

A church to call home: what St Columbaâ??s learnt from its neurodivergent service

By The Revâ??d Warren Huffa

A new initiative at St Columbaâ??s Hawthorn this year has been the introduction of a Neurodivergent Inclusive Service on Sunday afternoons.

We recognised for neurodivergent adults and children, families and individuals Church may seem unapproachable because of overwhelming sensory input but also the fear of being misunderstood, different and judged because of behaviour and parenting skills. Godâ??s love is accessible for everyone so we wanted to provide an environment that was more relaxed and comfortable, similar to how movie theatres, concert halls and supermarkets now offer sessions with lower sensory input.

St Columbaâ??s new service was intended to be specifically sensitive to and accepting of those who may benefit from a more relaxed environment, or anyone with sensory needs often unmet in many church services.

Modifications were made to sensory elements of the service, lighting and sound to eliminate surprise and reduce anxiety levels, making this service more welcoming for some people. The Service catered for adults and children, families, and single people. It was designed to enable participation, freedom to

move and be yourself.

We provided a calming, sensory environment with breakout spaces and quiet activities. Families were invited to bring their own support equipment, noise reduction headphones, sensory tools and fidgets. We also provided these, and sensory regulation tools. After the Service refreshments and a light tea was available.

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Care was taken to consider sensory sensitivities with regard to the food provided. Families were also welcome to bring their own food if preferred.

We began with two services in Term 1 and have since held services fortnightly during term time. Initially we were expecting families with neuro diverse children to seek us out. However, what we found were neurodiverse adults looking for a Church to call home. Unfortunately, with Warrenâ??s appointment to St Maryâ??s Anglican Church this ministry has ended.

What we have learnt

- There is a need out there. Autistic adults who have grown up with a church background have been looking for churches that are more accommodating of their needs and welcome their differences.
- Collaboration and involvement with Autism SA and Specialist Educators with expertise in Neurodiversity has been invaluable. As well as giving valuable advice these organisations have advertised our services. In addition, we became accredited with Autism SA to be included on their Autism Friendly.
- The shorter service, with less sensory input, freedom to move around, and offering sensory regulation tools suited those that attended.
- The biggest advertisement was participants inviting their friends. If the service had continued, we are confident that families with younger neuro diverse children would have joined us.
- At the food afterwards, it was a joy to see those who might ordinarily struggle to move into the centre of a social gathering be the centre. And conversations over a shared meal were really valuable, and seeing these adults bond and support each other was a rewarding experience.
- Perhaps we were a bit ahead of the curve. Research on the internet suggests to us that churches are moving to integrate those with particular needs into existing services. We aimed for those who would struggle to join an existing service and social gathering.

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