

Including autistic adults & children in Church

Ann Memmott

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01:00:05,000 --> 01:00:10,280

So we are really pleased to introduce our next speaker,
which is Ann Memmott.

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01:00:10,280 --> 01:00:17,760

Ann and I first met - I think most of the people I've met
here were on social media on Facebook,

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01:00:17,760 --> 01:00:27,679

and I've known Ann for many, many years and been a great
admirer for advocacy for autistic people.

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01:00:27,679 --> 01:00:33,599

If you watched my video yesterday when I said artistic and
then went no autistic,

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01:00:33,599 --> 01:00:45,239

but actually my gaff was quite apposite, because most of the
autistic people I know are fabulously creative & artistic

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01:00:45,239 --> 01:00:53,880

When we say think outside the box, most autistic people look at me and say what box? I'm thinking big picture anyway.

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01:00:53,880 --> 01:01:00,960

So there's a huge amount that neurotypicals need to learn from autistic artistic people.

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01:01:00,960 --> 01:01:06,280

Before I witter on too much I'm going to hand over to Ann.

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01:01:06,280 --> 01:01:12,639

She's going to talk a little bit about autistic people in church. Thank you Ann.

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01:01:12,639 --> 01:01:20,280

Thank you very much. Hopefully everything is working at this end. I'm dialling in from holidays

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01:01:20,280 --> 01:01:25,760

so if it sounds a little echoey it's because we're in the middle of a boatyard, don't ask.

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01:01:25,760 --> 01:01:35,440

I'm delighted to be here. I am indeed Ann Memmott. I'm autistic myself.

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I've been working with Oxford Diocese for more than 30 years in one form or another,

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01:01:41,559 --> 01:01:51,039

and of course in the current form as an external autism advisor. In other roles elsewhere,

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01:01:51,039 --> 01:02:00,760

I advise for the national development team for inclusion, and also for the Anna Freud Centre.

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01:02:00,760 --> 01:02:13,320

We're training NHS consultants on autism. In my spare time, I run a surveying firm, genuinely,

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01:02:13,320 --> 01:02:19,480

and I'm also part of care reviews for autistic young people and those who are autistic young people

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01:02:19,480 --> 01:02:27,400

who also have learning disabilities who are also in you know, very high support settings.

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01:02:27,400 --> 01:02:38,360

So it's work that I'm very familiar with. I'm also a mum to a fantastic autistic lad Christopher.

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01:02:38,360 --> 01:02:45,960

And I have physical disabilities as well, including arthritis and a genetic condition.

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01:02:45,960 --> 01:02:56,559

I love photography and art. There goes that creative thing! And gardening. And of course being with family and friends.

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01:02:56,559 --> 01:03:05,519

And I've been a Christian for as long as I can remember. Even during the 10 years when as a young child,

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01:03:05,519 --> 01:03:15,480

I didn't use spoken language to communicate, I had no doubt that God was there, no doubt at all,

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01:03:15,480 --> 01:03:22,039

and so many people think that if you have no ability to speak, that must mean

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01:03:22,039 --> 01:03:30,840

that you don't have a relationship with God. That isn't true. I'd strongly counter that.

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01:03:30,840 --> 01:03:42,760

Well, we have had the guidelines for churches on autism for about 13 years now, I think.

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01:03:42,760 --> 01:03:53,199

Yeah 2008 they were first created and regularly updated since. I like to try to keep them as up to date as we can

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01:03:53,199 --> 01:04:02,039

And what a lot has changed in that time. It has been fantastic working with people all over the world

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01:04:02,039 --> 01:04:10,760

in creating these new pieces of research, getting that information out to people.

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01:04:10,760 --> 01:04:20,280

What does it mean for us in church as well? We know that autistic people are already in our church.

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01:04:20,280 --> 01:04:29,039

They're already leading our church. I know a good number of really good, really, caring autistic vicars,

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01:04:29,039 --> 01:04:38,960

and indeed some higher up, I should not say who. Autistic people are already the musicians in your church,

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01:04:38,960 --> 01:04:50,159

already in the choir, already the bellringers, perhaps the organists, the youth workers, already prayer partners

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01:04:50,159 --> 01:04:59,280

and others of every kind. And we know from all this research that has taken place that autism

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01:04:59,280 --> 01:05:12,000

is almost nothing to do with young white boys with naughty behaviour. Or indeed with a skill with numbers.

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01:05:12,000 --> 01:05:18,480

I do have some skill with numbers. I know lots of autistic people who surely well do not.

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01:05:18,480 --> 01:05:26,480

I'm probably a typical autistic person. This has quite alarmed a lot of people

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01:05:26,480 --> 01:05:33,639

because they were really thinking it was young boys. But I'm a middle aged mum.

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01:05:33,639 --> 01:05:42,599

We weren't looking for people like me. We also had some other very strange ideas

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01:05:42,599 --> 01:05:48,840

which I've been delighted to see our research showing as true. We know that autistic people are generally

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01:05:48,840 --> 01:05:53,960

less likely to be criminals, for example.

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01:05:53,960 --> 01:06:01,599

Honestly, some people had the idea that we were more likely

to do dangerously criminal things, so strange.

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01:06:01,599 --> 01:06:11,719

We know that autistic people are generally honest and loyal to those around us and creative and dedicated

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01:06:11,719 --> 01:06:24,199

and passionate about justice and fairness. We know that autistic people are of all sorts of genders and sexualities.

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01:06:24,199 --> 01:06:35,679

And there all sorts of ages and IQs, of all sorts of backgrounds and ethnicities.

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01:06:35,679 --> 01:06:45,360

We know that autistic people sense the world differently and that our brains can become totally overloaded

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01:06:45,360 --> 01:06:51,920

with sensory information from the world around us, including fluorescent lighting for example.

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01:06:51,920 --> 01:07:05,480

That's a big thing for many autistic people. Loud or sudden noise around us, perhaps some smells or textures.

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01:07:05,480 --> 01:07:15,320

By my age, we manage those quite well, but it becomes exhausting, and what we see from autistic people

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01:07:15,320 --> 01:07:26,280

is the distress of that exhaustion a lot of the time. We also know fantastic new research that autistic people

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01:07:26,280 --> 01:07:35,880

have a genuinely different way of communicating socially and it works. They've done the studies on this.

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01:07:35,880 --> 01:07:44,679

They've looked at us communicating with other autistic people. And gone, wow, this is even more effective

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01:07:44,679 --> 01:07:50,159

than the communication of non-autistic people. Fantastic research.

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01:07:50,159 --> 01:07:58,119

I have links to that available on my blog and on Twitter
etc.

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01:07:58,119 --> 01:08:06,039

That means that a lot of our culture, a lot of our history
had gone unnoticed because people thought

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01:08:06,039 --> 01:08:14,840

we're just broken versions of other people, and we weren't.
A little bit like, I hate to borrow from other disabilities,

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01:08:14,840 --> 01:08:23,399

but a little bit like the deaf communities have their own
cultures, their own ways of communicating.

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01:08:23,399 --> 01:08:32,399

That's the same sort of thing that we have within ours.
Thanks to those myths about autism

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01:08:32,399 --> 01:08:42,399

and the lack of understanding, unfortunately, many of us
have been denied just about every human right.

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01:08:42,399 --> 01:08:50,760

And sometimes it has been very hard to access church and to feel like we belong.

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01:08:50,760 --> 01:09:02,000

Through this, I've been doing some lovely work, including with St Martin in the Fields in London

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01:09:02,000 --> 01:09:14,800

and we run disability conferences by, for and with disabled people and neurodivergent people, which includes autism.

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01:09:14,800 --> 01:09:24,680

There's been new thinking, new theology. Love, caring, fellowship, belonging.

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01:09:24,680 --> 01:09:31,760

More and more people are coming out as autistic at those events. Why is that?

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01:09:31,760 --> 01:09:38,399

You know, we've sat down and thought what is it and it is about belonging.

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01:09:38,399 --> 01:09:49,880

And belonging is not the same as access. A lot of our churches will say 'we are accessible. We have our ramp.'

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01:09:49,880 --> 01:10:04,239

That enables perhaps some people to get into a church, and they might still be ignored. They might still be ostracised.

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01:10:04,239 --> 01:10:16,640

It's about belonging. It's about encountering, living, loving God. And I think that is what we are trying

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01:10:16,640 --> 01:10:26,479

to enable in our churches and in our communities. Every human is asked to God's banquet.

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01:10:26,479 --> 01:10:37,960

A full feast, not a crust. Not hidden behind a wall somewhere else able to listen in, but a place at that table.

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01:10:37,960 --> 01:10:45,760

What can we do? We can work with one another. We can drop those myths.

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01:10:45,760 --> 01:10:54,039

We can make our churches safer places for someone to say,
I'm autistic as well, it's me.

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01:10:54,039 --> 01:11:04,000

Because they're having to hide so many have to hide and I'd
love to see a church where we can all belong.

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01:11:04,000 --> 01:11:11,640

And if we think about it, Jesus's friend Nicodemus was
probably autistic. I talk about that a little elsewhere,

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01:11:11,640 --> 01:11:16,119

and I'm aware of time here, I don't want to go over my
allocated hours,

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01:11:16,119 --> 01:11:21,840

but he was as autistic at the end as he was at the
beginning. Wonderfully made.

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01:11:21,840 --> 01:11:31,079

So thank you very much for inviting me here, and it's been a
delight to speak with you.

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01:11:31,079 --> 01:11:36,960

Ann, thank you so much. I always enjoy time in your presence.

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01:11:36,960 --> 01:11:44,880

Whether that is commuting to a cafe together to eat cake, or whether that is via a camera and on screen.

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01:11:44,880 --> 01:11:51,640

Lots of people have messaged me both privately and in the chat to say we have no questions

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01:11:51,640 --> 01:11:57,680

but what an amazing presentation and how precious it is to hear a bit of your story.

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01:11:57,680 --> 01:12:06,520

One question has come up, which is you are both autistic yourself and parent to an autistic, and I say child,

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01:12:06,520 --> 01:12:13,239

but he's grown up so now grown up, and how have you experienced life,

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01:12:13,239 --> 01:12:20,479

thinking about being a parent of somebody who has the same -
if I use the word condition you know what I mean -

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01:12:20,479 --> 01:12:26,119

and how is it being a parent too, but also being someone who
is autistic,

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01:12:26,119 --> 01:12:29,640

and that kind of relationship that you have. Does that make
sense as a question?

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01:12:29,640 --> 01:12:38,840

I think it does, yeah. Well, there's two points of view to
that. You get what I call the social services point of view,

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01:12:38,840 --> 01:12:46,479

which is 'Oh my goodness, me, you know, an autistic person
looking after an autistic child, this can only go wrong ,'

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01:12:46,479 --> 01:12:56,640

and then you get the lived reality, which is that we love
being together. I am so proud of my son. At the moment,

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01:12:56,640 --> 01:13:06,560

I know he won't mind me saying, he falls into a category of higher support needs because of a complex set of situations

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01:13:06,560 --> 01:13:13,560

But we have enabled everything we can enable for him.

Likewise, his particular strengths

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01:13:13,560 --> 01:13:24,199

complement areas with I find more difficult. We work together on different elements of autism advisory work

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01:13:24,199 --> 01:13:34,520

and it is just a joy being with him. And I've always had this idea that if you are positive about a young person,

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01:13:34,520 --> 01:13:43,000

if you are enabling them, not only respect but dignity and privacy, it can really work well.

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01:13:43,000 --> 01:13:49,399

So yeah, hoorah. And if I could have another autistic child, yes I would.

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01:13:49,399 --> 01:13:59,119

It's really hard, isn't it? I think when the society writes us off as parents by saying,

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01:13:59,119 --> 01:14:06,000

well, you can't possibly be any used to your child because you are labelled disabled. So me with cerebral palsy,

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01:14:06,000 --> 01:14:10,239

midwives and health visitors would say, well, how are you going to...?

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01:14:10,239 --> 01:14:14,079

And there was a pause and the list of things I couldn't possibly do.

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01:14:14,079 --> 01:14:25,239

How have you found the resilience to be completely yourself in order to come up against the negativity?

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01:14:25,239 --> 01:14:28,880

Like my, my words are gone today. Where's my brain gone?

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01:14:28,880 --> 01:14:35,479

Have you found the resilience to combat those negative attitudes and to be yourself

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01:14:35,479 --> 01:14:40,399

and model being yourself to your son so that he can be himself?

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01:14:40,399 --> 01:14:48,399

Thanks to the enormous support I get from so many others around me, including the rest of my family,

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01:14:48,399 --> 01:14:59,000

Such fantastic people I work with through some of the church work, but also the wider work in the community

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01:14:59,000 --> 01:15:07,479

and in different organisations. So many of the researchers in particular are starting to realise that

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01:15:07,479 --> 01:15:13,800

they can move away from the old myths, and they're starting to be more supportive and more affirming

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01:15:13,800 --> 01:15:19,279

That helps. Where you have anyone who's willing to put their hand up and go,

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01:15:19,279 --> 01:15:26,760

'Ah, I may have misunderstood autism. Tell me more.' You know that gives you that sense of confidence.

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01:15:26,760 --> 01:15:33,960

Sometimes I must admit I just lock my social media accounts and go, no, I've had enough.

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01:15:33,960 --> 01:15:41,119

You know, there's only so much of yourself you can give out without thinking oh I really need that time away.

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01:15:41,119 --> 01:15:53,840

But modelling myself is probably the most important gift I can do because if we force everyone to hide forever,

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01:15:53,840 --> 01:16:01,760

what are we doing? It isn't a lot different to forcing everyone who's part of the LGBTQ communities to hide.

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01:16:01,760 --> 01:16:08,760

We need to be able to say to people it's OK. So yeah, I'm trying to do a bit of that.

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01:16:08,760 --> 01:16:14,840

And that's about owning ourselves and then being confident to model who we are honestly.

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01:16:14,840 --> 01:16:22,840

And there's been a question in the chat about information and research on autism as a culturally unique community,

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01:16:22,840 --> 01:16:29,600

which you mentioned. I follow your Twitter thread and you post an awful lot of good research so

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01:16:29,600 --> 01:16:37,880

can you point us to people who are doing good research on autistic people as a culturally unique community,

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01:16:37,880 --> 01:16:40,199

apart from you 'cause you're doing some good stuff as well.

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01:16:40,199 --> 01:16:44,119

I can do, but not in the short space we now have available.

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01:16:44,119 --> 01:16:49,199

What I will do is make those resources available to everyone afterwards, if that's OK.

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01:16:49,199 --> 01:16:53,039

That's grand, thank you, and one final question on terminology.

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01:16:53,039 --> 01:17:00,000

Now the disabled community - oh community, we're a disparate bunch - disagree about whether

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01:17:00,000 --> 01:17:07,399

we are disabled people or people with disabilities. I go with disabled person because it's not a handbag

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01:17:07,399 --> 01:17:12,600

I pick up and put down like I'm with my dog or I'm with my wheelchair or I'm with my husband,

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01:17:12,600 --> 01:17:21,279

I am always disabled, so it's not an add on. You again, use the phrase autistic person rather than person with autism.

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01:17:21,279 --> 01:17:28,359

So do you wanna just have a minute to unpack those two and why you lean towards autistic person?

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01:17:28,359 --> 01:17:34,039

Yes, thank you. Well, first of all, it's always important to ask the individual.

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01:17:34,039 --> 01:17:41,319

If you're talking with someone, find out what they prefer, and I will always respect a person's individual choice.

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01:17:41,319 --> 01:17:49,000

Again, very good research, both general polls, general surveys, and formal academic research

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01:17:49,000 --> 01:17:52,960

showing most autistic people like to be called autistic people,

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01:17:52,960 --> 01:17:59,079

and the proper term for a group of autistic people is a group of autistic people.

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01:17:59,079 --> 01:18:06,800

It's much like you said Katie, where their autism isn't something we can put down somewhere else.

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01:18:06,800 --> 01:18:12,239

Where you're saying person with autism, it is as if you've sort of left it on the sofa for a while

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01:18:12,239 --> 01:18:16,640

and then you've nipped down to the shops and hope it's still there when you come back.

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01:18:16,640 --> 01:18:23,600

It's us. It is our neurology. It is the entire way we sense and communicate with the world.

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01:18:23,600 --> 01:18:32,680

So I think many of us are wary about saying yeah, we're with autism. We're not.

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01:18:32,680 --> 01:18:40,279

It would be like saying I'm a person with whiteness or I'm a person that is with Britishness.

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01:18:40,279 --> 01:18:45,199

You know it's a really awkward thing for us to say. It doesn't feel right.

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01:18:45,199 --> 01:18:50,720

Well, I'm sure Boris Johnson would love us to all describe ourselves as per person with Britishness,

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01:18:50,720 --> 01:18:55,119

but we'll have to leave that one for another seminar. Ann, thank you so much for your time.

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01:18:55,119 --> 01:19:02,720

I hope that you have found this helpful for you, and I know from the chat that people are just overwhelmed

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01:19:02,720 --> 01:19:08,960

by you and your story. I do encourage you folks to find Ann on Twitter and to follow the numerous threads

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01:19:08,960 --> 01:19:14,600

she posts there about her own experience and also about the myriad of good research out there

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01:19:14,600 --> 01:19:20,960

that combats the old-hand stuff, the mythology that has been
around for far too long

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01:19:20,960 --> 01:19:25,079

and damaged the autistic community for far too many ways.

Ann thank you so much.