News



The Still Waters Sensory Room at St. Joseph Church in Maplewood, N.J., is seen March 16, 2025. The first-of-its-kind sensory room at the church welcomes neurodivergent parishioners. (OSV News/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Newark)

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Percy Losardo never used to attend Mass.

The 14-year-old with autism struggled to sit still in the pews when he was younger, which caused his mother, Lark, to frequently take him outside to walk. Eventually, the challenge became too great, so Percy stayed home.

But everything changed once his parish, St. Joseph Church in Maplewood, opened its Still Waters Sensory Room for neurodivergent parishioners last December. Percy now has a calming place he can go to whenever he needs a break during the liturgy. As a result, the Losardos have resumed attending Mass as a family for the first time in years.

"The room is incredible," Lark Losardo said. "I never thought we'd go to church together, but Percy actually wants to go because of the Still Waters room. It's a refuge for him. He doesn't have to worry about what other people think if he starts losing focus, and I don't have to worry about where he is. We're grateful to St. Joe's for following Jesus' example of embracing everyone."

The Still Waters room functions the same as other sensory rooms, which are typically painted in soothing colors and contain tools to help people with conditions like autism, ADHD and anxiety manage their senses when feeling overwhelmed by auditory or visual stimuli. What makes it special is the fact that sensory rooms are exceedingly rare in houses of worship. In fact, the space is the first of its kind in the Archdiocese of Newark.

It was the brainchild of a priest who had never even heard of a sensory room less than a year ago.

Fr. Jim Worth, St. Joe's pastor, first learned about the benefits of sensory rooms after attending a panel discussion organized by Together We Bloom, a local nonprofit dedicated to serving the needs of neurodivergent children.

Knowing several of his parish community members are neurodivergent, Worth thought a sensory room would be an asset for St. Joe's. So, he asked Together We Bloom founder Kimberly Takacs — who also happens to be a parishioner — if her organization would create one.

Takacs jumped at the chance.

"Having a sensory room in a place of worship is probably more important than anywhere else because everyone should feel welcome in their faith," Takacs told Jersey Catholic, the news outlet of the Newark Archdiocese. "If a church or temple or synagogue does not have accommodations for people with disabilities, that makes those people feel excluded from their religion, which is profoundly hurtful."

Creating the Still Waters room wasn't easy, though. The space had served as a storage area since the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring Takacs' team to clear four years' worth of clutter. Then, they faced a unique challenge — designing a sensory-friendly room around the church's vibrant stained-glass windows.

According to Takacs, sensory rooms are usually painted neutral colors like tan or beige so people overwhelmed by visual stimuli can focus on a blank slate, calming their senses. But Takacs' team recognized that a neutral wall would clash with the windows' bold colors, which could induce a sensory overload in neurodivergent parishioners. Thus, it went in the complete opposite direction, picking a rich blue color to complement the stained glass.

"It's like you're walking into a hug," Takacs said.

The rest of the room was designed by Janelle Gera, vice president and secretary of the Together We Bloom board, who used her perspective as a woman with autism to pick out the sensory regulation tools she felt would be most effective for neurodivergent parishioners.

Since different tools work for different people, Gera selected a range of items to accommodate as many people as possible. This includes a glider, a weighted lap blanket and stuffed animals, a bean bag chair, books, noise-canceling headphones and Fidget Tubes, which are toys that provide sensory stimulation.

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To Worth, the finished room looks like a "different universe" compared to the crowded storage area that had previously occupied the space. And he appreciates the Together We Bloom team for making it happen. Though all parishes should be inclusive, the pastor said few make the extra effort to accommodate neurodivergent parishioners. He said the Still Waters room proves that when St. Joe's says all are welcome, it actually means it.

"This is another step forward for inclusivity," said Worth, who said his parish offers other welcoming initiatives like an LGBT ministry and a basketball program for adults with autism. "We always tell our parishioners that if there's something they need, just let us know. If we have the means and ability, we'll make it happen."

That attitude is in line with the Catholic Church's stance on serving people with disabilities, with Pope Francis most recently advocating for greater inclusivity at the G7 Inclusion and Disability Summit in October.

Still, statistics show many neurodivergent people may be facing challenges when it comes to their faith. For instance, a 2018 study from the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion found the odds of an autistic child never attending a religious service were nearly twice as high as the odds of a non-autistic child.

Because the Still Waters room has been open for a relatively short period, Worth said it is too early to judge the full extent of its beneficial impact. Right now, his goal is just to make people aware the room exists so they can take advantage of it. He also wants everyone to know the space is not a "crying room" for small children or an area where people can hang out for the duration of Mass. Instead, he said the room is meant to be a place where anyone feeling overwhelmed or suffering a panic attack can go to compose themselves before returning to the liturgy when they are ready.

And even when Mass is over, Worth said people can still utilize the room.

"Our church is open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., so if someone is struggling or having an overwhelming experience, they can come inside the sensory room and calm themselves," Worth said. "We see this as not just a church initiative but a community initiative."

So far, Worth has observed multiple people using the Still Waters room at Masses since December. In addition to Percy Losardo, Pavitra Makam said her 9-year-old son, Kai, and 4-year-old daughter, Rumi, both visit the room each time they attend Mass.

Kai has some sensory issues and anxiety, so he plays with the toys to keep himself calm. Rumi has a rare genetic disorder that causes leg pain and sensitivity to loud noises; thus, she loves sitting in the soft glider while enjoying the peaceful quiet of the space.

Yet what Makam appreciates the most about the room is the fact that it makes her family feel included.

The Maplewood mother said she is part of several groups dedicated to the neurodivergent community, so she knows a lot of parents who are hesitant to attend churches because they fear how parishioners will react to their children. That has never been a problem at St. Joe's, she said, because Worth and his congregation have always been extremely welcoming. The Still Waters room is proof of that, she said.

"St. Joe's and inclusivity go hand-in-hand, and that makes me proud to be part of this church," Makam said. "St. Joe's makes sure everyone who wants to attend Mass is able to attend, no matter what. That's huge because you don't see that in a lot of places. If more churches followed their example, it would be wonderful."

Worth plans to meet even more people's needs in the near future, like acquiring assistive listening devices so hard-of-hearing parishioners can hear Mass better. He also wants to make the vestibule bathroom ADA-compliant and install ADA signage to the church's entrance ramp so crowds will know not to block it.

Above all, Worth and Takacs hope St. Joe's can inspire other parishes to become more inclusive. Both said they are always open to giving tours of their sensory room as well as advice on how pastors can start one of their own.

And for those worried about the expense of such an endeavor, Takacs said sensory rooms require more intentionality than money.

The end result will be worth it, she said.

"Having accommodations that allow neurodivergent members of the community to participate more is beneficial for everyone," Takacs said. "It creates the sense that

everyone belongs, and people can learn from those who are different from them. That's what Catholic social teaching is all about.