

Autistic Christians Support Community

“There’s no such thing as ‘normal’ – we are all special”

Presenter: Stewart Rapley

Chair: David Derbyshire

15 November 2025

AGENDA

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. 11.00 – 11.05 | Welcome and Introduction |
| 2. 11.05 – 11.15 | Stewart: “There’s no such thing as ‘normal’ – we are all special” |
| 3. 11.15 – 11.45 | Discussion (30 mins) |
| 4. 11.45 – 11.55 | Community Update |
| 5. 11.55 – 12.00 | AOB |
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| 12.00 - 12.30 | Social time |

“There’s no such thing as ‘normal’ – we are all special”

Stewart Rapley

What is *normalcy*?

“At the root of why autistic people often feel unwelcome in churches is, I believe, the concept of *normalcy*.

To put it simply, *normalcy* is the set of dynamics by which communities safeguard the boundaries of what and who they deem normal and therefore acceptable.

Those who fall within those boundaries can be integrated into or even belong to the community, but those who do not fall within the boundaries either need to change or will be rejected.”

Léon van Ommen: Autism and Worship, p71

Normal = 'Appropriate' – right?

“... the ‘problem’ it's not the autistic person; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the autistic person. . . .

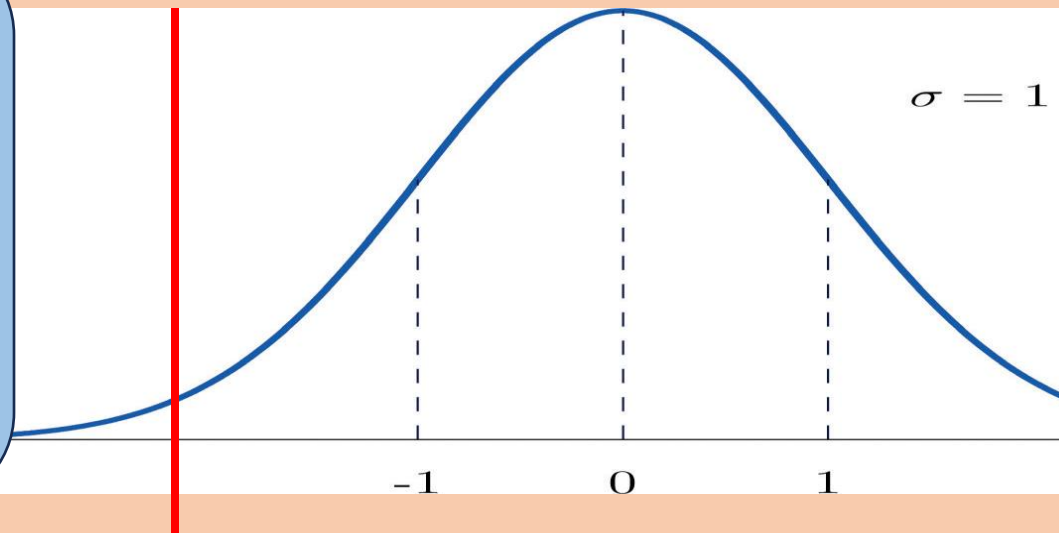
The question is . . . how to make sure that boundary keeping in churches does not turn people into ‘problems’ which then turns people away.”

Léon van Ommen: Autism and Worship, p72

Normal as a mathematical(?) concept

“Normal” = “What is typically the case” or “The way things should be”?

If the average height of a group of plants is 10 inches and the ‘standard deviation’ is 1 inch, then about 68% of the plants are likely to have heights in the range 9-11 inches – SD is a measure of ‘bunching’.



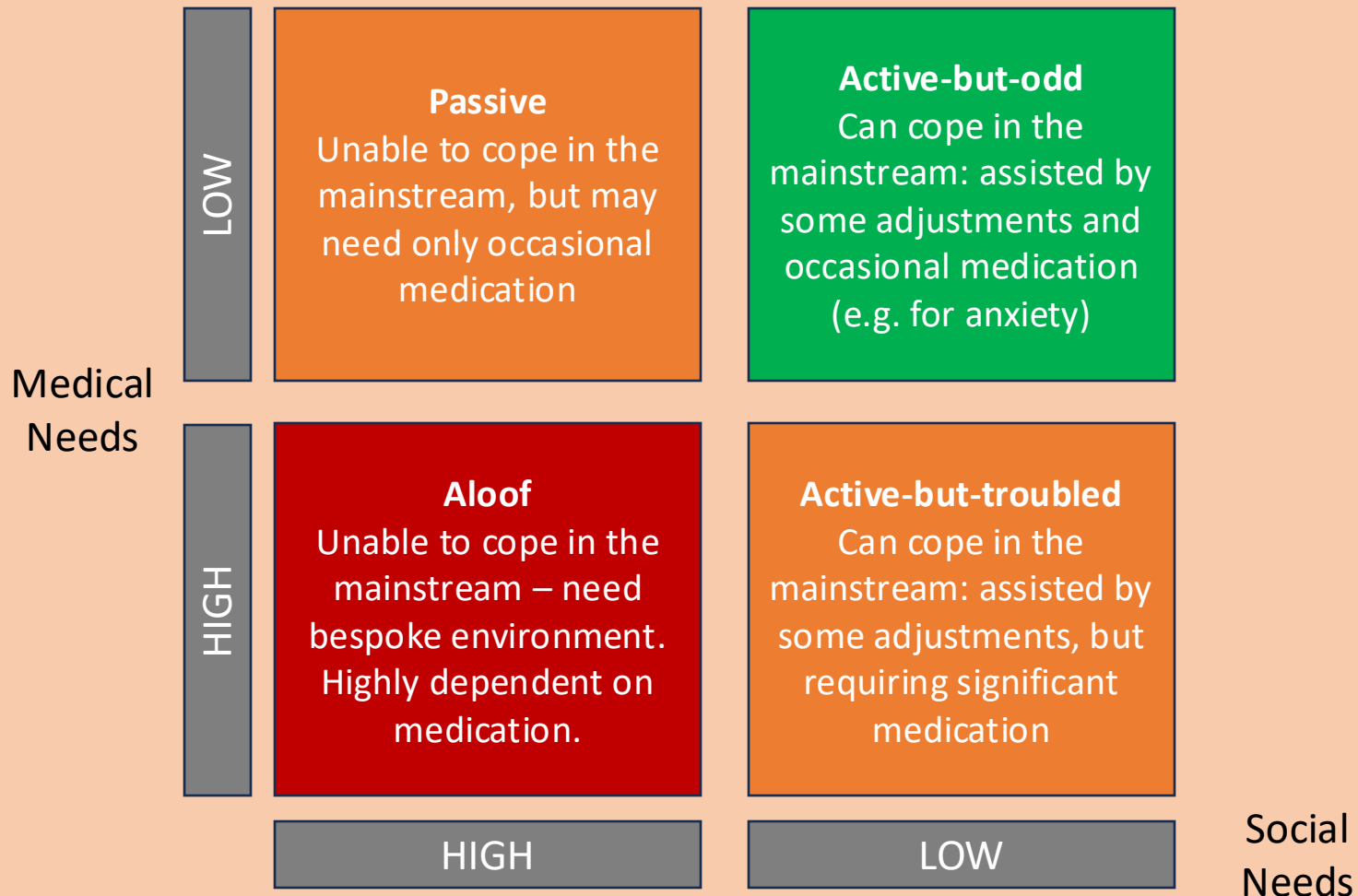
Where do you put the boundaries of ‘what is normal’?

More meaningful for some things than others

Data + Interpretation (e.g. Covid – ‘how close is safe?’ Or ‘should we close restaurants?’)

To some extent the language has become unhelpful because of the ‘should be’ connotation.

Autistic people are not all the same



Yes, we are all 'special', but we also have needs and (more or less) brokenness.

1 Cor. 12 – concept of the 'body' (of Christ)

How helpful is it to frame this discussion in terms of what is 'normal'?

Christian Perspective

- It is 'normal' to be 'broken' (Is. 53:6; Rom. 3:23; 1 John 3:4)
- It is 'normal' to be 'not yet' what we 'shall be' – we are all 'work in progress' (1 John 3:2)
- We need to distinguish in our boundaries between what is genuinely acceptable/unacceptable and what represents a (perhaps unsaid) bias (e.g. child's behaviour at school – kicking and biting – PBS?).
 - In which category does criticising our church (or leaders) come? – contextual? (Matt. 23 – “woe to you blind guides”) – note that Jesus' criticism resulted in his crucifixion! (Luke 22:66-23:49)
 - We need to think through our use of language: is driving on the right 'wrong' (and left 'right')?
- The spirit of Christ: “I do not condemn you.” (Matt. 7:1-5; John 8:11; James 1:19)
- Think about the response you seek: sometimes 'normal' implies a need for correction - this can sometimes be appropriate (Prov. 12.1 & 15:32; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 12:5-6).

Discussion Questions

- What is your experience or understanding of the use of 'normal'?
- Given that the goal of Christian discipleship is to become 'more like Christ' (Rom. 8:28-30) – what room do you see for the notion of 'normal' in a Christian sense?
- What alternative words might be helpful to use instead of 'normal' where this is likely to be unhelpful?

Community News

Discussion Schedule: Dates for your diary

DATE	DAY/TIME	CFE-Autism DISCUSSION TOPIC	SPEAKER	CHAIR	CHAT
Aug 2025		Summer Break: No meeting			
20 Sept 2025	Sat 11am	When we 'autistics' are the bullies!	Sue	Stewart	David
15 Nov 2025	Sat 11am	Autistic spirituality	David	Sue	Stewart
15 Nov 2025	Sat 11am	"There's no such thing as 'normal' – we are all special"	Stewart	David	AN Other tbc
13 Dec 2025	Sat 11am	AuDHD (Autism & ADHD) and Faith?	Emma Speake	Stewart	Sue

Speakers for 2026?

Courtney on 'Addiction'?

CHURCH FOR EVERYONE - LIST OF POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

No	Topic
~~6~~	~~Autism and ADHD~~
7	Helping churches become more 'autism friendly' (Case Studies)
8	Update from Peter Coxe at L'Arche
9	Rules and Tricks for Autistic flourishing: Can project management ideas help?
10	Building helpful and 'impactful' relationships outside meetings
~~11~~	~~Autistically speaking or being silent – and does God speak?~~
12	Humour, Faith and Autism
13	Autism and Other Faiths
14	Battling with Diagnosis and Govt benefits bureaucracy
15	Coping with (or avoiding?) formal exclusion (from ministry, job etc.)
16	The Book of Common prayer & liturgy: Good for autistic people?
17	Autism, Spirituality and Addiction
18	Learning from close family and friends: Can they help us find 'ways through'?
~~19~~	~~Do we, as autistic people, sometimes bully those who are NT?~~

Proposed Church For Everyone Webinar: Initial Thoughts

Key Underlying Themes

Theology

Culture

Practices



Webinar Theme: Creating a Church Culture to handle 'Hidden Differences'

2026/27
?

Purpose: Build on 2025 webinar by equipping delegates to develop a credible plan to address cultural biases in their churches

Date/Time: TBC, but likely 7.30-9.30pm UK time
Late Jan 2026?

Contributors

Penny Pullan
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Krysia Waldock
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15 Nov 2025

Proposed Content & Timing (provisional)

19.30

Introduction and Welcome

Biases: Good or Bad?

Learning from Research

Break

Learning from the Front Line

Break

Panel Q&A

Summary and Close

21.30

Proposed CFE@SJE Roadmap

Anyone interested in a 'lessons sharing' discussion?

