Non-Speaking Autistic Participation in Liturgy and Church Life: (Non-)Speech Acts

Introduction

Many liturgies presume the vocal participation of all those gathered, but sometimes congregations gathered to worship have non-speakers in their midst. This article examines how we can understand the presence and priestly role of non or minimally-speaking people. Our focus is on non-speaking autistic people (we use 'non-speaking' instead of 'non-verbal,' in line with the preference of most non-speakers[1]) who are not only missing from the autism discourse generally,[2] but are also poorly understood by churches and are up to 50-70% less likely to participate in religious activities.[3] Not only does the capacity for speech impact participation in liturgy, but also autistic people have a distinct experience of the world generally, especially in terms of sensory perception and social interaction.[4] Whilst autism is often thought of as a disorder – and indeed, the diagnostic term is

[1] Alyssa HIllary Zisk and Lily Konyn, 'How to Talk about AAC and AAC Users (According to Them)', 13 October 2022, https://www.assistiveware.com/blog/how-to-talk-about-aac. Non-speakers often understand language, which is why they are verbal in that sense, even though they cannot use speech, or use speech in a very limited way. In this article, the term 'non-speakers' include those who have limited speech.

[2] An estimated half of the people with an autism diagnosis have also a learning disability, and about 25-35% are non-speaking or have limited speech. Yet, a systematic literature review by Russell et.al. estimates that only 6% percent of autism research published in major autism journals include people with learning disabilities, and only 2% include non-speakers. Fritjof Norrelgen et al., 'Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders Who Do Not Develop Phrase Speech in the Preschool Years', *Autism* 19, no. 8 (November 2015): 934–43; Ginny Russell et al., 'Selection Bias on Intellectual Ability in Autism Research: A Cross-Sectional Review and Meta-Analysis', *Molecular Autism* 10, no. 1 (December 2019): 9.

[3] Krysia Emily Waldock and Rachel Forrester-Jones, 'An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom', *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 11 June 2020, 1–22; Naomi V. Ekas, Lauren Tidman, and Lisa Timmons, 'Religiosity/Spirituality and Mental Health Outcomes in Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Mediating Role of Positive Thinking', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 4547–58,; Li-Ching Lee et al., 'Children with Autism: Quality of Life and Parental Concerns', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 38, no. 6 (July 2008): 1147–60; see also Erik W. Carter, 'Research on Disability and Congregational Inclusion: What We Know and Where We Might Go', *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 8 February 2022, 1–31.

[4] We use identity-first instead of person-first language (i.e., 'autistic person' instead of 'person with autism'), in line with the preference of most autistic people. Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams, 'Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* online (2021).

Autism Spectrum Disorder[5] – from within the autistic community there is strong push for thinking of autism and other neurodivergences as differences instead of deficits, even if those differences can be challenging to live with.[6] If differences contribute to the healthy diversity of (faith) communities (1 Cor. 12), then it is necessary for practical and liturgical theologians to consider if and how autistic ways of being in worship enhance our understanding of worship as a core practice of the church.

Initial work in the emerging field of Autism Theology suggests that the contribution of autistic perspectives to the theological discourse is enriching and can be a corrective to current church practices.[7] Whilst participation is an important theme in liturgical studies, certainly since the well-known phrase "full, conscious and active participation" was coined by Vatican II,[8] discussion of *autistic* participation in liturgy is largely missing from the discourse. The current article continues a series of publications that attempt to address this gap. This publication resulted from a research project involving autistic participants from the UK as well as a study of a church in Singapore whose focus is on welcoming autistic people.[9] This article is one of the first academic publications to focus on the liturgical participation of non-speaking autistic people;[10] in it we present the findings of our

[5] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Arlington, 2013).
[6] E.g., Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, Thought in the Act (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). Note that the challenges of living with differences are often caused by the social environment as much as – if not more – by the neurodivergence itself.
[7] E.g., Ruth M. Dunster, *The Autism of Gxd: An Atheological Love Story* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022); Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019); Stewart Rapley, *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2021).
[8] Walter M. Abbott, ed., 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy - Sacrosanctum Concilium', in *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, Dublin, Melbourne: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), para. 14.
[9] Armand Léon Van Ommen and Topher Endress, 'Reframing Liturgical Theology through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experiences of Worship', *Studia Liturgica* 52, no. 2 (2022); Armand Léon Van Ommen, 'Re-Imagining Church through Autism: A Singaporean Case Study', *Practical Theology* 15, no. 6 (2022): 508–19; Armand Léon Van Ommen and Katy Unwin, 'The Sensory Aspects of Worship and Liturgy as Experienced by Autistic People', *Questions Liturgiques / Studies in Liturgy* 102 (2022): 267–88.
[10] Two studies with non-speakers that started to investigate the spiritual or religious lives of non-speaking autistic people should be mentioned here: Cynthia Tam, *Kinship in the Household of God: Towards a Practical Theology of Belonging and Spiritual Care of People with Profound Autism* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021); Karenne Hills, Jayne Clapton, and Pat Dorsett, 'Spirituality, Silence and Solitude: A Reflective Interpretation Regarding Mystery and People with Nonverbal Autism', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 9, no. 2 (2019): 138–51; Karenne Hills et al., 'Spirituality in the Context of Nonverbal Autism: A Research Process – Analysis and Findings', *Journal of Disability & Religion* 23, no. 4 (2 October 2019): 365–86. Tam's article underlines one important finding of our study, that is, the desire for participation on the part of autistic

research with eight non- or minimally-speaking autistic people of whom we asked questions about their participation in church life, and particularly about their participation in worship services. The first section discusses our methodology. The second section presents the two dominant themes in the data we collected, namely liturgical and social participation. In the final section, we offer a theological interpretation of non-speaking autistic liturgical participation through the lens of speech-act theory.

Methodology

There are communication barriers between speakers and non-speakers, and common qualitative research methods rely heavily on speech. This is perhaps why, in part, there has been so little research with non-speaking autistic people to date. As researchers, we faced the same obstacles, but it seemed better to search for innovative methods which try to include non-speakers in our research than to perpetuate the ignoring of their perspectives. As an extension of Léon's project on autism and worship, in which he worked extensively with a church in Singapore that is focused on autism, he interviewed five non- or minimally-speaking autistic people. We also recruited two additional non-speakers from the United Kingdom and one from the United States.

The five participants from Singapore were minimally-speaking and/or had learning disabilities. With this group, we used a photovoice interview method adapted from Krisson et. al.[11] In this method, participants took photographs during the worship of the things that were important to them, and then engaged in an interview where they could share more about the photos if they wished to. The process built upon an existing relationship between Léon and the church, which included an earlier visit lasting over two weeks, and continued with regular contact with the pastor, who functions strongly as a gatekeeper. Therefore the method was first discussed with the pastor, who

people. Hills et.al. report rich spiritual experiences of autistic people and point to the gap in the literature on this topic.

[11] Emma Krisson, Maria Qureshi, and Annabel Head, 'Adapting Photovoice to Explore Identity Expression amongst People with Intellectual Disabilities Who Have Limited or No Verbal Communication', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 50, no. 1 (March 2022): 41–51.

subsequently recruited five participants whom he thought might be able to engage with photovoice. First, the pastor sent an information sheet and consent form to the parents of the prospective participants. Once participation had been arranged, the families were sent the interview questions that we wanted to ask, emphasising (in accordance with the semi-structured format of the interview) that we wanted to elicit views on certain topics, especially the participants' experience of worship (for example through showing us what they liked best in the worship service). We allowed for flexibility because the parents would know better than us how to address certain topics in a way that would be understood. We offered to buy the participants a camera, but they all used their own cameras or devices. The participants were first asked (via their parents) to take pictures of that what they found meaningful in the worship service (or church life on a Sunday more broadly). Following that, we then asked the parents to interview their children on the basis of these pictures. A novel element in the method, compared to Krisson et.al., is that we asked the parents to video these interviews and send these to us before Léon travelled to Singapore to meet the participants in person. In this way, we got a good sense of what to expect in terms of content and communicative methods and ability. Léon then visited the church in Singapore for over a week, during which he interviewed each participant. An unplanned addition to this method by the pastor, which proved helpful, was that he compiled all the videos of the interviews and the pictures that were used in the interviews into a PowerPoint presentation, with brief contextual comments on each participant. For the interview with Léon this presentation served as a basis. For all interviews, one of the parents and the pastor were present, and with one interviewee a speech therapist. They filled in some facts but also added their interpretation sometimes. This was helpful due to the complexity of communication with the participants, and because it is likely that the presence of familiar people whilst meeting with an unknown person reduced anxiety for the participants. All interviews took place in the pastor's office.

We offered the same photovoice method as an option to the participants in the UK and the USA, but they preferred other ways of communicating, or were not able to participate in this way. The

participant from the USA used a spelling board to communicate. A spelling board is a laminated card with the letters of the alphabet and some basic punctuation. With this, the participant could tell us what he wanted to say by pointing to the letters to spell out his words one by one, and in this format he was very articulate. He did this during a video-call interview (due to travel constraints an in-person interview was not possible), but he also wrote down his thoughts in response to the interview questions beforehand because spelling takes a long time and is tiring. Following this, we conducted an interview in two parts, the first lasting about 45 minutes and the second about 75 minutes.

The participants in the UK (Matt and Carlos[12]) also did not use photovoice. Instead, Henna visited them in their homes, and she went to church with Matt. She spent a day with Carlos and his mother, which included an act of worship with two support workers. Matt and Carlos are both non-speaking (and do not use a spelling board or similar device) so they could not be interviewed. Instead, Henna recorded notes based on her own observations and based on conversations with Carlos' mother and Matt's support workers. All data was collected between May and November 2022.

With the majority of our participants (excepting Phillip who could use a spelling board) data collection entailed a careful process of facilitating participants to communicate their own views and experiences directly to the researchers (through photovoice, interviews and participant observation). However, there was also an ongoing process of triangulating the researchers' interpretation of that data through conversations with the participants' parents, caregivers and (in Singapore) the pastor. Including the views of caregivers in this way is sometimes critiqued, as these other voices become co-constructors of the data, shaping the picture that emerges.[13] However, triangulation of data gathered from different sources and by range of methods is common practice in qualitative research, as it allows researchers to construct a sufficiently full and nuanced picture of

[12] All names of participants have been changed.
[13] Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities* (London ; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016), 68–79.

the matter being investigated.[14] Additionally, and in alignment with Krisson et. al.,[15] we felt that it was worth allowing for any 'shaping' that might occur in an effort to bring the perspectives of non-speaking autistic people into the discourse, given that they are so vastly underserved by research. The flexibility of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, allowed for a consistent method of data analysis across different sources and media.[16] All interviews were transcribed. Both authors listened various times to the interviews, read multiple times through the transcripts, and repeatedly viewed the PowerPoint and photographs from the Singapore participants. Both authors identified key themes separately from each other and then discussed these together, after which they repeated this process. Several clear themes were identified, as discussed below.

For each participant, informed consent was given before and during the project ('ongoing' consent). Before the research process began, a consent form was completed either by the autistic participant themselves or, where appropriate, by the parent on their behalf. It was important to identify ongoing consent due to the vulnerability of the participants.[17] All participants continued to indicate ongoing consent during the research by enthusiastically engaging with the researchers. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Aberdeen's Committee for Research Ethics and Governance in Arts, Social Sciences and Business.

Themes

In our analysis, we identified participation as the single overarching theme across all our data sources. The photos, interviews and observations all indicated that our research participants *wanted*

[14] Nancy Carter et al., 'The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research', *Oncology Nursing Forum* 41, no. 5 (1 September 2014): 545–47.
[15] Krisson, Qureshi, and Head, 'Adapting Photovoice to Explore Identity Expression amongst People with Intellectual Disabilities Who Have Limited or No Verbal Communication'.
[16] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 2006): 77–101; Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, 'Thematic Analysis', *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (4 May 2017): 297–98.
[17] Miller, Tina and Bell, Linda, 'Consenting to What? Issues of Access, Gate-Keeping and "informed" Consent.', in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, ed. Miller, Tina et al. (Sage Publications, 2012): 61-63.

to participate in the liturgy and in the social activities around the worship service. In this section we will discuss these two avenues of participation.

Liturgical Participation

One means of liturgical participation that we observed, and discussed in the interviews, was bodily participation. Philip was highly motivated to join in the liturgy with his body and proudly shared, "I crossed myself once without help." Likewise, the desire for joining in (but needing help to do so) was evident with Matt. As Henna noted in her fieldnotes:

> Then, although he held his hand over the offering basket for a long time, it seemed that Matt could not direct his fingers to uncurl and release the coins in his palm. The steward with the basket waited very patiently, unperturbed by the delay – she was obviously used to Matt and accommodated the delay without any fuss. Eventually, when it became apparent that Matt was stuck, [Matt's carer] helped Matt to start uncurling his fingers. Matt also needed assistance sometimes through the service when changing from standing to sitting or kneeling, but even so he joined in with all the postures of worship.

Matt's desire to join in was clear throughout the entire service. In the passage cited above, it is noticeable that bodily participation does not always come easily for him; the fact that he nevertheless tries hard and joins in with all the different postures underlines his desire to participate. These fieldnotes also reveal two other important points. First, the community knows Matt and allows him the time he needs to join in. Second, neither the steward nor the carer stepped in to rush the liturgical moment of giving; they only did so when it became clear that Matt had got stuck and needed assistance. In this way they respected Matt's pace and competence and his manner of participation.

Another manner of bodily participation in the liturgy is singing. Most participants in Singapore said that this was a highlight of the worship service; three of them had taken one or more pictures of singing. Carlos also likes singing, and when given the chance, he can lead in singing at his own speed. Outside a worship context, he seems to communicate in songs, for example, when he stumbled on a loose stone during our (i.e., Henna, Carlos, and his mother) walk he began reciting a children's rhyme: "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall." He and his mother share a

lot of songs and nursery rhymes together, taking turns on each line or phrase. Matt also likes singing; his carer said that Matt seemed to miss the hymns when singing was not allowed in church due to Covid-19, and that he would normally dance in the aisle. Philip likes the singing in church too: “I’m so glad to be in worship. My autism can blend in.” When Léon asked what he meant by ‘my autism can blend in’ Philip replied: “It means with all the singing or noise I can be loud.” Philip cannot join in with the words and melody of the hymns, so whilst he enjoys the singing for the reasons given, he also described how he feels that this makes liturgy both inclusive and exclusive: he can join in, but not in the same way as other congregants. He also noted that he cannot say the prayers with everyone else, but then made an interesting statement: “It’s OK because I listen as if I am speaking.” Later in this article we will come back to this, as this has implications how we think theoretically about liturgical participation as a speech-act. For now, we note that Philip, like most participants in Singapore, likes singing because it is an element in the liturgy which is inclusive in some ways, even though it also reveals the differences between these autistic people and other congregants. We can infer that the inclusiveness of singing – because it allows more body movement and using one’s voice loudly – may be one reason why most of the Singaporean participants highlighted singing.

Receiving Holy Communion was important to most participants. It was striking to see that most interviewees in Singapore had taken pictures of Holy Communion, although it was difficult to learn exactly why they took pictures of this. Dane said he took the picture “because Jesus died on the cross.” Reflecting on the picture of the Eucharist taken by See Huan, the pastor of the church said, “He likes the silence, sight and movement of this moment. Receiving the elements is also a draw to him.” Matt and Philip also seemed to attach significance to the Eucharist. Matt seemed to sink into a very relaxed state (of prayer?) when kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer, and he was noticeably quiet and appeared reflective whilst eating his wafer. In preparation for our interview, Philip wrote: “I think the part of the service I like best is communion. It is a beautiful ritual. I’m so happy when I come forward to receive; it is a privilege. It is also a place where autistic people can participate like

everyone else. No differences." Philip's comments align well with the pastor's observation of See Huan and with our observation of Matt's kneeling and apparently reflective state at the Eucharist.

Finally, it is noteworthy that seven of the eight participants engaged in a liturgy that was not, or hardly, adapted in terms of language and ritual to autistic worshipers.[18] The only liturgical act that was simplified was that with Carlos, whose caregivers used a bespoke liturgy aimed at his way of engaging. This raises the question about the need for adapting or simplifying the liturgy, although we should note that the five Singaporeans all liked their own group,[19] where they engaged with the Christian faith in ways adapted to them.[20]

Social participation

In the analysis of our fieldwork it was hard to miss the desire for social interaction that each of our participants expressed. This defies the old stereotype that autistic people prefer to be on their own and retreat in their own world all the time – what autism researcher Douglas Biklen calls the 'myth of the person alone.'[21] It was remarkable that virtually all pictures taken by our Singaporean interviewees included people in them. All five commented on the importance of friendship and said that was one of the aspects of church that they liked the most. Carlos likes to have visitors in his house and also to go to the local cafe just to hear the owner say, "Hello darling!" Despite appearances, Matt highly values the social time after mass. He does not say much, nor does he reach out to other people, but his support worker commented that Matt is sociable in his own way. It was

[18] For a discussion of adaptations made in the Singaporean church, see Van Ommen, 'Re-Imagining Church through Autism', 512–14.

[19] Most Sundays, halfway the worship service the autistic members go their own programme. See Van Ommen, 'Re-Imagining Church through Autism'; Armand Léon Van Ommen, *Autism and Worship: A Liturgical Theology of Availability* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), chap. 6.

[20] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this further, but see the discussion in Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022), 125–28.

[21] Douglas Biklen et al., *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, Qualitative Studies in Psychology (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005).

telling that when, after Covid-19 lockdowns, mass resumed in-person but without the coffee time afterwards, Matt did not like missing that social time.

Philip adds a critical note to social interaction in churches. “I think other people would rather be with speaking people. Autistics are hard to be with sometimes.” He points to some traits that some autistic people have that might be hard to be around with, such as being loud or behaving in other ways that are socially awkward, but in his email in preparation for the interview he also turns his observation to non-autistic people: “I’m thinking it’s way easier to chat with an international [international people are a focus for ministry in Philip’s church] than take time with a person with autism or other disability. Especially Alzheimer’s for example. We abandon people when they have trouble with conversation.” When Léon asked Philip how he would like people to get to know and interact with him, he answered: “I’d love them to ask me questions. To hang out doing things even if we don’t talk, it’s OK.” He would like to hang out more with people from his age group, but he thinks “they are preoccupied with being cool” – a thought to which he adds, “I’m not cool.”

Philip points to an important social dynamic in churches. For speaking people, it can be hard to connect with non-speakers, because social interaction, especially when people do not know each other well, often depends in important ways on spoken language. When someone does not look interested, as with Matt, people might not feel inclined to initiate contact, which is then exacerbated by the fact that many autistic people find it difficult or uncomfortable to initiate contact. Nevertheless, each of our participants made clear that they long for friendship and value social interaction.

Liturgical Participation as Speech Act

As described above, a unifying theme throughout the data was that of *participation* in various forms. This included the desire for *liturgical participation*, which is interesting given that the majority of our participants could not ‘join in’ with liturgical worship by unifying their voice with others to join in

with spoken/sung words of liturgy. It raises the question: what does it mean to participate in liturgy when one cannot say the words? Without words, is one still a participant in liturgy or merely a spectator? As we will argue, the way in which one answers this question of liturgical participation has implications also for social participation, pushing us to consider what it means for non-speaking members to participate in the whole life of a church community.

Before we discuss the questions just raised, it is important to add more precision to the term 'participation.' When Vatican II called for the "full, conscious and active participation" of all members of the church, it certainly had in mind the active, visible or tangible engagement, which it encouraged, not least by advocating for the celebration of the liturgy in the local vernacular. However, there is more to participation. Subsequent liturgical reflection grounded participation in the liturgy firmly within the notion of Trinitarian participation – both God's work in and through the liturgy and the participation of the congregants in the life of the Trinity.[22] Analysing the concept of participation in broadly Evangelical theologies, Alan Rathe proposes a useful distinction between three dimensions or 'horizons' of participation: participation in human action; participation in divine-through-human action; and participation in the life of God.[23] It should be clear that the one act of participating in the liturgy encompasses each of these dimensions, which can also be seen when we analyse the non-speaking autistic participation in liturgy through the lens of speech-act theory, to which we now turn.

Given the tension between the speech-focused format of liturgy and the limited ability of our participants to speak, speech-act theory emerges as a relevant lens through which to reflect on liturgical participation. This is a particular direction of thought among philosophers of language which arose in the 1940's through a series of lectures by J. L. Austin, later published in a book called

[22] E.g., Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011); R. Gabriel Pivarnik, *Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Liturgical Participation* (Collegeville: A Pueblo Book/Liturgical Press, 2012).
[23] Alan Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship and Participation: Taking a Twenty-First Century Reading*, Liturgy, Worship and Society (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2014), 92–101.

How to do Things with Words.[24] The lectures examined the phenomenon of *performative* utterances – i.e., things that we say which get something done. In his lectures, Austin argued for several categories of performative speech-acts. Among his categories, there are *locutionary* speech acts, in which we speak words that meaningfully say something but do not create any effect, *illocutionary* speech acts, within which words declare the intention of getting something done, such as making a promise. However, promises can be broken. Therefore, Austin also defined the category of *perlocutionary* speech acts, whereby words spoken do indeed contain enough force (intention) to "produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience."[25]

Austin gives a number of examples of perlocutionary speech acts, most particularly the declaration, "I name this ship *The Queen Elizabeth*."[26] Naturally, it is only a matter of social convention that the utterance of these words (by a certain person at a certain occasion) can be said to *do something*, i.e., effect the naming of a ship.[27] Someone might say the same words in jest (i.e., without illocutionary force), or to a group of people who do not understand their import (so that they no longer have perlocutionary effect). It becomes clear that there can be a disjuncture between the words spoken, the speaker's intention, and the attitude of the hearer(s). Therefore, Austin concludes, there must be certain conventions which govern when saying something is also doing something.[28] Austin's work has been generative, leading subsequent thinkers to build on his ideas, seeking to elucidate how social conventions interact with the intentions or inner beliefs of speakers in order to give statements illocutionary and/or perlocutionary effect.[29]

These questions over the effectiveness of speech acts are thrown into sharp relief when one considers the liturgy as a speech act or as a series of speech acts. In liturgy, worshippers tell and re-

---

[24] Austin, J. L., *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
[25] Austin, J. L., 101–2.
[26] Austin, J. L., 117.
[27] Austin, J. L., 120.
[28] Austin, J. L., 104–7.
[29] See, for example: Michael Morris, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

tell a story in which their own lives are caught up into the activity of God. Although the words of the liturgy may stay the same from week to week, the passage of time and changing circumstances of life mean that worshippers come back to them each time with a fresh perspective. Participating in the liturgy, a congregation enters into a dramatic redescription of "who we are and what we do" – concluding with a refreshed 'sending out' back into daily life.[30] It appears to be understood by convention that there is an effectiveness, what we might call a perlocutionary effect, in gathering to say the liturgy together[31] – with each member carrying out their priestly vocation to pray for the world. George Guiver expresses it this way:

> In the Church's liturgy the spotlight is taken off our faltering individual struggle and focused on the prayer itself, allowing us to tag along and relax, in an exercise shared by the community and the whole Church.[32]

In the liturgy, different words may be said by different people; there are conventions (defined by liturgical theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff as 'social practices'[33]) as to what makes the liturgical act accepted as meaningful. These conventions operate on the plane of Rathe's 'human action' horizon of participation. For example, in many Anglican churches one meets the expectation that everyone must say the words of the confession but only the ordained person says the words of the absolution, and then everyone says 'Amen.'

But what happens if someone in the congregation cannot literally 'say' the confession and the amen? Does what appears to be an inability to participate on the horizon of 'human action' become a barrier, or have material effect on other horizons, such as 'divine-through-human action' or participation in the life of God? Of all the interviewees, only Phillip was able to tell us using words

[30] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 145.
[31] White, James F., 'How Do We Know It Is Us?', in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 64.
[32] Guiver, George, *Company of Voices: Daily Prayer and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 2001), 90.
[33] Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91.

what his thoughts and feelings were about not being able to say the liturgy, and it was clear that Phillip still considered himself to be participating, even without saying the words ("It's OK because I listen as if I am speaking.") Speech-act theory gives us room to affirm Phillip's understanding of his participation – the perlocutionary force of the speech-act is there for Phillip (he *does* pray), even though he relies on the community to give utterance on his behalf; he is by no means merely a spectator. Wolterstorff observes that it is not the bodily act of using one's tongue and vocal cords to say something like "thanks be to God" that causes the worshipper to thank God, rather making the statement only conjoins the body with a state of thankfulness that has already come to be.[34]

With Philip's insight in mind, we note the significance of how some research participants seemed to demonstrate with their bodies that they were participants not spectators. Matt wanted to put the coins in the offering basket and to adopt the postures of worship by kneeling, standing and sitting at the appointed times, and all of our participants chose to move forwards and to receive the elements during the Eucharist. Their speech-acts had no words, but by 'speaking' with their bodies, they (to pick up the terminology of Austin) 'performed' the liturgy and 'got something done' - something that took place with the worshipping community and on behalf of the world. What emerges is that it is important for worshiping communities to reflect on the role of non-speaking members who are present in worship. By taking account of and incorporating the unique contribution to the worship service that non-speakers bring, participation on the horizon of human action may become a better reflection of what is taking place on other planes – i.e., divine-through-human action and participation in the life of God.

However, valuing what non- or minimally-speaking autistic people bring to the worship service may require a willingness to do things differently, or to think differently about what is taking place. Phillip described how meaningful it was for him to once realise his ambition of verbalising one of the

[34] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 85.

responses of the liturgy. He lamented that it came out “too late, and too loud,” but nevertheless he commented, “it felt as if the whole community could affirm with me.” Phillip’s words are a reminder that congregations should not think only in terms of non-speaking worshippers joining in with the worship of those who can speak; it is just as important to realise that the speakers are joining in with the worship of those among them who cannot speak. As a community, Phillip’s church affirm *with* him, not *for* him, and without his participation (spoken or otherwise) their liturgical act would be incomplete.

De Jong reflects on how a “collective activity” is not merely everyone doing the same thing at the same time, such as reciting the same prayer, but rather:

> A collective activity in our sense only happens if they all do something together that cannot be done by each participant alone. To perform a collective activity they must cooperate and coordinate their activities with a view to a common goal that they can only achieve as a group and from which their individual contributions derive.

On this basis, de Jong argues that liturgy “has to be a collective expression,” which is made up of each participant’s individual expressions, whence the whole becomes something more than the sum of its parts.[35] For this to take place, de Jong argues that it is necessary to find out what each individual participant would like to contribute, but he acknowledges that this can be complex when somebody’s ability to communicate in words is limited.[36] In this project it was necessary to employ a range of methods to ‘hear’ the communication of our participants, and to invest significant time in observing the stories that they told with their bodies when present in the worship.

Reflecting on those stories, we are moved to ask: was Philip’s vocalisation “too late”? Or, with de Jong’s arguments in mind, was everyone else too early? Bearing in mind Rathe’s horizons of

[35] de Jong, Aad, ‘Liturgical Action from a Language Perspective: About Performance and Performatives in Liturgy’, in *Discourse in Ritual Studies*, ed. Schilderman, Hans (Brill, 2007), 117.
[36] de Jong, Aad, 116.

participation, Phillip was not only hoping to 'join in' with a speech act taking place on the level of human action, but he also wished to demonstrate to his congregation that he, like them, was there to carry out the priestly duty of prayer on behalf of the world. How would it have been for everyone present if the congregation had waited for Phillip to initiate the response and then followed his lead?

This approach was demonstrated in the small liturgical act that took place with Carlos, his mother and his carers at home. In the Lord's prayer, Carlos led us "at Carlos's pace." Saying the Lord's prayer at Carlos' pace took more than 2 ½ minutes, compared to the time it would take in a typical Church service (which we would estimate at less than 30 seconds for most congregations). Disability theologian John Swinton suggests that by spending time with those who have intellectual disabilities, people are often challenged to be slow, mindful and deliberate over certain tasks and activities that they might ordinarily rush through or take for granted.[37] Saying the Lord's prayer at Carlos' pace took time, but arguably it created a 'collective activity' that was much more meaningful for everybody present than reciting the Lord's prayer in any kind of brisk way that would have left Carlos behind.

This demonstrates a key feature of speech-act theory, which is that there is a malleability to the socially created 'conventions' that govern when a speech-act comes to be regarded as perlocutionary or meaningful. There are conventions not only regarding the words used and who says them, but also regarding pragmatics such as tone of voice, gesture and timing – all of these contribute to the 'meaning' of certain acts in certain communities.[38] However, where there is mutual agreement within a community these conventions can be changed.[39] For example, at a recent conference on neurodiversity, a waving of the hands ('flappause') was agreed as the means to show appreciation to presenters, replacing the usual 'round of applause' that might cause significant

---

[37] John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 81-88.
[38] Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse,* 93.
[39] Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse,* 92.

sensory discomfort to some attendees.[40] At any other academic conference, it might be thought odd if certain members of the audience were to start waving hands at the end of a presentation, but where there was social agreement this was accepted as a meaningful and unremarkable response.

When we reflect on the malleability of conventions demonstrated with regards to things such as 'flappause' we begin to see how speech-act theory unites the malleable normativity that underlies both liturgical participation and social participation. Just as there is community normativity regarding the 'meaning' of certain speech acts, so there is community normativity regarding the meaning of certain social behaviours – but this normativity is not fixed. Matt appears to ignore everybody around him for most of coffee time; he appears to focus his attention on the soundscape of the room and the taste of the biscuit. But his church community have learned not to take the 'meaning' of this to be that he does not want to be there or interact with them. They have developed the convention of speaking to Matt anyway, even when he does not seem to respond. By contrast, Phillip appears to want this kind of engagement from his community, but does not receive it yet, and so he feels that his community "abandons" those who "have trouble with conversation."

Reflecting on interactions with non-speaking autistic people, Rowan Williams advises communities to "resist 'normalizing' what is easy and accessible for us in ways that rule others out from the business of human exchange and engagement."[41] He argues that autistic people have a point of view that is indispensable to the work of "mutual sense-making" in the community.[42] We noted above that worshipping communities should not see non-speaking worshippers as 'joining in' with their worship – which would signal that 'they' can join on 'our' terms – but that each participates in the worship of the other, with the result that the whole becomes something greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, the church's worship belongs to none of its members, autistic or non-autistic, but is rooted in the ongoing prayer and worship of Jesus (e.g., Heb. 4:14-16).[43] If we follow William's

[40] https://itakom.org/.
[41] Williams, Rowan, 117.
[42] Williams, Rowan, 115.
[43] Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 86.

argument, then the same principles can apply to social interactions too – Matt's community shares in his experience of the coffee hour, interpreting his actions, sounds and body movements as symbols of how he makes sense of the world. Adding Matt's perceptions of the coffee hour to their own not only completes but enhances the picture of what is taking place.

Conclusion

This research project has shown clearly that non-speaking people autistic people can, and do participate, both in the liturgical worship of their congregations and in the wider social life of the church. However, such participation is not, in all cases, fully recognised or realised. By considering the liturgy in light of the different horizons of participation (Rathe) and in light of speech act theory (Austin), we begin to see that participation is not a matter of congregations allowing non-speakers to 'join in' with Church practice. Instead, having taken time to observe the participation that is already happening (by listening to the stories that non-speakers tell of worship with their photographs, words, and bodily participation) we propose that congregations can gain a deeper understanding of what is taking place when they pay attention to how all members join in with the liturgical and social offering that each member brings, creating a whole offering of priestly ministry that is greater than the sum of its parts. Moreover, the horizon of participating in the life of the Trinity means that ultimately, the congregation as a whole is participating in the ongoing liturgy or work and prayer of Christ through his Spirit.[44]

There are some very practical ways in which this renewed theological understanding can be made explicit in the practice of the community, recognising that conventions around what is meaningful are socially constructed and therefore malleable. In practical terms, this may include congregations slowing down some parts of the liturgy to be led by the pace of someone who is slow to verbalise, or to a relaxation of the expectation that everybody at the coffee hour is there to make "small talk" –

[44] Saliers, 86.

some may just want to sit and soak in the atmosphere of friendship and fellowship. In doing so, church communities can resist normalising practices that exclude, and the unique viewpoint of non-speaking people can enhance the whole community's perspective on the life and worship of the church.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities in Scotland for funding this research project.

"For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission."