

# Interviewing Autistic Clergy: How to Try not to Discriminate



The Equality Act (2010) requires organisations to avoid discriminating against autistic people in employment and service provision. Yet UK government reports from 2024<sup>1</sup> and 2025<sup>2</sup> continue to highlight widespread failures of inclusion, and the devastating consequences these have for autistic people's mental health and life expectancy.

The Church, of all places, should lead the way in welcoming those whom God has called, recognising the primacy of character over outward appearance. Instead, it often lags behind even a struggling secular sector in its inclusion of autistic people. My own experience<sup>3</sup> of the Church of England's clergy interview and discernment process, as an autistic candidate, Area Dean, and Examining Chaplain, sadly confirms this.

We are not asking for special treatment or positive discrimination. We are simply asking that interview and discernment processes be fair. Fairness serves everyone: it honours God, strengthens the Church, and helps ensure that the best candidate is appointed.

## General Pointers

My general headings for how to include neurodivergent people follow the acronym FEEL:

- **Flexibility** – the idea of a standard pathway rests on the assumption of a 'standard person', which is both theologically flawed (because we're all fallen in different ways) and discriminatory in favour of people who work like that person. People are more important than systems, and the church is meant to be diverse, so be flexible and don't have single standard pathways.
- **Empathy** – contrary to stereotypes, autistic people's difficulties are far more often caused by neurotypical people failing to empathise with them than by their own failures in empathy. Take time to listen to and try to understand what it's like to be an autistic person and then treat them like you would want to be treated in that situation.
- **Empowerment** – autistic people often suffer from rejection trauma and from fear of putting themselves forwards because of how they have been treated in the past. That's especially true around employment; the unemployment rate for autistic people without other disabilities is a whopping 70%; autistic graduates are the single group in society most likely to be overqualified for their jobs. Leaders need to redress this by being pro-active in empowering neurodivergent people, encouraging them, and enabling their voices to be heard.
- **Leadership** – the culture of an organisation is the responsibility of the leader. The culture of an interview process and panel is the responsibility of the chair of the panel. Those of us in positions of leadership need to use our leadership to create a more inclusive culture, otherwise we are guilty of discrimination too. If the panel members are prejudiced against an autistic candidate, it's the chair's job to redress that.

## Specific Issues with Clergy Job Interviews

- **Parish visits** are often the worst possible environment for autistic people! Changes of attention, social interaction with neurotypical people in noisy environments, new noisy situations, and having to convey a good first impression are all much harder for autistic people than for neurotypical people, and it's not unusual for a parish visit day to leave an autistic candidate too overwhelmed to function effectively in an interview. In regular ministry, I plan my time carefully so I don't get overwhelmed, and I would never plan a day like a parish visit. If I had to do one, I'd need a few days off to recover. Here are some ways to help improve the situation.
  1. Invite the candidates to help you plan the parish visit day. If it's for them, ask them beforehand what they would benefit from doing.
  2. If the visit day is meant to be for the benefit of the candidate, then give the candidates freedom not to do it, without anyone thinking worse of them.
  3. Make a quiet space available for the candidates to recover between events; many candidates might prefer to go for a walk outside.
- **Reasonable Adjustments** – under the Equality Act 2010, an employer is legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with a diagnosis of autism. I have never known this done well in a clergy job interview context. Many autistic people have been bullied throughout their lives into thinking that their way of functioning is unreasonable, and almost no-one likes to be a hassle to others, so employers need to ask about reasonable adjustments **before** sending out a timetable for the interview and visit day. Ideally, if a candidate puts anything in the “disability” box on the application form, they should be automatically asked what reasonable adjustments at interview would look like. Last time, there was a question about physical disability at that point – something like “Would you need any reasonable adjustments to be able to attend an interview?”, but nothing about what reasonable adjustments might be required for an interview to be fair, which is the more important question.
- **Interviews** – *The Buckland Review* concludes that “Research suggests interviews may not be a fair or necessary way to recruit autistic candidates.” (5.11). If the employer doesn't have the skill to find a better way of selecting a candidate, then they should at least recognise that their system will be discriminating against the autistic candidate and give them a boost in estimation accordingly. For example, if an autistic candidate doesn't maintain eye contact, is observed to stim, infodumps, or meanders on the way to reach the main point of an unprepared answer, that should not count against them. Furthermore, “pastoral ability” is often assessed using people's impressions of warmth or extroverted sociability; these are notoriously unreliable guides. See, for example, Malcolm Gladwell's book *Talking To Strangers*<sup>4</sup> for details of how and why our “gut reactions” from meeting people are so often inaccurate; autistic people are one of the significant groups disadvantaged by this prejudice.

- **Interview Questions** – autistic people are notoriously sensitive to exact wording of questions. Great care should be taken over the wording of interview questions, and it should be ensured that the correct and precise wording is used by the questioner. Before now, a slight change to the intended wording has led me to think that a question which was intended to be about inclusive planning of corporate worship was actually about my own personal spirituality. Autistic people can also be significantly slower at verbal processing than neurotypical people, especially in group situations. Therefore, it makes sense to make sure that all candidates have the questions in advance. Personally speaking, being given the questions in writing 15 minutes before the interview in exam conditions would give me enough space to work out what the questions are probably trying to ask, and would also make sure that people couldn't use AI to write better answers. Of course, that might vary for other candidates, especially ones with dyslexia as well as autism.

- **Assessing the Correct Skills** – If you are interviewing a candidate for a position, then you want to know how good they would be at doing the job. However, most interviews actually assess ability to talk about the job while exhibiting neurotypical social skills. One person interviewed for *The Buckland Review* said that if you want to appoint a violinist, you don't ask them to talk about playing the violin; you ask them to play it. A slightly better question would be asking for specific examples of times when they have used the skill, but it still isn't as good as seeing it done.

It's also important to be clear which skills are really needed for a role. For example, if someone needed a wheelchair, you would assess whether the role would be impossible for someone with that disability (e.g. firefighter) - or whether it was possible to make provision. Likewise, if someone is autistic, you need to do an assessment of what level of "bluntness" is acceptable or inappropriate in the role before you reject them for being "too blunt". If someone lists autism as a disability, it counts as a protected characteristic in law, and you need to establish a genuine occupational requirement for rejecting someone on the basis of a linked character trait or ability.

The list of skills looked for at interview is also based on the skills that "normal" people have. What if there are some skills that neurodivergent people might have, that would be incredibly useful in role, but which you don't assess for at all? For example, I think the question "What is your theology of leadership and could you give me examples of how that works out in practice?" is a very good interview question, but I've never been asked anything like it and I suspect many neurotypical clergy would struggle to answer.

- **Use Portfolios of Work** – if you want to assess how people actually do the job rather than just how they perform at interview, it makes sense to request a portfolio of work (e.g. "five pieces of work you have created in the last three months that are already publicly available") – to include sermons, podcasts, services, magazine articles, funerals, seminars, church e-mails, etc. That should probably carry similar weight to the interview, and it's easy enough to give links to sermons on YouTube, etc. It would

also give parish reps a much better idea of how the candidate would function in role than an interview.

- **Feedback** – it is normal in secular employment for the interview panel to ask a disabled candidate whether they think the interview process has been fair, and if not why not. That should be normal in the Christian world too.

## Checklist

Here is a TL;DR version:

1. Standard pathways bad; flexibility good. Don't assume that everyone else works the way that you do.
2. It is the responsibility of the chair of the panel to ensure that the selection process is non-discriminatory. They should have done training in avoiding subconscious bias that includes discussion of autism.
3. At the application stage, ask the autistic candidate what a fair interview process would look like.
4. Ask the candidates to help plan the parish visit day. What would they value? What would they avoid?
5. Let candidates opt out of bits of the parish visit day without negative consequences.
6. Make a quiet space available for the candidates to recover between events; many candidates might prefer to go for a walk outside, whatever the weather.
7. Interviews usually give the worst impression of autistic people. If you interview, make sure that the interview is assessing what it needs to be assessing, not whether the person can blag convincingly or do neurotypical extroverted sociability.
8. If you interview, do a sensory audit of the interview environment beforehand.
9. Give interview questions out beforehand in writing.
10. Consider requesting portfolios of work (including video sermons / service leading, etc.) to see the candidates in action rather than just listen to them talk about what they do.
11. Offer candidates the opportunity to comment on whether the process was fair.
12. Remember why this matters: diversity, including neurodiversity, is a key feature of the Body of Christ. If we exclude autistic Christians, we exclude Jesus<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Buckland et al., 2024, 'The Buckland Review of Autism Employment', Department for Work and Pensions, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations>

<sup>2</sup> House of Lords, 2025, 'Time to deliver: The Autism Act 2009 and the new autism strategy', accessible at <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/770/autism-act-2009-committee/news/210570/autism-act-committee-report-publication>

<sup>3</sup> Much of which has been written up in *Faith, Hope, and Autism: Learning to Love Neurodiversity* (Canterbury Press, 2026). Many of the statements here rest on evidence explained at greater length in either *The Buckland Review* or my book.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, 2019, *Talking to Strangers*, London: Penguin

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:40