Neuro Church
at St Aidan's Strathmore

Quick Guide to Neurodiversity

For Church members

Document Information
Author: Rev Glen Wesley
Version: 1.0 A5 Booklet
18 October 2024
Revision: Q1 2025

St Aidan's Anglican Church

Disclaimer

This guide is intended for educational and informational purposes only, aimed at informing church ministers about specific neurodiversity conditions. It is not meant to provide medical advice. For medical concerns or advice, please consult a healthcare professional.

Public Draft

I consider this document to still be in public draft form. If you have an feedback to the guide, please contact me at glen@staidans.org.au.

Other Resources

- Neurodiversity Handbook for Clergy and Church Workers (Coming Q1-2025)
- Guide to Autism for Church Members
- Guide to ADHD for Church Members
- Guide to Neurodiverse Inclusive Ministry (Q1-2025)
- The St Aidan's website & blog: staidans.org.au
- ADHD Australia: adhdaustralia.org.au/about-adhd/
- Autism Australia: autism.org.au/what-is-autism/

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to St Aidan's Church Members “Quick Guide” to Neurodiversity. This guide serves as an introduction to understanding the varied cognitive landscapes that make up our community, specifically focusing on conditions like Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia. As we explore the concept of neurodiversity, our goal is to cultivate a compassionate and inclusive environment that recognises and values the unique perspectives and abilities of all members, aligning with our belief that everyone is created in the image of God.

Opening Principles

1. **Image of God**: Each person, regardless of any disability, reflects God's image fully and without diminishment. Everyone possesses inherent value and dignity as a creation of God. See: staidans.org.au/christianity

2. **Unity does not require Uniformity**: We believe that the diversity of God’s creation is part of what makes it beautiful and that God’s radically inclusive love excludes no one. We seek to reflect that radical love and include everyone without exception. See: staidans.org.au/inclusion-and-diversity

3. **Inclusive and Safe Environment**: St Aidan's commits to providing a safe and inclusive environment that supports spiritual growth and fellowship for all members. See: staidans.org.au/safety-and-well-being

4. **Richer Service**: Our church's ability to serve and glorify God is enriched by including people with disabilities, benefiting from

the diverse gifts and perspectives they bring to our community. See; staidans.org.au/our-values

> God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body?
>
> But as it is, there are many parts but one body. So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."
>
> Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary!
>
> 1 Corinthians 12:18-22

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to significant differences in how people's brains are structured and function, such as in conditions like **Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia**. While everyone's brain is unique, neurodiverse individuals experience larger variations that impact how they process sensory input, attention, memory, and social interactions. For example, someone with ADHD might struggle with attention and memory due to differences in brain function, while an autistic person may process social cues differently because their brain is wired to focus on details or patterns.

In addition to differences in sensory processing and social interaction, neurodiverse individuals often experience variations in **executive function**, which affects tasks like planning, organising, and remembering details. This can make it harder for someone who is ADHD or autistic to manage time, remember information, or complete complex tasks. At the same time, these

individuals often have incredible strengths—such as creativity, deep focus, or strong memory in specific areas—that enrich both their lives and the communities they are part of. By understanding and embracing these differences, we create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Wired differently?

When we say someone is "wired differently," we're talking about how their brain's structure and function differ from neurotypical brains. In the case of Dyslexia, for example, the brain processes language in unique ways. This can make tasks like reading and spelling more challenging because the brain's pathways for interpreting sounds and letters work differently. However, people with dyslexia often have strengths in problem-solving, creative thinking, or spatial reasoning due to these same neurological differences. These variations shape how they understand and interact with the world.

Neurodiverse Conditions or Types

Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how a person communicates, processes sensory information, and interacts socially. People who are autistic often experience the world in unique ways, such as heightened sensitivity to sounds, lights, or textures, or a preference for routines. These traits can make certain environments or social interactions overwhelming, but they also bring strengths, like attention to detail or deep focus on specific interests.

The term “spectrum” regarding autism refers to the range of ways these differences impact daily life. While some autistic people may need more support in areas like social communication, others may be highly independent. Autism isn’t something to be fixed or cured but embraced as part of human diversity. Understanding and supporting autistic people means creating environments that respect their needs and allow them to flourish.

ADHD

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects attention, impulse control, and activity levels. People who are ADHD often have trouble focusing, staying organised, or sitting still for long periods, and these challenges are linked to how their brain is structured. Specifically, the frontal lobe, which regulates decision-making and planning, can function differently in people with ADHD, leading to struggles with focus and impulse management. Dopamine levels, which affect motivation, also play a role.

However, ADHD also brings strengths. ADHD people often have high energy, creativity, and the ability to think in non-linear ways. These traits can make them great problem solvers and quick thinkers in dynamic environments. While some tasks might be more challenging, many ADHD people thrive when they are able to channel their strengths, often excelling in areas that require creative thinking, adaptability, and innovation.

Other Types

Dyslexia is a learning difference that affects a person’s ability to read and process language. It is related to differences in how the brain processes written words and symbols, making reading,

spelling, and writing more difficult. Dyslexic people may struggle with decoding words or recognising common word patterns, even though their intelligence is unaffected.

Dysgraphia is another learning difference that affects writing ability. It impacts fine motor skills, making it difficult to write legibly, organise thoughts on paper, or use correct spelling and grammar. These challenges are linked to how the brain coordinates movement and language.

Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), is a condition that affects motor skill development and coordination. People with dyspraxia may have difficulty with tasks that require fine motor skills, such as writing, tying shoelaces, or using tools. It can also affect gross motor skills, making activities like running or riding a bike more challenging. Dyspraxia doesn't impact intelligence but can make everyday tasks harder due to difficulties with planning and executing physical movements. These challenges can affect academic, social, and daily living skills.

Tourette Syndrome is a neurological disorder characterised by repetitive, involuntary movements and vocalisations known as tics. These tics can range from simple, such as blinking or throat clearing, to more complex movements or sounds. Tourette's often appears in childhood and can fluctuate in severity. While the exact cause is not fully understood, it is believed to involve abnormalities in certain areas of the brain that control movement. Despite the tics, people with Tourette's often lead full, active lives, and intelligence is not affected by the condition.

But aren’t we all on the spectrum?

While everyone’s brain is different, the autism spectrum specifically refers to the range of ways that brain variations affect daily life, such as in communication, sensory processing, and social interaction. The spectrum reflects the diversity of how these challenges manifest, from mild to more significant impacts. Saying "everyone is on the spectrum" oversimplifies these differences and diminishes the real struggles that autistic individuals face. Autism involves unique challenges that go beyond typical variations, impacting how a person experiences and interacts with the world.

Being Inclusive and Neuro-Friendly

Understanding Language Preferences: Use identity-first language unless an individual expresses a different preference. Examples:

- “They are autistic” instead of “They have autism”.
- “Glen is ADHD”, instead of “Glen has ADHD”

Identity-first language frames a person's neurodiversity as an identity to be lived out instead of a condition to be managed or cured.

Accepting Traits: Embrace common neurodiverse behaviours such as avoiding eye contact, fidgeting, pacing, or repetitive movements (often calming for neurodiverse people).

Ask Questions: Respectfully ask questions to understand someone’s needs or preferences better.

Respect Boundaries: Be mindful of sensory sensitivities, social needs, and personal boundaries.

Promote Flexibility: Offer adaptable environments and participation styles to ensure everyone is comfortable.

Encourage Participation: Offer opportunities for neurodiverse individuals to participate in ways that play to their strengths, whether it's behind the scenes, in leadership, or in creative roles.

Celebrate Neurodiversity: Actively celebrate the unique contributions of neurodiverse people within the church, recognising the gifts they bring to the community.

Masking and Authenticity

Many neurodiverse people, especially adults, have spent years hiding who they are to fit into a world that doesn't understand them. This "masking" often leads to exhaustion and social anxiety.

At St Aidan's, we celebrate the courage and resilience it takes to live authentically as neurodiverse individuals. Instead of hiding who they are, we encourage neurodiverse people to embrace their full selves. By fostering an environment where no one feels the need to mask, we support true belonging and acceptance.

Neurodiversity and Church

Understanding the barriers neurodiverse people have experienced in participating in the church can help us at St Aidan's break them down.

- **Sensory Sensitivities**: Loud music, bright lights, or crowded spaces can be overwhelming.
- **Abstract Language**: Metaphors in sermons may be difficult for those who prefer direct communication.
- **Social Expectations**: Eye contact and small talk can cause anxiety.
- **Lack of Routine**: Unpredictable changes in services may increase stress.
- **Masking**: Many neurodiverse individuals feel pressured to hide their true selves to fit in, leading to exhaustion.
- **Theological Exclusion**: Some theological views and scripture passages have historically framed disability as a diminishment of being fully human, causing feelings of alienation.
- **Feeling Excluded**: These barriers often lead to isolation or feelings of not belonging.

By recognising and addressing these barriers, the church can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone.

Co-Occurring Conditions in Neurodiverse People

Many neurodiverse people also experience **co-occurring conditions**, meaning they may face additional challenges beyond their neurotype. It's common for autistic and/or ADHD people also to have conditions like anxiety, depression, or sensory processing disorders. Physical conditions, such as epilepsy,

gastrointestinal issues, sleep disorders, or continence problems, may also overlap.

These combined challenges can make everyday life more complex and require extra understanding and support. By addressing both neurodiversity and these overlapping conditions, the church can offer a more inclusive and caring environment for everyone.

Final Thoughts

NeuroChurch aims to strengthen St Aidan's as a community of Christian faith for **all people**, including those who identify as neurodiverse. This initiative is not about creating a separate or segregated group but about building a church where **authenticity is embraced** and seen as an enriching part of our collective faith journey. By welcoming everyone's full, authentic self, we reflect the inclusive love of Christ, creating a church community that is stronger and more diverse, embodying God's vision for unity and belonging.

Rev Glen
Vicar and NeuroDisciple

Glossary of Terms

Neurodiverse describes individuals or groups of people whose brain functions differ from neurotypical development. Neurodiverse people include those with Autism, ADHD, and similar conditions, and this term is often used to identify those who experience the world differently because of these variations.

Neurospicy: A playful, informal term used within the neurodiverse community to describe someone with a neurodiverse brain.

Stimming: Repetitive movements or sounds that help neurodiverse individuals regulate sensory input or emotions.

Masking: The act of hiding or suppressing neurodiverse traits to fit social norms, often leading to exhaustion or anxiety.

Social Anxiety: Fear or discomfort in social situations, commonly experienced by neurodiverse individuals due to difficulties with social cues or interactions.

Executive Function: Cognitive processes such as planning, organising, and managing time, which can be challenging for some neurodiverse people.

Sensory Processing: How the brain interprets sensory input (sound, light, touch), which can be heightened or diminished in neurodiverse individuals.

Identity-First Language: A way of describing someone by their identity (e.g., "autistic person") rather than using terms like "person with autism."

Co-Occurring Conditions: Additional challenges such as anxiety, depression, or physical conditions that are often experienced alongside neurodiverse traits.