

Joining The Feast

(Towards a theology for Autism)

By Ann Memmott and Helen Tyers



The Appetiser

Introduction

This article is to introduce a book by Ann and Helen. It looks at theology, Scripture and Christianity in the context of autism and Autistic People.

There are very few books on theology and Christian works for Autistic People, by Autistic People. The work of Ann and Helen is centred on the social model of disability. It seeks to assist inclusion. This book is not about 'awareness', as that is often used to hide the lack of inclusion. This applies to all the Disability Community, but in particular Autistic People. The aim was to produce a work suitable for academics, but which does not exclude most people by being too hard to read and understand.

It is not possible to ensure absolutely everyone can read and use the work. Care has been taken to ensure widest possible use. The writers

have avoided theological jargon where possible. Words that have little meaning to many Autistic People have also been avoided. The main words are explained at the end of the paper, to allow people to understand what the work says.

Words that cannot be avoided have been explained. *Joining The Feast* is written as simply as possible and each section has a simple English explanation to it.

The work considers what autism is, and what it is not. A lack of understanding of autism can increase myths and exclusion.

Joining the Feast will help Autistic People to explore the Christian faith. It will help Autistic People take part in sacraments and church activities.

It does not cover everything. It is a first step in looking at theology and autism. It is a start to developing a theological view of autism written by Autistic People. It is about Autistic People, but the book will hopefully help all Disabled People.

Both Ann and Helens brains work in ways that are different. Their writing may at times reflect this. They decided not to edit this out. What is produced reflects the reality for Ann and Helen. They have teamed up to pool their joint expertise as Disabled Theologian and Autistic Person.

Who Are Ann and Helen?

Ann Memmott is an Autistic Person who has been actively seeking justice for Autistic People for many years. Ann is author of the autism guidelines for the Church of England, a contributor to the book, "Making Church Accessible to All". Ann is a regular speaker at national conferences on autism, disability and inclusion. The recent conferences at St Martin in the Fields with Inclusive Church, and in the North with Disability & Jesus are examples. Her work is based around a lifetime of autism, and decades of exploring what church means to autistic individuals.

Ann's talks and written materials include autistic prayer and spiritual exploration through the senses. Ann leads informal worship sessions for church groups. She also advises Vocations teams on how to find and make the best use of autistic church leaders. Ann was for some time a member of the ASPARRG Autism and Spirituality network, working with national and international figures on this important subject. Outside of church work, Ann advises the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism in her role as Vice Chair of the Advisory Board. She works closely with the National Autistic Society and with Autism Oxford UK. Autism Oxford is an award-winning national training company using autistic professional trainers. Her advisory work extends to the BBC, National Trust, Thames Valley Police, the University of Oxford and many other organisations and groups. Her whole family is autistic, as are many of her friends and colleagues. Ann has survived cancer and is also faceblind. She has arthritis and a spinal scoliosis.

Helen Tyers a Disabled Person who is a theologian. She has been an active campaigner for inclusion in secular settings, and within the church. She has had a physical impairment for many years. In 2015 Helen had a stroke which has left brain damage that affects the brains processing. Some of the effects are similar to those Autistic People have. This helps give a greater understanding of the impact of an excluding society for Autistic People.

Helen has been an ally of Autistic People for many years. She worked for an autistic society in the 1980s, and promoted Autistic Peoples' rights in the wider disability community in discussions in the 1990s. Helen has many family and friends who are Autistic People. Helen continues to advocate for and support Autistic People. However she is clear that she does not speak for Autistic People as she herself is neurotypical but with a heightened knowledge and understanding.

Helen is a social work consultant, researcher and author in the field of supporting Disabled People in their parenting role. She has been on government task forces, parliamentary committees and other national working parties. She has been an expert witness in English, Jersey and Scottish courts and the European Court on Human Rights. She has

worked as a social worker, and later as a social work regulator, where she had national lead responsibility for disability. She was the consultant on a BAFTA award winning drama by the BBC. She has trained legal professionals, including Judges. Helen has a varied background in advocating full inclusion.

Helen was part of the Methodist Church national working party that considered equality across all areas of exclusion. She co-chaired the committee that considered equality policy. Ill health forced early retirement from active roles. Helen continues to offer advice and support where she can. She started to write a paper towards a theology for autism. Some of this is in the book, however conscious that Autistic People must be heard she has teamed up with Ann to produce 'Joining The Feast'.

Terminology

Where possible; words and phrases that are excluding have been avoided. There are no long complicated theological terms and words. These we think are not needed. In the completed work there is a longer section where things are explained. For this article it is important to highlight the following words and phrases:

- Theology is the study of things to do with God.
- Theologian is a person who studies things to do with God
- Exclusion is when you are stopped from being part of something
- Inclusion is being able to be part of something. Joining in.
- Scripture means the Bible for Christians. Other religions have special holy books as well. These can be called scriptures.
- Sacrament is an event that Jesus told Christians to do, such as Holy Communion, marriage, baptism.

Where possible the words agreed by large numbers and groups of people are used. So, the authors use the phrase Autistic People and

Disabled People. Both of these have capital letters, as they are not a description but a title. This is a 'social model' of disability or difference.

Disabled People reject the view that it is their impairments or body difference that excludes them from society. It is a disabling society that has structures and systems that prevent the full participation of people. 'Disabled People' is used with pride.

Here is a simple way to explain it. It is not the fault of a person who uses a wheelchair that they cannot get into a building. It is because the building has steps and no ramp. A greater look at the various models of disability and society is included in the book.

People who are not autistic are referred to as neuro typical to indicate that there is not the brain difference associated with autism.

Church leaders mean vicars, ministers, pastors and elders as the work seeks to be non-denominational unless an example or story is specific.

What's included

Joining The Feast includes sections on law and how it has and will impact on Autistic People. It looks at models of disability, and the connection for Autistic People. Understanding autism today in the light of past and current knowledge. Understanding history is important in making things change. There is discussion of theology that is relevant to Autistic People, and a look at Scripture. There are resources for making an Autistic inclusive church, as well as how to deliver an inclusive gospel message.

The work includes a look at what it means to be made in the Image of God for Autistic People. Also included is an understanding of Broken Body Theology, and how it is relevant. It considers the idea of the Church as One Body. Inclusion is at the centre of the message on church establishment and growth, One Body is important for understanding inclusion of Autistic People.

Joining The Feast also considers the use of 'pictogospels' and how they can enable Autistic People to understand the nature of God and the message of Christ. They can be a tool for church leaders in delivering

church messages, in a way that Autistic People can process and understand.

What Next

Joining The Feast is to be available electronically and in hard copy as the publishers and distributors make it available. Meanwhile you can sign up to the website for Joining The Feast and send in your stories, ideas and resources. Information will also be available on that site for any on-going work.

Website link

Ann and Helen thank you for reading this article and look forward to the journey with you as we all join The Feast.