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Briefing for parishes: neurodiversity

Introduction

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how human brains function, encompassing differences in thinking, learning, processing, and behaving. It includes conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette's syndrome, among others.

While neurodiverse individuals bring unique strengths—such as creativity, deep focus, and innovative thinking—they often face challenges in environments that aren't designed with their needs in mind. Common issues include sensory overload (from noise, lighting, or crowds), difficulty with social cues or communication, and anxiety around unpredictability or change.

The biggest hurdle for churches and communities is moving beyond token inclusion to genuine belonging—this means rethinking norms, offering flexibility, and listening deeply to neurodiverse voices. Overcoming stigma, embracing difference, and creating spaces where everyone can worship and contribute authentically is both the challenge and the calling.

Top ten tips for welcoming neurodiverse people into church

1. Learn About Neurodiversity

- Understand conditions like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's, and others.
- Recognize that neurodiversity is about different ways of thinking, sensing, and interacting—not a deficiency.

2. Create a Sensory-Friendly Environment

- Offer quiet spaces or sensory rooms.
- Reduce harsh lighting, loud music, or strong smells where possible.
- Allow noise-cancelling headphones or comfort items.

3. Use Clear and Predictable Communication

- Keep language simple and direct in services and notices.
- Provide visual schedules or service outlines.
- Avoid idioms or metaphors that may be confusing.

4. Offer Alternative Ways to Participate

- Allow people to engage in worship in ways that suit them—standing, sitting, drawing, or moving.
- Provide online or written versions of sermons and prayers.

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5. Be Flexible with Expectations

- Don't expect eye contact, handshakes, or verbal responses.
- Allow people to leave and return during services without judgment.

6. Use Inclusive Language and Imagery

- Avoid language that implies brokenness or healing is needed for neurodiversity.
- Emphasize belonging, dignity, and the image of God in all people.

7. Train Church Volunteers and Staff

- Offer basic neurodiversity awareness training.
- Encourage empathy, patience, and non-judgmental attitudes.

8. Celebrate Neurodiverse Gifts

- Invite neurodiverse people to share their talents—music, art, tech, theology, etc.
- Affirm their contributions as part of the body of Christ.

9. Include Neurodiverse Voices in Planning

- Ask neurodiverse individuals what they need and what works for them.
- Involve them in leadership, planning, and feedback.

10. Practice Radical Welcome

- Make it clear that everyone is truly welcome—on posters, websites, and in sermons.
- Follow up with genuine relationships, not just surface-level inclusion

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