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Capstone Project (Intersectionality of the Neurodivergent Being Underserved in Churches )

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### Abstract

(An abstract should be typed as a single paragraph in a block format This means no paragraph indentation! A typical abstract should only be about 6 sentences long or 150 words or less.)

Note

Completed last

## Table of Contents

Chapter I - Introductions



## FOCUS

There are many ways a child is diagnosed as neurodivergent. The autism spectrum is labeled and viewed as a spectrum because there are many levels of children needing various amounts of assistance. The part of the spectrum that will be focused on in this paper is mostly in the Asperger's range on the spectrum. Asperger's children with sensory issues look at life and spirituality very differently. This difference is not being addressed in most aspects of life let alone in the spiritual. Churches are assuming the faith is there for them to accept one into their fold. Neurodivergent doesn't look at spirituality in the same conceptuality as most do. Their relationship with the living word is far different and is also on a unique spectrum. Most higher-functioning children can read and easily understand secular concepts. High-functioning Asperger children will often pick a topic and have their entire focus of life will be on that topic. Children with Asperger's syndrome will read, draw, and center their entire life around a very specific subject. Their studying becomes a compulsion in their life whereas other aspects of their will only become relevant based on how it interacts with that subject matter of the time. An example of this compulsion would be horses. The child will look at every book, poster, or website on the subject. They will only play with horse toys while fulfilling their obsession with the topic. They will choose a topic that is tangible and physical in their world. Even if the object is extinct like dinosaurs or a subject from history like ancient Egypt. Museums and television will bring this alive and real to an Asperger's child. The obsession topic will become more complex as the child grows. Video games will also fill the obsession's need. All maps must be completed. All character development must be completed within the game. The child will be lost until this obsession is completed and run its course only to move on to a new one. The Asperger's child feels the object is connected to them in some way. A lot of this is also driven by the lack of

social skills these children have especially with their peers. They are not able to interact with most of their peers socially. Objects of popularity that most children must-have will be of no interest to the Asperger child. This especially includes relationships with others. The obsession topic becomes their world in many ways and all other items that are not part of the obsession must be disregarded. The concept of spirituality is not a concept that is usually obsessed over. The idea of faith is very difficult for an Asperger's child. In as much as all people are unique, there are few on the spectrum that will make God or religion the obsession in their lives. But they are few and still face challenges. Most people when seeing a cross will associate it with a symbol of Christianity. A Christian will see it as the symbol of the sacrifice where Jesus paid for their sins. The Asperger's child may read about the cross as a tool of punishment used by the Roman Empire. The Christian implication of the cross would be almost intangible for the Asperger's child. Christian concepts such as faith, grace, and divine love are not physical and more emotional. Emotions are other social cues that are missed by an Asperger's child. The obsession object or the video game is tangible because it's in their life. Emotional Christian concepts are difficult for those not on the spectrum but almost irrational to the Asperger's child. Further, although the Christian church ranges from Catholicism to many different brands of protestant Christianity, for the purposes of this paper the Christian church will be referred to as general Christianity focusing on the protestant religion. Especially, those nondenominational churches that presented a more modern brand of worshipping the lord. These churches in particular present an emotional awaking religious experience but marginalize the child with sensory issues that fail to feel the emotional understanding of celebrating the religion and the point of worship

## RATIONALE

Throughout the history of the Christian church, understanding that there are neurodivergent people and their spiritual needs have been marginalized. The history of the church charged such people as being possessed that need to be exercised or worse, put to death for their affliction. The concept of the needs and conditions of these have only in the last several years been diagnosed within the medical community. The term Asperger's syndrome itself was not even published as a namable diagnosis until 1991. The actual symptoms themselves were being noted and diagnosed before that, however. Treatment began to happen shortly thereafter. While modern churches do have compassion for those on the autism spectrum as Asperger's diagnosis is. The concept of how to include these children in the understanding of including them and bringing them into the body of Christ has been noticeably lacking. This paper is not about this judgment laid upon those poor souls. But more to show that there has been a trend of the Christian community not being able to keep up the modern scientific theories resulting in an exclusion of the neurodivergent and sometimes their families. By continuing in this perpetual game of catching up the Christian body is missing the opportunity to answer to the spiritual needs of a neglected group in our population. Throughout the history of time, there have been those who have been differently abled both physically and mentally. These people have been relegated or marginalized to the corners of our society. Sometimes ignored or even labeled as cursed and persecuted by many in society. The Christian church has historically looked upon

those as cursed and condemned several of them to death. In the Gospel of Luke 18:16, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." No child was defined by this statement. Jesus didn't mention a single limitation or restriction to the children that are to be brought to the lord. It is not this author's opinion that the Christian body has been negligent in its duties of bearing witness to good word to those with special needs. However, why has this been continuing, knowing that there are those in the world with sensory issues? Sensory issues range from sound volume, bright lights, and even physical touch issues. Public schools use tools like individualized education plans (I.E.P) to help students with abnormal mental conditions. These plans are laid out with the coordination between the public-school districts and the child's mental health therapists. These plans will include issues with lighting and atmospheres in the classroom including sound levels and lighting conditions. These plans are made available to these students by law to keep them from being marginalized in public schools. Most colleges have accepted the fact these children and adults shouldn't be marginalized either and have their version of I.E.P with the 504 programs. The 504 program is an acceptance of these people's limitations and allows for reasonable accommodations for the neurodivergent. Churches play loud worship music with bright lights. Most of these modern churches make church fun and energetic to attract a younger crowd. While other churches stay more traditional using hymns of the 1800s and beyond is difficult for today's youth to get behind. The social side of church services themselves is a stress on the sensory sensitive. Many Asperger's children don't want to be touched or hugged. Many Preachers yell and scream about heaven and hell. Sometimes people stand out on street corners screaming into bullhorns about hell's fire and brimstone. All these common worship practices and preaching practices are offensive to those on the spectrum. Leaving this group of underserved to figure out their

spirituality on their own. Shouldn't their spiritual needs also be met? The parents of these children are also left wanting because they can't attend when they can't bring their whole family. There is an intersectionality showing those neurodivergent children being left underserved by the church's use of worship and lighting effect in some churches also most churches don't even see how some of these neurodivergent children can sit for an entire service. These children and some adults cannot physically be involved when lighting and sounds are translated to physical pain in their minds and body. Beyond the neurodivergent, there is an almost refusal of the modern church to acknowledge the fact that there is an entire generation of youth being raised in a world of wokeness that teaches them the judgment of any type of behavior or personality is wrong. Leaving youth without the concepts of spiritualization in general marginalized and underserved. Our society has raised children with no consequences because someone has always made it better. The church's old concept of believing or fiery hell doesn't work anymore. Churches following their old messaging in sharing the word will be stuck leaving these souls underserved.

### **Research Question**

While beginning the research on this paper it seems several questions can be looked at. While there is a shrinking interest of youth in the Christian faith. The question which is the focus of the paper, is how children who are neurodivergent or on the autistic spectrum are being underserved by Christian churches by marginalizing their special needs. In doing research this question is not fully addressed. Several factors have been researched and written about but there doesn't seem to be a focus on this core question.

## Definitions of Key Terms

Neurodivergent- (unknown, n.d.) Neurodivergent is a nonmedical term that describes people whose brain develops or works differently for some reason. This means the person has different strengths and struggles from people whose brains develop or work more typically. While some people who are neurodivergent have medical conditions, it also happens to people where a medical condition or diagnosis hasn't been identified.

Asperger's Syndrome- (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2022)  
Asperger syndrome (AS) is a developmental disorder. It is an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), one of a distinct group of neurological conditions characterized by a greater or lesser degree of impairment in language and communication skills, as well as repetitive or restrictive patterns of thought and behavior. Other ASDs include classic autism, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (usually referred to as PDD-NOS). Unlike children with autism, children with AS retain their early language skills. The most distinguishing symptom of AS is a child's obsessive interest in a single object or topic to the exclusion of any other. Children with AS want to know everything about their topic of interest and their conversations with others will be about little else. Their expertise, high level of vocabulary, and formal speech patterns make them seem like little professors. Other characteristics of AS include repetitive routines or rituals; peculiarities in speech and language; socially and emotionally inappropriate behavior and the inability to interact

successfully with peers; problems with non-verbal communication; and clumsy and uncoordinated motor movements. Children with AS are isolated because of their poor social skills and narrow interests. They may approach other people but make normal conversation impossible through inappropriate or eccentric behavior, or by wanting only to talk about their singular interest. Children with AS usually have a history of developmental delays in motor skills such as pedaling a bike, catching a ball, or climbing outdoor play equipment.

## Chapter II – Historical Informed Analysis

### **Introduction**

Neurodivergent children have always had issues fitting with societal norms. It's not that they do not wish to fit in its more than their understanding of self and how to read and understand others are skills that elude them. Through the years a lot of those who researched this topic have developed theories about children on the autism spectrum one being *absent self-theory* as a reason to dismiss those on the spectrum as self-identified Christians. This theory states that children on the spectrum pick up on social cues and tries to act them out not understanding the why behind what they are doing. They would instead argue that autistic Christians are more mimicking Christian behavior rather than fully able to understand the meaning of being a Christian. Mimicking is common for kids on the spectrum to try to blend in socially even though they don't fully understand. Further, their ability to process everyday sensory input like smells, sounds, and even tactile sensory input such as physical contact from others or even from clothing. When one looks at websites like Wrongplanet.Net where both young people and adults with Asperger's post comments on discussions of multiple topics. There are several discussions about the pros and cons of being neurodivergent and being Christian and attending church. Most tend to feel there are issues with the concept of spiritualization and socialization at churches.

These are key elements in being part of the Christian church body but leave the neurodivergent feeling marginalized and relegated once more to the part of society that leaves them feeling isolated and as outcasts. Therefore, they tend to mimic the activities of the church by saying and acting a certain way but miss the big picture.

### History of Problem

There are over 350,000 churches in this country. With very few exceptions there is little being offered for those diagnosed as being on the spectrum. Relegating these people with special needs to a lack of access to the services required for their spiritual growth. Many of these larger institutions have mission statements or goals of providing for the needs of neurodivergent. But the social aspects of the church community seem to not be fully availed to those on the spectrum. Public schools and colleges have programs to provide accommodations for neurodivergent children and adults. Churches are not making this available as a standard. This is not as much about learning help as much as making the environment a positive atmosphere for those with sensory issues. A recent study shows this. (Carter, 2016) The study found that 56% of parents of children with disabilities in their study had kept their children from participating in a religious activity because support was not provided and 32% of parents said they changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed. If the goal of the church is to be welcoming and a safe place for all to attend, then the church is failing and marginalizing the needs of the neurodivergent.

The Autism Society website states About 1 percent of the world's population has autism spectrum disorder based on CDC studies from 2014. That number is not very shocking

considering these diagnoses are: 1. Based on a spectrum of symptoms that have a wide mental abilities range that currently growing and being discovered. 2. These diagnoses have been discovered in the last forty years. Before that many of these neurodivergent children have been misdiagnosed and worse incorrectly medicated for treatments. Some of these people are so high functioning that it is difficult to miss the suffering these people are going through. Churches are not all equipped to handle or identify those in the congregation with special needs. Most with special needs will try to hide their disabilities so they can fit into society. They use a variety of techniques to cope with their suffering. Most neurodivergent will use mimicking to pretend to fit in socially missing the point of what is happening. Olivia Buston writes about this in an article in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion and the actual harm this causes in finding true spiritualization. (Buston, 2017) In spite of the problems with the absent self-theory, discussions in the philosophy of religion and academic theology on the topic of autism and religion tend to proceed on the assumption that, insofar as the theory imputes to autistic persons a lack of first-order self-experience, it gets autism right. Even well-intentioned philosophers of religion and academic theologians—ones who see themselves as disability rights supporters—take behavioral scientists at their word that autistic persons cannot ascribe mental states to others or integrate their own experiences into a cohesive sense of self. Accordingly, these philosophers of religion and academic theologians assume, without consulting the self-described self-experience of autistic persons of faith, that autistic person will have trouble seeing God as an intentional agent, getting the main point out of figurative religious narratives, and assigning meaning to events in their lives based on such narratives. In other words. Imagine a person looking around during the worship service and all the parishioners have their arms raised for various reasons. In this scenario, the neurodivergent would also raise their arms to be socially

accepted as the same or equal. However, they would be in their heart not feeling the worship service's spirit or purpose. Their concentration would be more directed to how the music caused physical pain as a sensory overload. They would much rather or even eventually be forced to cover their ears to protect themselves. Their thoughts would not be focused on the worship service. They are not receiving the word or celebrating with their hearts. Instead, they are facing their flight or fight instincts to just be accepted by others in the congregation. Another example would be a member of the Amish church being present for a very animated southern Baptist mega-church service with dancing and hollering during service. The conservative Amish visitor who meets with a few other families in their homes will be so overwhelmed that they couldn't accept the message being given. If the purpose of the service is to have all those in attendance have some spiritual reconning then it could seldom be possible when in both examples the social communal aspects of the service have taken over the actual self-awareness in spiritual learning. Further, there are other sensory issues with most of the basic church services. Before Covid, a lot of churches would welcome those in attendance by suggesting parishioners shake hands with their neighbors or sometimes even hug them in welcoming each other. These physical interactions are very difficult for those on the spectrum. It makes them feel uncomfortable and places the neurodivergent into a "fight or flight" mode. Even being dressed in one's "Sunday's best" by wearing a jacket and tie or dress adds to the stress through tactile sensory input by wearing uncomfortable clothing. Why would the neurodivergent want to wake up and try to be a part of that? The answer is they wouldn't. Worse parents of the neurodivergent will also not wish to subject their child to such a situation where the child is suffering. The parent could remove the child to quieter areas of the church as most have places for children and parents to help calm children. But now the parent has been removed from the experience and begins to lose interest in

the church-going experience. When churches marginalize the sensory needs of neurodivergent they are also doing the same to families with those sensory issues. This will eventually cost membership numbers. With there being only one percent of the population diagnosed with being on the spectrum, churches are still doing well in attendance however, this represents only the ones diagnosed. It has been mentioned before that there are several more entire groups of the population still undiagnosed that are older. These adults suffer from the afflictions and have suffered their entire life that may have walked away from attending church years ago. These are souls who may lose faith, these members are not in attendance at any church. Churches struggle to keep membership. It is a struggle for survival and relevance. Churches in most towns are as numerous as streets in each town. There are so many various denominations and variations of each denomination that church bodies are contently going through ebbs and flows with partitioner numbers in attendance. Costing churches both the families and adult members that have other skills to offer the church through missionary or service not to mention lost tithing revenues and relevance and influence in the neighborhoods they serve. Even though the neurodivergent section of the population is very low they are looking for acceptance and to be welcomed in any way by any group. Christians are a group based on love and acceptance, so it would seem a good church be the best place for the neurodivergent, and their families could be accepted and understood.

### Chapter III – Data Trend Analysis and Interpretations

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a 5 year trend analysis using archival data from public databases to better understand the changes related to topic. The data presented will cover national or local ( specify

Statistical Narrative

Statistical Tables

Implications

#### Chapter IV- Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide recommendations to address the issues related to topic focus ( name )

Identify Specific Recommendations and Rationale

. References ( USE APA Version 7