Fostering Belonging for Those with Sensory Processing Challenges in an Over-Stimulated Society

By Trudi Sang

Recognizing those with special needs in our faith communities gained visibility and a broader notice through the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. This historical acknowledgment was groundbreaking for a population that until then had few rights and little recognition. And yet, we are still just scratching the surface. Attention focuses primarily on basic mobility accommodation, though without a posture of humility and understanding.

Studies show that a minimum of 5-16% of the general population deal with sensory challenges. This range does not even include those diagnosed with autism or ADHD. These percentages beg us to ask who feels excluded from society and from our faith communities due to perceived and actual disregard for the sensory challenges they endure.

It is essential, not optional, to raise awareness for individuals dealing with sensory processing challenges in our faith communities. Similarly, it is critically important to respond to that need with acceptance and resourcing. Acceptance entails cultivating a posture of welcome and opportunity that conveys full belonging of these persons.

I have been working with others to offer a welcoming and supportive environment for those experiencing sensory processing challenges in my faith community. We have developed sound panels for smaller gathering rooms so that the issue of sound and volume are not overwhelming. In addition, we have created a Sensory (Quiet) Room as an opportunity for people to decompress and self-regulate due to over-stimulation. Last, but not least, we have introduced sensory bags for use in the youth group, children's programs, and in the auditorium during worship gatherings. These bags have sensory processing tools and other items, like fidgets, that help support sensory regulation in group settings quietly and without disturbing others.

We have been encouraged that people of all ages are experiencing support in this environment. These are simple steps and tools that communities of faith can employ to acknowledge and honor those needing extra supports for their engagement and full belonging.

The hope is that we can all find creative ways to cope in our overstimulating world. I recognize that each community has its own unique culture and needs. It is important for each congregation to consider a variety of factors, including the required space and most effective tools for optimal use. It need not be a costly endeavor. Whatever decisions are made, it is vital that the leadership and community as a whole invest in cultivating a posture of humility, understanding, and welcome so that those contending with sensory challenges experience full belonging.

What I have written about here has broader import for our communities of faith and entire society. We live in a world that has ramped up demands on our time, space, visuals, movement, and sound. It is a world that is overwhelming to most people as increasing demands bombard us in almost every aspect of daily life. We find it more difficult to find peace, solitude, pause, or relief from added pressures. Technology, while useful and intended to make life more enjoyable, can add to the challenges of over-stimulation.

Our world demands a great deal from us and for those among us with sensory challenges the stress only intensifies. It would be advantageous for everyone to find ways to decompress. Wisdom is needed in providing space, cultivating an environment, and making available tools, including liturgical practices, that foster opportunities for everyone to experience calm and groundedness amid so much cultural turbulence.

Please feel free to reach out to me at trudisang@aol.com if you would like to discuss how this initiative might prove beneficial to you and your community.