a teacher to try. I am pleased when two or three of these strategies are effective and helpful. This book is filled with many suggestions, but your knowledge of the individual, God's guiding Spirit, and trial and error will help you locate the nuggets that are most beneficial for the individual in your community. Choose two or three strategies to try. If they are helpful, keep on using them. If not, replace them with another two or three. Work until you have the right package for the individual involved.

Whether your church already includes persons on the autism spectrum or you want to prepare for the time when they do, it's my prayer that the information and strategies in this book will guide and equip you. An incredible opportunity is waiting for you!

SECTION 1

God's Handiwork

God's Knitting: An Analogy

My mother knits. Although Mom did not pass on any knitting genes to me, she has a lifetime collection of afghans, baby blankets, sweaters, shawls, mittens, slippers, and vests credited to her amazing knitting talent. Some of the things she made for me when I was a child are so strikingly beautiful that I keep them in my closet today.

God knits too. Psalm 139:13-14 says: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." God's end project is not a blanket or a sweater—God knits people.

I've noticed a number of striking similarities between my mother's knitting and God's knitting. Let's look at each one briefly.

Made in God's Image

My mother spends so much time with her projects, altering patterns and choosing colors and stitches, that it's easy to see that part of her is knitted into each garment. She is clearly visible in her projects.

The creation account in Genesis describes this same process. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (1:27). When God creates our "inmost being" and knits us together, God himself is reflected in each one of

us. As amazing as this is, when we become God's children through faith in Jesus Christ, that likeness becomes even clearer. The apostle Paul says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Made for a Purpose

The items my mother knits all have a different purpose. The colorful afghans she makes as a graduation gift for each of her grandchildren are very different from the small white blanket each one received as a newborn. The purpose and use of each item differs depending on how it is made.

God also has a specific purpose for each one of us. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). Paul offers this affirmation: "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (Rom. 12:6), and then challenges us to use these different gifts in proportion to our faith.

Made to Be Part of a Whole

My mother never intends for one item she's knitted to cover all of the clothing needs we have. Some items were made for warmer weather while others are for cold weather. Some items are to be used in a rugged setting

while others require a delicate touch. Each is part of a larger wardrobe.

So too God created each one of his children to be part of a larger body of people. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:4-5).

Clearly we were created to live in community, enjoying one another’s gifts and ministering to one another’s needs. Our strengths are knitted together for us to support others. Our weaknesses and needs are part of God’s design so that others may minister to us. We truly were created to need one another.

“Fearfully and Wonderfully Made”

This understanding of God’s knitting process certainly helps us to see our friends with ASD in a new light. Each of us, whatever our gifts and needs, our strengths and weaknesses, can say, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Ps. 139:14).

When the apostle Paul repeatedly asked God to remove his weakness, God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). Testifying to the reliability of God’s grace, Paul says,

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (vv. 9-10).

Not only does God use our strengths and weaknesses, but God gives us these very explicit instructions as to how we should treat one another within his family:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!”
And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”
On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we

think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

—1 Corinthians 12:21-26

The Bible completely affirms the worth and value of each individual as created by God. The only special arrangements God seems to make for persons with disabilities is qualifying them for a place of honor and special treatment within the body of Christ. Any church caught saying “I don’t need you” to one of these individuals has completely violated and ignored God’s instructions to the church. In contrast, individuals and churches testify to God’s blessing as they purposefully embrace and include persons with disabilities.

Ryan and Friends

Ryan is a great friend of my two sons. Ryan loves horses, chips and cheese, lightsabers, movies, and playing. He also happens to have Down syndrome. John and Jim don’t really pay much attention to his different facial features or difficult speech. They really enjoy his company and great personality. Although they coach Ryan’s speech from time to time, the boys usually just have fun together.

It would be easy for someone to put a hand on the shoulders of my children and say, “How good of you to be nice to Ryan.” It would appear to some that my boys are the “givers” and Ryan is the “taker.” In God’s body system, this is simply not the way it works. My boys have the gift of friendship and caring to offer Ryan, but Ryan also gives something to my children. His mother tells us that our whole family has made Ryan’s “list.” Every night, without fail, for the last eleven years, Ryan has prayed for each one of us by name. Imagine what a gift Ryan is giving to my boys and to our family!

Seeing People through God's Eyes

Often insightful, one of my sons called me to the place where he does his best thinking. Soaking in the bathtub, he was troubled that he was unable to see God's amazing handiwork in a certain person. "Mom, I want to like this person, but he is so *annoying!*" As "Mrs. Special Education," I was supposed to have an answer. I had to admit that, seen through human eyes, this individual is annoying. But in that moment God showed me something important. I said to my son, "You're right. Most people would say that he is annoying. But if you can see something different in him, I will know that you are using God's eyes." I left the bathroom realizing that my own vision had just been adjusted. When my son called me back and said that he wanted to have this person over to our home, I knew that the Spirit was challenging him to take a closer look, to spend time finding what God had wrapped up in this child.

Jessica's Insight

At a conference I attended, the speaker was a brilliant individual with ASD. At the close of the speech, a parent asked this question: "I want my child to know God. What can I do?" The speaker thought for a moment and then responded, "God is too hard for people with autism to understand. Next question." The instant pain on the mother's face brought tears to my eyes. I tried to make my way over to her, because I wanted to share a very different answer with her.

My friend Jessica is a Christian equipped with a passion for evangelism. Jessica loves to talk about her relationship with Jesus, and she cannot bear to think that some people in her life will not be with her in heaven.

God has given Jessica many insights, but I found one completely profound. Jessica described herself to her mother like this: "My body has autism, but my spirit does not." Jessica knows that her connection with God is not hindered by ASD. From my observation, Jessica's connection with God is vibrant and all-pervasive in her life.

Jessica's comment made me think of the time when God sent Samuel to choose a king to replace Saul. Samuel was sure that God would choose Jesse's oldest son, but God said, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Samuel had to look through God's eyes to see David—not as a young shepherd but as an individual God would use mightily in the days to come.

Jessica has given me this answer for the mother who asked the question at the conference:

God made your daughter. Your child's heart is fully wired to be connected with God. God now reaches out through Jesus to your daughter. When she receives Jesus as her Savior, that connection won't be weaker because she has ASD. Becoming a Christian won't take away her Autism Spectrum Disorder. But loving Jesus will give her the chance to serve God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. God will take who she is and fill her with his Holy Spirit to serve him and touch others around her.

As we talk more about Autism Spectrum Disorder, you will note that persons on this spectrum often have an intense area of interest that preoccupies a lot of mind space and time. Some people note the difficulty this can make in accomplishing tasks. I suppose that's one way of looking at it. True, it's a repetitive behavior—sometimes referred to as a *perseverative* behavior—but looking through God's eyes, we may gain a different perspective.

As we look more deeply into the topic of Autism Spectrum Disorder, we will discuss labels, diagnoses, differences, and more. This information will be helpful in interpreting terms used by parents, caregivers, or individuals with ASD.

Nuisance or Awesome Creature?

One of my young friends at Zeeland Christian School has been diagnosed with ASD. She absolutely adores animals. She wants to study them, read books about

them, and talk about them. From bugs to larger critters, her curiosity is insatiable. Sometimes that love of animals prevents her from participating in the school day.

Attempting to use God's eyes, I see a different picture. It's possible that God is tired of us rushing past his amazing creation on our way to work or school, on our way to be "productive." The moth with delicate wings stuck to our windshield is one of his creations. While most of us will likely turn on the wipers to rid our vision of the obstruction, my friend will have a closer look.

Perhaps God allows my friend with ASD to delight more in his creation and pass on that sense of awe to those of us fortunate enough to be hanging next to her in God's closet. While my friend needs the advice and counsel of others to do well at school and home, I also need her in my life. Autism Spectrum Disorder does not hinder her connection with God; it may even enhance it.

Our Response to God's Handiwork

Imagine my mother having spent weeks of time and energy on one of her knitting projects only to hear me express distaste for her precious gift:

- "I'd never wear a sweater like this!"
- "What a dumb-looking blanket. I'm not taking this anywhere."
- "These mittens are too uncomfortable. Give them to someone else."
- "I only like sweaters just like all the other ones in my closet. Don't give me something different."
- "Ugly, weird—no way. Just don't give me anything."

What is the likelihood that I would hurt my mother's feelings? What is the likelihood that I would ever get another knitted gift from her?

All too often, our reaction to people who have a disability is similar to those I'd never think of saying to my mother.

We may be too uncomfortable even to give eye contact to an individual with Down syndrome or ASD. We may see only the disability and not the person's gifts. We may focus only on the outward appearance and be unable to see the person's heart.

Using a previous example, you could view our friend Ryan only as a person with Down syndrome—end of story. What a sad thing that would be! Ryan has a complex personality with loves and interests. Ryan is gifted by God to be an intercessor. He is not Down syndrome Ryan. He is Ryan, my brother in Christ, who happens to have Down syndrome as one of the many qualities that make him unique.

As a church community, we must not allow fear or uncertainty to rob us of enjoying and delighting in God's gifts to our community. By excluding those in the body of Christ who have a disability, we cheat our faith communities out of some of God's gifts for us. By including persons with ASD, we become a stronger body of believers.

The Gift of Adam

Adam's parents are quick to note how many people are thankful for his presence in their church community. Adam's heart is quickly displayed in his care for others.

The day Adam's pastor started crying as he made a difficult announcement, no one knew how to respond—except Adam. He broke the socially acceptable "rules of order" with his own tears as he hurried forward to give the pastor a hug. God used Adam to bring comfort in his own unique way.

Adam is a gift to that body of believers. Adam, who happens to have ASD and Down syndrome, makes that body stronger because of his presence. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

May God equip you with his eyes. May God give you delight and joy as you see each individual as a gift from him, packaged with unique strengths and needs, designed

to serve in your faith community. “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).



If you're taking the lead in welcoming people with ASD into your church, you'll want to help your entire church family learn along with you. In the reproducible pages at the back of this book, you'll find a summary called "I Belong" (p. 94). You may want to share this information in small group meetings, with your church council, in your church newsletter, and so on, in order to open the way for thoughtful discussion.

“*Autism and Your Church* contains lots of practical tips to successfully include individuals on the spectrum in church.”

—Temple Grandin,
author of *The Way I See It*

“I love what Barbara Newman is bringing to the body of Christ. Her book is a gift. Our families need the church, but more importantly, the church needs our families.”

—Emily Colson, author of
Dancing with Max, winner of the
Autism Society of America’s
Literary Work of the Year Award

“The church is often ill-equipped to deal with the unique needs of those affected by autism. This book provides practical, easy-to-implement strategies and loving reminders of our mandate to interact with each person as a valued imagebearer with gifts to enhance our community of believers.”

—Laurel Falvo, Executive Director,
The Gray Center for Social
Learning and Understanding

“This excellent new edition of *Autism and Your Church* will quickly become a well-worn resource on the desks of church staff and volunteers alike.”

—Stephen Grcevich, MD, Child and
Adolescent Psychiatrist,
President of Key Ministry

“Barbara Newman’s inclusion strategies, behavior management methods, and strong belief in the gifts and value of all people make this book essential reading for every church worker who wishes to welcome people with ASD.”

—Connie Hutchinson, Director of
Disabilities Ministry, First Evangelical
Free Church of Fullerton, California



Autism has evolved from an unfamiliar term to an everyday reality for millions of people. Bookstore shelves are filled with resources that address how Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects children and adults at school, work, and home.

But what about the church? What about your church? How can it become a welcoming place for individuals and families affected by ASD?

Autism and Your Church offers practical ways to welcome and include individuals with ASD into the full life of your congregation. This resource will enable church leaders to

- appreciate those with ASD as persons created in God’s image.
- learn about six common areas of difference in individuals with ASD.
- discover ten strategies for including people with ASD in the life of your church.
- develop an action plan for ongoing ministry with children and adults who have ASD.

A reproducible resources section includes interview and permission forms, a coordinator’s job description, a sample Individual Spiritual Formation Plan, and more.

Barbara J. Newman has been a special education teacher and consultant for CLC Network for over twenty years. Her tested strategies and personal stories will empower your church to follow her lead. Barb has also written *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities*, *Body Building Devotion Book*, the *G.L.U.E. Training Manual*, and several other resources for churches and Christian schools.



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