

Creating a sensory-healthy church

Welcoming all into worship



Sensory Healthy Church

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Churches are called to be places of welcome, yet there are many for whom church is so stressful to their senses that they can't engage fully with it; some even stop going. In fact, during a recent survey I conducted, **61% of respondents said they avoided church because of sensory needs**¹. That's huge! Individuals with conditions such as ADHD, mental health issues, learning disabilities or autism often process sensory experiences differently, meaning that they may find certain aspects of church services — such as loud music, bright lights, sitting still, and welcome hugs — overwhelming, anxiety-provoking, or frustrating.

As a Christian occupational therapist for over 30 years, I've heard patients recount these experiences time and time again, and so sensed the nudge from God to help church leaders and members alike by creating tools which start conversations and provide solutions to these issues.

One in six people will have sensory processing and integration challenges that significantly affect their life. Sensory processing differences affect how individuals respond to their environment, but there is no universal response. Some may experience sensory overload, finding bright lights or loud sounds distressing, while others may seek additional sensory input and movement to feel engaged.

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Church leaders may assume that if no one has raised concerns, there is no need to make changes. However, sensory processing issues often go unspoken. A child covering their ears during a hymn, a teenager avoiding youth group due to the bustle and possibility of unexpected physical contact in activities, or an adult who struggles with sitting still in a service — these are signs that a church environment may not be fully accessible.

One family didn't attend church because no church near them was willing to make adjustments to accommodate their son's needs, despite being aware of them. He was totally overwhelmed in most church environments as churches aimed their services to be 'funky and cool'. Because he couldn't attend a service, his mother couldn't either. Thankfully, they then moved to a church where the pastor had an autistic grandchild. Finally, this family was able to sit through the whole service with support! And the son loved it. He now passionately attends church; he knows he is loved because now he has the environment he needs to feel loved.

Making sure that church is an inclusive and accessible space for all requires some training to help reimagine the worship experience through a sensory lens. The changes that lead to this kind of sensory-healthy worship don't have to be major, but rather small, thoughtful adjustments that enable everyone to participate. Avoid making assumptions about what is required; instead, begin by engaging with your congregation to learn more about what they would find helpful. Maybe use the following as a starting point for your discussions:

- **Provide quiet areas** for those who need a calm space: something as small as an area in the entrance where the volume is turned right down; a room that they can go to; or a quieter area within the main worship space.
- Consider undertaking a **sensory audit** of your church with individuals who might struggle with lights/noise/smell/taste/touch.

- **Use visual aids** such as service outlines or picture schedules to help reduce anxiety. Roots' Visual Timetable is available at <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/vt>
- **Offer flexibility** in seating and movement, allowing people to engage in ways that suit them. (It's remarkable the difference a swing at the back of church makes!)

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Consider sound and lighting adjustments such as lower volume levels or dimmed lights in certain areas. Maybe even giving controls to parents/carers to reduce anxiety about noise levels. A sensory-healthy church is not just about accessibility — it's about showing love to all God's people, no matter how their brains are wired. It is about truly welcoming everyone! We need to create a space where people of all ages and abilities can experience worship in a way that is meaningful and comfortable for them. Loving and accepting individuals' needs, and not 'othering' them is important. It's about knowing your people and remembering their needs (as best you can) and not making assumptions. How we lead — giving the opportunity for flexibility — is important.

We want to see all members of God's family in church and worshipping in a way that meets their needs. Every church can benefit from guidance and support on making their setting more sensory-healthy. Visit www.sensoryhealthychurch.com or www.annelaurejackson.com where you can access resources, training and sensory support, and sign up for The Sensory Healthy Church.

To raise your group leaders' awareness of sensory challenges, you may want to try using a 'One Page Profile' for your children and young people, a free template can be found at <https://www.sheffkids.co.uk/resources/>

🎧 Listen to Melanie and Anne delve deeper into this topic on the Roots for churches podcast: [rootsforchurches.podbean.com](https://www.rootsforchurches.com/podcast/)

¹ The survey was shared online and had respondents from around the world. To see the full research findings, watch the video at www.sensoryhealthychurch.com.