

Neurodiversity, Worship, and Belonging: Reimagining Autism Inclusion in African Churches

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ABSTRACT

Autism remains insufficiently explored within African Practical Theology, where theological engagement with disability has historically focused more on visible impairments and healing narratives than on neurodevelopmental differences. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how ecclesial interpretations and worship practices shape the participation and belonging of autistic children and their families. This qualitative ethnographic study examines the experiences of families raising autistic children within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia in Malawi. Data were generated through interviews with parents and a specialist therapist, participant observation at a rehabilitation center, and liturgical observation in selected congregations. The findings reveal three interconnected challenges. First, families navigate competing medical, cultural, and spiritual explanations of autism, creating uncertainty in pastoral responses and congregational understanding. Second, sensory-intensive worship practices and social expectations may produce forms of exclusion in which autistic children are physically present but unable to participate meaningfully in ecclesial life. Third, families articulate belonging not as mere acceptance but as relational participation grounded in Ubuntu, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility. Drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu, this article argues that the primary barriers to autistic children's participation arise not from autism itself but from theological, liturgical, and social structures that privilege neurotypical patterns of worship. By developing the concepts of the hermeneutical void and quiet exclusion, the study contributes to African Practical Theology and Disability Theology by offering a framework for reimagining worship as a space where neurological diversity is recognized as part of God's creative design and where all members of the Body of Christ can experience genuine belonging.

Keywords: Neurodiversity; autism; worship; belonging; Ubuntu; African Practical Theology; disability theology

INTRODUCTION

The Christian church understands itself as the Body of Christ, a community in which every person is called to participate in worship, fellowship, and the shared life of faith. Within this theological vision, belonging is not merely a social experience but an expression of the church's understanding of humanity, community, and participation in God's purposes. To belong to the church involves more than physical presence or formal membership; it requires recognition, relationship, participation, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to the life of the community. However, the experiences of families raising autistic children reveal a significant tension between the church's theological affirmation of belonging and the realities experienced by neurodivergent children within ecclesial spaces.

Recent practical theological scholarship has increasingly shifted attention from disability inclusion as accommodation toward belonging as a deeper theological and relational category. Rather than asking only whether persons with disabilities are welcomed into existing structures, scholars have examined whether churches function as communities where children with disabilities and their families are genuinely recognized as valued participants. Manuel (2024) argues that churches should be understood as communities of belonging for children of all abilities, while Manuel and Weber (2026) emphasize the importance of theological approaches that view churches as welcoming spaces where families experience recognition, resilience, and

participation. These perspectives challenge churches to move beyond practices of acceptance that leave existing structures unchanged and toward forms of belonging that transform communal life.

Despite these developments, autism remains insufficiently explored within African Practical Theology and Disability Theology. Much theological reflection on disability within African contexts has historically concentrated on visible impairments, healing narratives, and questions of suffering. Ndlovu (2016) observes that African theological education has given limited attention to disability, resulting in inadequate theological resources for responding to the experiences of persons with disabilities. More recently, Daehnhardt et al. (2024) have called for a movement away from harmful theological interpretations toward approaches that affirm dignity, agency, and participation.

Autism presents a particular challenge to existing approaches because it involves differences in communication, sensory processing, behaviour, and social interaction that are often less visible than physical disabilities. Clasquin-Johnson (2023) argues that the inclusion of persons with autism requires communities to reconsider how they understand participation and relationship. Within religious communities, the question is therefore not simply whether autistic individuals are present, but whether they are integrated into the communal life of faith in ways that recognize their personhood and contribution.

This question is particularly significant within African contexts where understandings of autism are often shaped by multiple and sometimes competing explanatory frameworks. Families raising autistic children frequently navigate medical interpretations alongside cultural and religious explanations concerning the meaning and causes of autism. Simelane (2021) demonstrates that religious and cultural beliefs significantly influence responses to children with autism, sometimes creating tensions between supportive care and interpretations that associate disability with spiritual or moral concerns. In Malawi, limited awareness and inadequate access to diagnostic and support services further complicate how families and communities understand autism (Chibwe, 2024). Within churches, these uncertainties influence pastoral responses and shape whether autistic children and their families experience support, stigma, or silence.

The question of belonging becomes especially important when examining worship practices. Worship is not only an expression of Christian belief but also a space where communities enact their understanding of who belongs. African Christian worship is often deeply embodied and communal, expressed through music, movement, prayer, interaction, and collective participation. These practices represent significant theological strengths because they affirm community and shared faith. However, worship environments may also create barriers for autistic children whose sensory experiences and patterns of communication differ from dominant expectations. As Van Ommen (2024) demonstrates, liturgical practices can either affirm belonging or reinforce exclusion when they privilege particular forms of participation as normative.

Existing approaches to disability inclusion within churches have often focused on physical accessibility through architectural modifications, communication resources, and practical accommodations. While these approaches remain essential, they do not fully address the experiences of autistic children and their families, whose participation is also shaped by sensory environments, relational expectations, and congregational attitudes. As Pearson et al. (2024) demonstrate, families raising autistic children often negotiate complex experiences within religious communities where faith provides important support but where misunderstanding can also limit belonging. Therefore, the challenge facing churches is not simply how to make worship accessible, but how to cultivate communities where autistic children are recognized as full participants in the Body of Christ.

This article examines these questions through a qualitative ethnographic study of families raising autistic children within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia in Malawi. Drawing on interviews with parents and a specialist therapist, participant observation at a rehabilitation center, and observation of congregational worship practices, the study explores how theological interpretations, liturgical environments, and communal relationships shape experiences of belonging among autistic children and their families.

The article makes three contributions to African Practical Theology and Disability Theology. First, it introduces the concept of the hermeneutical void to describe the uncertainty created when medical, cultural,

and spiritual interpretations of autism coexist without constructive theological engagement. Second, it develops the concept of quiet exclusion to explain forms of marginalization where autistic children remain physically present within church communities but experience limited participation and recognition. Third, by bringing together the neurodiversity paradigm, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu, the article proposes a framework for neuro-inclusive worship grounded in relational belonging.

The article argues that the primary barriers facing autistic children within African churches do not arise from autism itself but from theological, liturgical, and social structures that privilege neurotypical patterns of worship and participation. Reimagining worship through the lens of neurodiversity therefore requires more than accommodation. It requires a transformation of ecclesial imagination in which neurological diversity is recognized as part of God's creative design and where every member of the Body of Christ can experience genuine belonging.

Contextual and Conceptual Framework: Autism, Belonging, and Neuro-Inclusive Worship

Discussions of disability inclusion within African churches have increasingly challenged theological traditions that have understood disability primarily through categories of suffering, limitation, or healing. However, much of this engagement has focused on visible disabilities, while neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism remain relatively underexplored within African Practical Theology (Ndlovu, 2016; Clasquin-Johnson, Mahlo, & Clasquin-Johnson, 2023). This limited engagement has significant implications for ecclesial practice because autistic children and their families often encounter forms of exclusion that are less visible but equally influential in shaping their experiences of faith, worship, and community.

Autism and Disability Discourse in African Churches

Autism introduces particular challenges for theological and pastoral reflection because it exists at the intersection of medical, cultural, and religious interpretations. While contemporary understandings describe autism as a neurodevelopmental condition involving differences in communication, sensory processing, and social interaction, many families in African contexts encounter additional interpretations shaped by spiritual and cultural beliefs (Simelane, 2021). These interpretations may provide communities with meaningful explanations; however, they may also contribute to stigma when autism is associated with spiritual failure, curses, or the need for deliverance.

In African churches, disability responses have historically been influenced by healing narratives that emphasize restoration and divine intervention. While prayer and spiritual support remain important aspects of Christian pastoral care, approaches that interpret disability primarily as a problem requiring correction risk undermining the dignity and agency of persons with disabilities. Daehnhardt et al. (2024) argue that African churches need to move from harmful theological interpretations toward life-giving approaches that affirm persons with disabilities as full participants in Christian communities.

The challenge is particularly significant for autistic children because their differences are often less immediately recognizable than physical disabilities. As Clasquin-Johnson (2023) observes, religious communities frequently struggle to integrate autistic persons because assumptions about communication, behaviour, and participation are often based on neurotypical expectations. Consequently, autistic children may be welcomed into church spaces while their ways of engaging and participating remain misunderstood.

Autism and Ecclesial Belonging

This study conceptualizes belonging as a central theological and practical concern in the inclusion of autistic children. Belonging involves more than physical presence within a congregation; it includes recognition, participation, relationship, and the experience of being valued as an essential member of the community. A church may permit autistic children to attend worship services while unintentionally communicating that they are different, disruptive, or peripheral members of the Body of Christ.

Recent practical theological scholarship has emphasized that churches must move beyond models of inclusion that focus only on allowing access and toward creating communities where persons with disabilities experience

genuine belonging. Manuel (2024) argues that churches should be understood as communities of belonging where children of all abilities are recognized as participants rather than recipients of care. Similarly, Manuel and Weber (2026) highlight the importance of theological approaches that cultivate belonging and resilience among children with disabilities and their families.

For families raising autistic children, belonging is often shaped by everyday experiences of acceptance or exclusion. Pearson et al. (2024) demonstrate that parents of autistic children frequently negotiate complex relationships with religious communities, seeking spiritual support while also encountering assumptions that may increase stigma. Therefore, the question facing churches is not simply whether autistic children are present but whether they are able to participate meaningfully in worship, relationships, and communal life.

This distinction is important within African ecclesial contexts where community identity is strongly expressed through participation in shared worship and social relationships. When autistic children are unable to engage according to expected patterns of behaviour, exclusion may occur not through explicit rejection but through subtle forms of distancing and limited interaction. The concept of belonging therefore provides an important framework for examining how church practices either affirm or restrict autistic children's participation.

Neuro-Inclusive Worship and Liturgical Hospitality

Worship represents one of the primary spaces where belonging is experienced and communicated within Christian communities. Through music, prayer, preaching, ritual participation, and communal interaction, worship practices embody theological understandings of God, humanity, and ecclesial identity. Liturgical practices do not merely express existing beliefs; they also shape how communities understand participation and membership. As liturgical theology emphasizes, worship forms the identity of the worshipping community by establishing patterns of relationship, recognition, and participation (Boersma, 2003; Moyaert, 2016).

In many African Christian contexts, worship is characterized by embodied participation, expressive music, collective responses, and relational engagement. These elements reflect important theological affirmations concerning communal faith, participation, and the active involvement of believers in worship. However, the same features that create rich communal experiences for many worshippers may present challenges for autistic children when sensory environments and behavioural expectations assume neurotypical forms of participation (Wakeling, 2019; Van Ommen, 2024).

For autistic children, amplified music, extended services, spontaneous interactions, and expectations of stillness may become significant barriers when their sensory experiences and communication patterns differ from those expected within the congregation. Van Ommen (2024) argues that worship practices often carry implicit assumptions about what a "normal" worshipper should look like, revealing how liturgical spaces may privilege certain bodies, behaviours, and forms of participation over others. The concern, therefore, is not that African worship traditions are inherently exclusionary, but that churches must critically examine whether their practices create space for diverse ways of encountering and participating in worship.

The concept of neuro-inclusive worship extends discussions of disability inclusion beyond physical accessibility. While architectural adaptations, communication support, and other accessibility measures remain essential, autistic children often encounter barriers related to sensory environments, social expectations, and communication patterns. Manuel (2025) argues that theological engagement with disability must attend to embodied experiences by examining how religious spaces either enable or restrict participation. This requires churches to consider not only whether persons with disabilities can enter worship spaces but whether those spaces allow them to participate meaningfully.

Within this framework, liturgical hospitality refers to the capacity of worshipping communities to welcome difference as an integral aspect of Christian community rather than as an interruption that requires correction. Hospitality in this sense is not simply an act of receiving those who are different into an unchanged community; it involves the transformation of communal practices so that diverse forms of participation become possible (Goo, 2024). Neuro-inclusive worship therefore reimagines the liturgical space as a

community where autistic children are not merely accommodated but recognized as active participants in the divine-human encounter.

Ubuntu and Relational Belonging

Ubuntu provides an important African resource for conceptualizing belonging as a relational and communal practice. Grounded in the understanding that personhood is formed through relationships, Ubuntu emphasizes interdependence, mutual recognition, and responsibility for the wellbeing of others. Rather than viewing individuals as autonomous entities whose participation depends solely on their ability to adapt to existing structures, Ubuntu understands human flourishing as emerging through relationships of care, recognition, and shared responsibility (Majoko, 2023; Mutanga, 2023).

Within ecclesial contexts, Ubuntu offers a significant theological resource for rethinking disability inclusion. It challenges approaches that place the responsibility of adaptation primarily on autistic children and their families by asking how communities themselves can become spaces where diverse forms of participation are possible. From this perspective, inclusion is not simply the process of bringing autistic children into existing church structures; rather, it involves transforming communal practices so that all members can contribute to the flourishing of the whole community.

This understanding resonates with the Christian vision of the church as a relational body in which every member has value and purpose. When autistic children are marginalized, the loss is not only experienced by individuals and families but also by the wider community, which fails to receive the gifts and contributions of its members. Ubuntu therefore expands the meaning of belonging from mere acceptance toward active participation and mutual enrichment.

However, Ubuntu should not be romanticized as an automatic solution to exclusion. While African communal traditions emphasize interconnectedness, actual communities may still reproduce patterns of marginalization when difference is misunderstood or when inclusion is not intentionally cultivated. Chisale (2023) argues that African communal values must be translated into concrete practices and institutional commitments if they are to challenge exclusion. For churches, this requires moving beyond expressions of sympathy or kindness toward deliberate actions that recognize autistic children and their families as active participants in ecclesial life.

This study therefore employs Ubuntu as a conceptual resource for connecting autism, worship, and belonging within the African church context. Neuro-inclusive worship is understood not merely as an accommodation offered to autistic children but as a theological expression of a community that recognizes every person as created in the image of God and as essential to the life and witness of the church.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is guided by the intersection of the neurodiversity paradigm, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu as complementary perspectives for understanding autism, worship, and belonging within African ecclesial contexts. The neurodiversity paradigm provides the primary lens for interpreting autism beyond deficit-based assumptions by recognizing neurological variation as part of human diversity. Rather than locating exclusion within autistic children themselves, this perspective directs attention toward the social, theological, and institutional environments that shape their participation. Within church contexts, it enables critical engagement with approaches that interpret autism primarily through healing, limitation, or correction, calling instead for recognition of autistic persons as valued participants in the life of the faith community (Clasquin-Johnson, Mahlo, & Clasquin-Johnson, 2023; Lawson, 2023).

Liturgical theology complements the neurodiversity paradigm by examining worship as a formative practice through which belonging is enacted. Worship does not simply express theological beliefs; it shapes communal identity through practices of prayer, music, preaching, ritual participation, and social interaction. Consequently, liturgical environments communicate implicit assumptions about who belongs and how participation should occur. This perspective helps analyze how sensory expectations, behavioural norms, and patterns of interaction

within worship may unintentionally create barriers for autistic children while also revealing possibilities for more hospitable and inclusive practices (Boersma, 2003; Van Ommen, 2024).

Ubuntu provides the African relational lens through which this study understands belonging as a communal responsibility rather than individual accommodation. Rooted in the understanding that personhood emerges through relationships, Ubuntu challenges churches to move beyond expecting autistic children and their families to adapt to existing structures and instead calls communities to transform themselves toward mutual recognition and participation (Majoko, 2023; Mutanga, 2023). Together, these perspectives provide an integrated framework for examining how theological interpretations, worship practices, and communal relationships shape autistic children's experiences of belonging within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia.

DATA AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design within an interpretive paradigm to explore the lived experiences of families raising autistic children in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to select eight parents of autistic children who were actively engaged with a local rehabilitation center, as well as two therapists working at the facility (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The study focused on parents and a specialist therapist because the primary objective was to explore family experiences of ecclesial belonging. Direct participation by autistic children was beyond the scope of this exploratory study due to ethical and communication considerations. Future research should intentionally incorporate the voices of autistic children, adolescents, and adults. Three congregations within the Synod were also chosen for liturgical observation based on their contemporary worship practices, which feature amplified instrumentation and extended durations.

Data collection combined semi-structured conversations, participant observation at parent support group meetings and therapy sessions, and non-participant observation of worship services. Field notes and audio recordings provided primary data, which were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical clearance was obtained through institutional review procedures, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns across parent narratives and liturgical observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Special attention was given to how these patterns intersected with the conceptual framework of neuro-inclusive worship and liturgical hospitality, particularly in tension with "healing-only" narratives and sensory barriers. The dual positioning of the author as an ordained minister and parent of autistic children was continuously interrogated through reflexive journaling, ensuring analytical rigor and bridging the gap between lived experience and scholarly interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and relational barriers facing neurodivergent children in the Malawian ecclesial context and provided a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis of findings.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal three interconnected themes emerging from interviews with parents/guardians of autistic children and a specialist therapist within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia: (1) competing interpretations of autism and pastoral responses, (2) worship practices and experiences of quiet exclusion, and (3) visions of neuro-inclusive belonging grounded in Ubuntu.

Competing Interpretations of Autism and Pastoral Responses

Participants' accounts revealed that families raising autistic children navigate complex and sometimes conflicting interpretations of autism within ecclesial communities. Rather than encountering a consistent theological understanding, parents experienced what this study conceptualizes as a "hermeneutical void," where medical, cultural, and spiritual explanations coexist, often creating uncertainty regarding the meaning of autism and appropriate pastoral responses.

Autism Between Medical Understanding and Spiritual Interpretation

Participants described receiving multiple explanations for autism from church members and wider communities. Some explanations reflected developmental understandings, while others interpreted autism through spiritual or cultural frameworks. Participant 007 explained that “some members said boys develop slowly and that I should not worry. Others advised me to increase my prayers and fasting. A few privately suggested possible spiritual causes such as witchcraft or generational curses.” These competing explanations placed families in situations where they had to continuously negotiate different understandings of their children’s experiences.

The pressure to explain autism was particularly evident when children’s communication differences challenged cultural expectations. Participant 001 described repeated questioning regarding her child’s inability to speak, stating that “they kept asking how it was possible that my son was nonverbal at three. Some wanted to know whether we had cut ‘that thing under the tongue’ that many Malawians believe determines whether a child will speak. Others assumed we simply weren’t talking to him enough.” Such experiences demonstrate how parents often become responsible for responding to assumptions that locate autism within cultural or parental failure rather than neurological difference.

The therapist confirmed that spiritualized interpretations could contribute to exclusion when autistic children were categorized through negative spiritual assumptions. Such interpretations shaped not only how families understood autism but also how children were treated within communal spaces. The findings therefore reveal that the challenge facing families is not simply the absence of information about autism but the coexistence of competing interpretive frameworks that influence pastoral attitudes and congregational responses.

Pastoral Care Between Support and Theological Harm

Participants identified prayer and spiritual support as important resources, yet they also highlighted situations where theological responses increased feelings of guilt and isolation. Some parents experienced healing-focused interpretations as a failure to recognize autism as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition requiring understanding and support. Participant 007 explained that suggestions concerning “curses and deliverance” were “hurtful and made me feel blamed.”

Similarly, Participant 001 reflected on common pastoral responses such as being encouraged to “leave it in God’s hands.” While acknowledging that such statements may be intended as comforting, she observed that they could also dismiss the practical realities faced by families. The findings suggest that pastoral care becomes problematic when spiritual encouragement replaces rather than accompanies informed understanding of autism.

At the same time, participants did not reject spirituality itself. Rather, they distinguished between forms of spiritual support that affirmed their children’s dignity and those that reinforced suspicion or blame. This distinction highlights the need for pastoral approaches that integrate faith, compassion, and recognition of neurological diversity.

Institutional Silence and the Invisibility of Neurodivergence

A recurring concern among participants was the limited visibility of autism within church teaching and ministry. While physical disabilities occasionally receive attention through charity initiatives or accessibility discussions, neurodivergence remains largely absent from sermons, prayers, and congregational education. Participant 001 observed that “our churches have not really been intentional about understanding autism. There is little to no integration of children on the spectrum, and the topic is rarely addressed directly in sermons.”

This silence contributes to continued misunderstanding because congregations lack theological and practical resources for responding to autistic children and their families. Participant 003 noted that the absence of teaching allows “sin-based” interpretations to persist, with some people assuming that “there’s something we’ve sinned against God.” The specialist therapist further identified a lack of adaptation within church

programmes, particularly Sunday school structures, where general approaches often fail to accommodate neurodivergent children.

Worship Practices and the Experience of Quiet Exclusion

Participants identified worship as a central space where belonging is experienced but also where exclusion can occur. Although congregations were generally described as welcoming, the sensory and social expectations embedded within worship practices often created barriers for autistic children. These barriers were rarely expressed through direct rejection but rather through subtle forms of marginalization that this study conceptualizes as “quiet exclusion.”

Sensory Barriers within the Worship Environment

The sensory intensity of contemporary worship emerged as one of the most significant challenges for autistic children. Participants described amplified music, keyboards, drums, and extended worship services as environments that could become overwhelming. Participant 006 explained that her grandson “usually cups his ears with his hands,” while Participant 004 observed that “my child always closes his ears when he hears sounds of keyboards.”

These responses illustrate how worship practices that are meaningful expressions of communal faith can simultaneously become barriers when sensory diversity is not considered. Participants did not suggest that music or expressive worship should be removed, but rather that churches should recognize that members experience worship differently.

The expectation of remaining still and quiet for extended periods also created difficulties. Participant 007 explained that although his child enjoyed music, he struggled with “loud sounds and long sermons.” When children responded through movement, vocalization, or other forms of expression, their behaviour was sometimes interpreted as disruptive rather than understood as part of their neurological experience.

From Physical Presence to Meaningful Participation: The Reality of Quiet Exclusion

A significant finding was that attendance at worship did not always translate into genuine belonging. Participant 001 described this experience as “quiet exclusion,” explaining that “most congregants don't react negatively. If anything, they are kind but distant. There is often sympathy, but not always understanding. The difficulty is less about overt rejection and more about quiet exclusion, the kind that happens when people don't quite know what to do, and therefore do nothing at all.”

This form of exclusion was particularly visible in social interactions among children. Participant 003 explained that “all the peers don't like being close to him because it is difficult for him to follow the beat and adjust.” The specialist therapist similarly observed that autistic children often experience isolation because others struggle to understand their communication styles and ways of relating.

The findings demonstrate that inclusion requires more than allowing autistic children to occupy physical spaces. Meaningful belonging requires relationships, recognition, and opportunities for participation within the worshipping community.

Ecclesial Withdrawal and the Cost of Non-Inclusive Worship

The combined effect of sensory barriers and social uncertainty influenced families' participation patterns. Some parents reported leaving worship services early when their children became overwhelmed, while others avoided certain church activities because of fear of judgment. Participant 006 explained that concern about how others would respond affected their willingness to participate fully in church gatherings.

Participant 001 further noted that even when families remained physically present, the child was often “not fully engaged.” This distinction between presence and participation reveals an important theological concern: a church may welcome people into its spaces while still failing to create conditions where they can fully belong.

Imagining Neuro-Inclusive Belonging through Ubuntu

Despite experiences of exclusion, participants expressed a strong vision of churches where autistic children are recognized as valued members of the community. Their understanding of inclusion moved beyond tolerance or accommodation toward belonging as a relational practice grounded in acceptance, participation, and mutual responsibility.

Belonging as Recognition, Acceptance, and Participation

Participants consistently emphasized that authentic belonging begins with recognition of autistic children as persons of dignity and value. Participant 007 explained that belonging involves “acceptance without judgment and understanding that his behaviors are part of his condition, not signs of disrespect.” Participant 003 similarly emphasized the importance of social connection, stating that “everyone should talk to them and not avoid my child.”

Participant 001 described a welcoming church as one where the child is “seen, heard, and valued by peers and leaders alike.” These narratives demonstrate that belonging is not achieved merely through physical inclusion but through relationships that affirm autistic children as active participants in the life of the church.

Moving from Individual Kindness to Intentional Communal Inclusion

Although participants valued Ubuntu as an important resource for inclusion, they also identified a gap between communal ideals and actual practices. Participant 007 observed that Ubuntu often remains “individual kindness” rather than a deliberate communal commitment to inclusion. Participant 001 similarly noted that general ideas of togetherness do not automatically result in meaningful inclusion for children with special needs.

Participants therefore called for intentional practices that translate Ubuntu into concrete action. These included educating congregations about autism, training church leaders, supporting families, and creating environments where autistic children can participate without fear of judgment.

Nothing for Them Without Them: Toward Participatory Inclusion

A central principle emerging from the findings was the importance of participation in shaping inclusion. The specialist therapist emphasized the principle of “nothing for them without them,” arguing that autistic children and their families must be involved in developing responses that affect their lives. This principle challenges approaches that view autistic children primarily as recipients of care, healing, or charity. Instead, it recognizes them as contributors to the church community whose voices and experiences are essential in shaping a genuinely inclusive ecclesial future.

Overall, the findings reveal a tension between existing church practices and the aspirations of families seeking genuine belonging. While theological uncertainty, sensory barriers, and social distance continue to limit participation, participants envision a church transformed by neuro-inclusive worship, relational belonging, and an Ubuntu-informed commitment to recognizing every child as an integral member of the Body of Christ.

DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that the experiences of autistic children and their families within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia are shaped by the interaction between theological interpretations, liturgical practices, and communal understandings of belonging. The findings reveal that exclusion does not primarily occur through explicit rejection but through subtle theological, sensory, and relational structures that privilege neurotypical patterns of participation. This discussion interprets these findings through the interconnected lenses of the neurodiversity paradigm, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu, arguing that neuro-inclusive worship requires a theological shift from accommodation toward belonging.

Reframing Autism, the Imago Dei, and Theological Belonging

The findings reveal that families raising autistic children often encounter competing interpretations of autism, ranging from developmental explanations to spiritualized understandings associated with curses, witchcraft, or parental failure. Such interpretations demonstrate that autism remains contested within some ecclesial spaces, where neurological difference is sometimes understood as a problem requiring correction rather than as part of human diversity. This reflects a theological challenge concerning the meaning of the imago Dei, because the recognition of every person as created in God's image becomes compromised when certain forms of embodiment or communication are viewed as deficient.

The neurodiversity paradigm provides an important corrective to deficit-oriented approaches by understanding autism as a form of neurological variation rather than merely a disorder located within the individual (Clasquin-Johnson, Mahlo, & Clasquin-Johnson, 2023). From this perspective, the central theological question shifts from "How can the autistic child become more like others?" to "How can the church become a community where different ways of being human are welcomed?" This movement is consistent with Walsh's (2016) argument that autistic presence should be understood as a gift that contributes to the richness of Christian community rather than as a disruption requiring elimination.

The findings also resonate with Haack's (2017) observation that many autistic persons experience a social distance from church communities because congregations often lack theological and practical resources for meaningful engagement. The problem is therefore not simply negative attitudes but a deeper failure of ecclesial imagination. When autism remains absent from sermons, theological education, and pastoral conversations, the church communicates that autistic lives exist outside the centre of communal concern. The invisibility of autism consequently becomes a theological issue because belonging within the Body of Christ requires more than acknowledging presence; it requires recognizing the gifts and agency of every member.

Van Ommen's (2024) concept of the "cult of normalcy" further illuminates this challenge. Churches often establish implicit expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, communication, and participation. Those who cannot conform to these expectations may experience exclusion, even when congregations express goodwill. The findings suggest that neuro-inclusive theology requires a movement away from asking autistic children to fit existing ecclesial structures toward transforming those structures so that they reflect the diversity of God's creation.

Worship, Sensory Justice, and the Formation of Belonging

The findings demonstrate that worship is not merely a neutral environment in which inclusion either happens or fails to happen. Rather, worship practices actively shape experiences of belonging. Through music, ritual, prayer, preaching, and social interaction, worship communicates who is recognized as a legitimate participant in the Christian community. Consequently, sensory barriers within worship represent not only practical challenges but also theological questions about participation and belonging.

The sensory experiences reported by participants reveal the importance of what may be described as sensory justice within worship. Contemporary African Christian worship often values expressive participation, vibrant music, and embodied engagement. These practices are significant expressions of faith and communal identity. However, when sensory intensity becomes the assumed standard for authentic worship, children with different sensory processing experiences may become unintentionally excluded. The issue is therefore not the presence of music, celebration, or communal participation but whether these practices create multiple pathways through which members can encounter God and participate in worship.

Van Ommen's (2024) discussion of the "cult of normalcy" provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. Worship spaces can unintentionally privilege those who are able to tolerate specific sensory and behavioural expectations, while those who communicate or participate differently become viewed as disruptive. In this sense, disability is not produced only by individual limitations but also by environments that fail to accommodate human diversity.

Liturgical theology deepens this argument by demonstrating that worship practices are theological practices because they embody beliefs about community, grace, and participation. Boersma (2003) and Moyaert (2016) emphasize hospitality as central to Christian worship, suggesting that the church's liturgical life should reflect the welcoming character of God. For autistic children, liturgical hospitality involves creating spaces where different sensory experiences and communication patterns are not treated as interruptions but recognized as legitimate expressions of participation.

Therefore, neuro-inclusive worship does not require abandoning African Christian expressions of celebration. Rather, it calls churches to expand their understanding of participation by allowing different forms of engagement. Quiet spaces, flexible participation, adjusted sound levels, and alternative forms of involvement are not signs of weakened worship but expressions of a deeper commitment to the hospitality of Christ.

Ubuntu, Relational Belonging, and the Transformation of Community

The findings demonstrate that belonging cannot be reduced to physical inclusion within church spaces. Families were not primarily asking for autistic children to be present in worship; they desired recognition, relationship, and participation. This distinction is significant because it moves inclusion beyond accessibility toward belonging as a relational practice.

Ubuntu provides an important theological and cultural resource for understanding this form of belonging. Rooted in relational personhood, Ubuntu affirms that human flourishing occurs through mutual recognition and shared responsibility. Applied to autism inclusion, Ubuntu challenges the assumption that families must adapt themselves to existing ecclesial structures. Instead, it calls the community to examine how its own practices can change so that all members can participate meaningfully (Majoko, 2023; Mutanga, 2023).

However, the findings also reveal a tension between Ubuntu as an ideal and Ubuntu as lived practice. While participants appreciated kindness from church members, they also experienced isolation resulting from limited understanding and intentional support. This confirms Chisale's (2023) argument that African communal values must be translated into concrete practices if they are to challenge exclusion. A church may value community in principle while still maintaining structures that prevent some members from fully participating.

The principle of "nothing for them without them" represents an important practical expression of Ubuntu. It challenges paternalistic models of disability inclusion where churches design programmes for autistic children without engaging families or autistic individuals themselves. Genuine belonging requires participation in decision-making, recognition of agency, and the inclusion of autistic voices in shaping ecclesial responses. In this sense, Ubuntu and neurodiversity converge around a common theological claim: the community is incomplete when some members are present but unheard.

Toward a Theology of Neuro-Inclusive Worship

The integration of neurodiversity, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu provides a framework for reimagining worship as a space of belonging rather than conformity. The findings suggest that the church's response to autism should move beyond the traditional language of accommodation toward a theology of mutual transformation. Inclusion is not simply about making space for autistic children within existing structures but allowing their presence to reshape how the church understands worship, community, and the Body of Christ.

This theological movement requires a shift from a healing-centred approach toward a belonging-centred approach. Prayer and pastoral care remain essential aspects of Christian ministry, but they must be practiced in ways that affirm autistic children as already valuable members of God's community. The goal is not to remove neurological difference but to ensure that neurological difference does not become a barrier to participation.

A neuro-inclusive theology of worship therefore requires churches to reconsider sensory environments, pastoral formation, Sunday school practices, and congregational relationships. Such transformation reflects the character of Christ, whose ministry consistently challenged boundaries that excluded people from communal and religious life. In this sense, inclusion becomes not an additional ministry program but an expression of the church's theological identity.

The argument emerging from this study is that autistic children do not primarily need churches that learn how to tolerate their presence. They need churches that recognize their presence as a gift and understand belonging as a shared responsibility. Neuro-inclusive worship is therefore not simply a response to disability; it is a theological affirmation that the diversity of human experience reflects the richness of God's creative work.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like all qualitative research, this study should be interpreted within the context of its methodological boundaries. First, the research was conducted within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia in Malawi. While this context provided rich insights into the lived experiences of families raising autistic children, the findings may not fully represent the diverse theological, liturgical, and cultural realities of other African Christian traditions. Different denominations may exhibit distinct understandings of disability, worship, and inclusion.

Second, although the study explored autism through the experiences of parents, caregivers, and a specialist therapist, the voices of autistic children and adults themselves were not directly included. Ethical considerations, communication differences, and the exploratory nature of the study influenced participant selection. Nevertheless, the absence of autistic participants means that the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of those who support and care for them rather than their own lived experiences of worship and belonging.

These limitations also identify important opportunities for future scholarship. Comparative studies across different African ecclesial traditions would strengthen understanding of how theological and cultural contexts shape autism inclusion. Future research should also intentionally include autistic children, adolescents, and adults as participants wherever appropriate, thereby deepening theological reflection on belonging, identity, and participation from neurodivergent perspectives. Additional research involving pastors, liturgical leaders, Sunday school teachers, and theological educators would further illuminate how neuro-inclusive ecclesial practices can be developed within African churches.

Implications for Neuro-Inclusive Ecclesial Practice

The findings and discussion point toward the need for a theological and practical reorientation of ecclesial responses to autism within African churches. The challenge facing the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia is not simply the absence of disability programmes but the need to rethink the assumptions that shape worship, pastoral care, and communal belonging. A neuro-inclusive ecclesial practice begins by recognizing that autistic children are not objects of charity or recipients of accommodation but full participants in the Body of Christ whose presence contributes to the life and witness of the church.

A first implication concerns theological formation. The persistence of spiritualized explanations of autism demonstrates the need for sustained theological education among clergy, elders, Sunday school teachers, and congregational members. While prayer remains central to Christian faith, theological responses that associate autism primarily with curses, sin, or spiritual failure create unnecessary suffering for families and contradict the affirmation of human dignity grounded in the *imago Dei*. Churches therefore require theological resources that affirm neurological diversity as part of God's creative work while equipping pastoral leaders to respond with compassion, knowledge, and sensitivity.

A second implication concerns the transformation of worship practices. The study demonstrates that belonging is experienced through embodied participation, meaning that liturgical environments communicate inclusion or exclusion through sound, movement, duration, and social expectations. Neuro-inclusive worship does not require the abandonment of African Christian expressions of celebration but invites churches to consider how these practices can accommodate different sensory experiences. Adjustments such as moderated sound levels, flexible participation, quiet spaces, visual supports, and alternative forms of engagement can enable autistic children to participate without forcing conformity to neurotypical expectations. Such practices represent a theological expression of hospitality because they communicate that the church values every member's participation.

A third implication relates to the cultivation of relational communities. The findings reveal that many families experience exclusion not through direct rejection but through uncertainty, silence, and social distance. Addressing this form of quiet exclusion requires more than awareness campaigns; it requires intentional relationships. Congregations can cultivate belonging through peer support, inclusive children's ministries, family support networks, and leadership practices that model acceptance. Within an Ubuntu framework, inclusion is not achieved when individuals are merely welcomed into an existing community but when the community itself is transformed through relationships of mutual recognition.

A fourth implication is the importance of participatory inclusion. The principle of "nothing for them without them" challenges churches to move beyond designing interventions for autistic children without their families' involvement. Parents, caregivers, and autistic individuals should participate actively in shaping programmes and pastoral responses. This approach reflects both contemporary disability scholarship and African understandings of communal responsibility because it recognizes that those with lived experience possess important knowledge for transforming ecclesial practice.

Finally, the study highlights the need for institutional commitment. Sustainable inclusion requires that churches move beyond individual acts of kindness toward intentional structures that support neurodivergent members. This may include incorporating autism awareness into theological training, developing pastoral guidelines, strengthening partnerships with rehabilitation professionals, and creating spaces where families can receive spiritual and practical support. Such institutional responses demonstrate that inclusion is not a temporary project but part of the church's ongoing vocation to embody God's reconciling love.

The broader implication is that neuro-inclusive worship benefits not only autistic children but the entire ecclesial community. When churches learn to recognize different ways of communicating, participating, and belonging, they develop a deeper understanding of hospitality and the diversity of the Body of Christ. Autism inclusion therefore becomes an opportunity for theological renewal, inviting churches to reconsider what it means to be a community where every person is seen, valued, and able to contribute.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how autistic children and their families experience worship and belonging within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia in Malawi. The findings demonstrate that exclusion often operates through subtle theological, liturgical, and relational processes rather than through explicit rejection. Competing interpretations of autism create a hermeneutical void, sensory expectations within worship contribute to quiet exclusion, and limited institutional engagement leaves families navigating inclusion largely on their own.

By bringing together the neurodiversity paradigm, liturgical theology, and Ubuntu, this study argues that the central challenge facing churches is not autism itself but ecclesial structures that have been shaped around narrow assumptions of normal participation. Neuro-inclusive worship therefore requires a movement from accommodation toward belonging, from asking how autistic children can fit into existing church practices toward asking how church communities can be transformed through their presence.

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that belonging is both a theological and practical category. A church that confesses itself as the Body of Christ cannot be fully understood as inclusive when some members are physically present but socially, liturgically, or relationally excluded. Ubuntu provides a valuable African theological resource for reimagining this reality by reminding the church that the wellbeing of the community depends on the recognition and participation of every member.

Ultimately, neuro-inclusive worship is not simply about creating more accessible spaces for autistic children. It is about recovering the deeper theological conviction that diversity belongs within the purposes of God. African churches are therefore called to become communities where neurological difference is not treated as a problem to be solved but as part of the richness through which God's image is revealed. In this way, worship becomes not only a place where people gather before God but a space where every person can truly belong.

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