



Supporting Ministers-in-Training with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Guide for Incumbents

Introduction

This guide is designed to support incumbents in accompanying ministers-in-training (lay and ordained) who are autistic. It offers a brief overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), practical strategies for inclusive ministry training, and theological reflections to affirm the value of neurodiversity in the Church. Every person with autism is unique, and this guide encourages a posture of listening, learning, and adapting to individual needs. By fostering inclusive environments, we honour the diverse ways in which God calls and equips people for ministry.

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how a person experiences and interacts with the world. It is called a “spectrum” because it encompasses a wide range of traits, strengths, and challenges. People with autism may process sensory information differently, communicate in unique ways, and prefer routines or predictability.

Importantly, autism is not a deficit, it is a difference. Autistic individuals often bring deep insight, creativity, and integrity to their ministry. Using person-first language (e.g., “a person with autism”) helps affirm their identity beyond diagnosis, while also respecting individual preferences (some may prefer identity-first language, such as “autistic person”).

Common Strengths and Challenges

Strengths Often Seen in Autistic Ministers-in-Training

- Focused passion for theology, scripture, or specific ministry areas
- Honesty and integrity, often with a strong sense of justice
- Creative problem-solving and unique perspectives
- Commitment to routine and reliability

Challenges That May Arise

- Sensory sensitivities (e.g., noise, lighting, touch)
- Social communication differences, such as interpreting tone or body language

- Executive functioning difficulties, including planning, time management, or transitions
- Anxiety, especially in unfamiliar or unstructured environments

These traits are not universal, and each person's experience will differ. The key is to approach each minister-in-training with curiosity and compassion.

Ministry Training Context

Ministry training often involves placements, group learning, reflective practice, and interpersonal engagement, all of which may present barriers for autistic individuals. For example:

- Group discussions may be overwhelming or difficult to follow.
- Placements in unfamiliar settings may trigger anxiety.
- Abstract expectations or unwritten social norms may be confusing.

Incumbents play a vital role in creating environments where autistic ministers-in-training can thrive. This includes offering clarity, structure, and flexibility, and advocating for reasonable adjustments in training pathways.

Practical Support Strategies for Incumbents

Here are some ways incumbents can support autistic ministers-in-training effectively:

- **Build trust and rapport:** Be consistent, respectful, and open. Take time to understand the person's communication style and preferences.
- **Communicate clearly:** Use direct language. Avoid idioms, sarcasm, or ambiguous instructions. Written follow-ups can be helpful.
- **Create sensory-safe spaces:** Be mindful of lighting, noise, and physical layout. Offer quiet spaces or allow breaks when needed.
- **Offer structure and predictability:** Share schedules in advance. Outline expectations clearly. Avoid last-minute changes where possible.
- **Be flexible with social norms:** Understand that eye contact, tone, or body language may differ. Focus on the person's intent and content.
- **Encourage self-advocacy:** Support the minister-in-training in expressing their needs. Ask what helps them feel safe and supported.

- **Collaborate with training institution:** Ensure accommodations are in place. Share feedback constructively and advocate for inclusive practices.

Theological Reflection

The Church is called to be a body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12), each contributing uniquely to the whole. Neurodiversity is part of God's creative design, and autistic ministers bring gifts that enrich the Church's witness and ministry.

Jesus consistently welcomed those who were misunderstood or marginalized. In following Christ, we are invited to challenge assumptions about what "typical" ministry looks like and to celebrate the diverse ways God calls people to serve.

Conclusion

Supporting autistic ministers-in-training is not about fixing or changing them, it is about creating environments where they can flourish. Incumbents have a profound opportunity to nurture vocations, model inclusive leadership, and reflect the radical hospitality of the Gospel.

By learning, adapting, and listening, we honour the image of God in every person and build a Church that truly welcomes all.