



Section: Explore More

Module: Disability Inclusion for Ministry

Creating a Ministry of Belonging: Embracing Neurodiversity Handout 1 of 3

An important task, when working to create a ministry that creates a space of welcome and inclusion of all, is to get on the same page about definitions and common language.

To start, let's build on Katie Snyders [module](#)- where she uses the the following definitions:

Neurodiverse - the concept that there is natural variation in the human brain that leads to differences in how we think and behave. ([This video is SUPER helpful!](#))

Neurodiverse is most commonly used by the Autism, ADHD, and other learning-disabled communities to describe themselves. While neurotypical is often used to describe everyone else in society who does not fall into the neurodiverse category.

In less pathological words: Neurodiversity is the reality that we all think, learn, experience the world, and connect with others in various ways.

Neurotypical - describes human brains that have “normal” neurological development or functioning.

Additionally, Common diagnoses that fall within the Neurodiverse umbrella are:

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder**- A developmental disorder that includes differences in social communication skills, fine and gross motor skills, speech, and how people connect and engage with others and the sensory world around them
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**- A neurodevelopmental disorder that includes features of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity
- **Tourette's Syndrome**- A tic disorder starting in childhood that involves involuntary, repetitive movements and vocalizations
- **Dyslexia**: Challenges with language skills (reading and writing)
- **Dyscalculia**: Challenges with numbers and arithmetic
- **Sensory Processing Disorder**: An umbrella category for varying processing categories
 - Sensory Modulation Divergence:
 - Sensory over-responsiveness – Characterized by strong reactions to things others find normal, like intense responses to clothing tags or food textures, often seen in children on the spectrum.





- Sensory under-responsiveness – Some individuals might respond slowly or react less to stimuli, appearing lethargic or withdrawn compared to their peers.
- Craving sensory input – Seeking sensory input is a way to gather feedback, distinct from under-responsiveness. In autism, it might result in compulsive spinning, for example.
- Sensory- Based Motor Divergence:
 - *An example: Dyspraxia:* Complex neurological condition involving multiple brain functions which govern the coordination of muscles and perception and may also impact language and thought
- Sensory Discrimination: process whereby specific qualities of sensory stimuli are perceived and meaning is attributed to them (what is seen, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled)

It is not just possible, it is likely, that you will have people who exist on the spectrum of neurodiversity in your context. Statistics show that **1 in 8 are neurodiverse***, and that number is likely higher due to lack of awareness of the spectrum of neurodiversity and or the lack of an accurate diagnosis. Neurodiversity is often identified and accommodated in communities that have ease of access to healthcare research and resources. Access is key.

**A note: this statistic is higher in the LBGTQIA+ community as there is a large intersection between neurodiversity and gender diversity*

Shifting the paradigm:

So often, language of pathology is used when talking about individuals who are neurodivergent. Nick Walker, a neurodivergent author, educator, and psychologist, offers an alternative in what he calls the Neurodiversity Paradigm that affirms the following principles that are very helpful when considering faith formation:

1- Neurodiversity affirms natural human variation, and the variation reflected in God's creation

- A helpful way to frame this is in the telling of the creation story. God created land and sea... and also marshes, wetlands, deserts, forests, lakes, beaches, etc. God created night and day...and also dusk, dawn, twilight...etc. So it is no wonder that God created each individual and our brains to be different and unique!

2- There is no single "right way" of thinking or learning.

- Just like there are a variety of opinions, tastes, and colors, there are also a variety of ways to think and learn- try to avoid language of right and wrong and lean into language of difference and affirmation of the way that our diversity makes us stronger and shows us how to be a better neighbor each day.

3- Similar to the experiences of gender or ethnic diversity, neurodiversity is not just about minds or behavior, but is also about power and social experiences.

- The world is not ordered for neurodivergent brains and processes. That is the hard truth, and if you talk to any individual or family who live with neurodiversity- they will tell you that access, resources, education,





research and support are hard to come by. Harder even still for those who are not white, affluent, and living in highly urban areas. Knowing this, we must work to create access in the spaces we can and build ministries that create access, promote equity, and prioritize agency.

There will be times you need to assess the success of a specific offering (for example, a class, gathering, or an event). Here are examples of questions that you can use as well as suggestions of who and how to ask.

Who should you ask?

- Participants or learners
- Teachers
- Staff and church leaders
- Yourself!

How will you ask?

- Paper survey [Provide PDFs of questions below.]
- Google form [Create and provide links.]
- In person meeting

Resources prepared by Rev. Pepa Paniagua, a pastor, New Worshiping Community leader (Kin-dom Community), and co-founder of Kin-dom Camp.

