

The Susanna Wesley Foundation



Podcast 14: The No Normal: Neurodiversity and youth in the church TRANSCRIPT

James Blackhall, James Carver and Emma Pavey

Initial transcript by **Way With Words**.

Edited transcript by SWF.

Speaker Key:

EP Emma Pavey

JC James Carver (Dave)

JB James Blackhall

00:00:00

EP Hello and welcome to this podcast from The Susanna Wesley Foundation. My name is Emma Pavey, and this is another in our series on crafting hope. Today I'm joined by James Carver and James Blackhall. And I'm going to start, as usual, by asking them to introduce themselves. Do you want me to call you James C? James Carver? Do you have a preference?

JC Dave.

EP Dave?

JC Yes. Make it simple.

EP Okay, if you really genuinely want me to call you Dave. All right, fine, okay. James Carver, you would like to be called Dave, that would make things much simpler. Would you like to introduce yourself?

JC Yes, I'm James Carver and when me and James Blackhall are together I'm known as Dave. And I am the Youth President of the Methodist church.

EP Great, thank you very much. And James?

00:00:57

JB Yes so I'm James Blackhall. I'm currently a local preacher in the Methodist church. I'm a lay worker for the Leicester Trinity Circuit and also work for the St Philip's Centre aiming to help Christians engage in an interfaith world and learn to live well together.

EP Brilliant, thank you very much. So Dave, AKA, James Carver, so you're the Youth President. And what is your theme, if you like, for your year? Because I believe that Youth Presidents tend to have a sort of theme that they focus on.

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JC We used to have a theme. But because the Methodist church had more themes so you had like the conference theme the 3Generate theme, the presidential theme, it's hard to condense it. And now, youth president has certain areas of work which what they want to work on throughout the year. And my one this year is increasing awareness of, and support for people living with neurodiverse conditions within the church.

EP Thank you. So what does that mean then? So what have you been up to this past year?

JC Eating lots of cake. In all seriousness, I've been out and about, around the country. I'm speaking with children and young people about my issues. I've also been working with the Communications team at Methodist Church House to be able to put together resources such as videos, and articles, and stuff sort of aimed at myth busting and promoting good practice when it comes to interacting with individuals who either have ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, and other conditions.

00:02:41

EP And James, what about you? What's your focus? I know that you've done some work with Dave, with the other James. So what do you focus on then when you're not preaching? Or perhaps when you are preaching.

JB So I currently serve on the Justice, Dignity, and Solidarity committee of the Methodist Church. I've taken some responsibility of being the link with Faith and Order in regards to neurodiversity and healing. I also focus a lot totally on the other side. I'm particularly passionate about helping the Jewish community and the Christian community live well together.

And I'm particularly passionate about how Christians discuss the Israel-Palestine Conflict. And how often that's done in very unhelpful ways for communities here. In terms of this work, I'm also particularly passionate about how we talk about disability so I'm doing a lot of work around how we discuss disability in its widest sense, and what language we use.

EP Can you give us some examples maybe of what sorts of things you've been up to in that regard?

JB So I've been thinking about helping churches to consider what they say so as part of the JDS thing. So It's just things like helping preachers reconsider saying things like, 'Please stand'. I also am trying to break down ableist language. So an example that



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hadn't even occurred to me, until I read a wonderful book last week, called *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* by Amy Harris [Kenny] was that we sing *Amazing Grace*, and it was, I'm blind but now I see. What does that actually say?

00:04:20

It's a hymn I particularly love, so it's going to be quite tricky now singing that. Because once you see it, you can't unsee it. But also, helping people to reflect on what healing means. So a lot of the work on the Faith and Order Working Party's been around what does healing actually mean and is healing and cure actually the same thing? And I'd argue it's not. But what actually that means in practice.

EP Yeah. So, our theme this year at The Susanna Wesley Foundation is *Crafting Hope*. And in our previous episode we had some young people talking about the concerns of young people around ecoanxiety, so connecting the climate crisis with mental health. And so the transition I see here is that there's issues to do with mental health and mental wellbeing and also for younger people.

So that's where we were hoping to go in thinking about this episode. So as younger people, especially you, Dave. What do you think, given that, you know, you're representing younger people and children, what are the themes that you see? What are the issues that you find? And also, where do you see hope coming up?

00:05:33

JC I think that in terms of mental health, the big ones are exam stress, school stress, home stress, basically stress and anxiety around everyday occurrences for children and young people. But also, there's a lot of concern as well. So I went to one youth group, I think it was back in December, and there was one young person, I don't think they could have been more than five years old.

And they explained how they had a lot of anxiety around the cost-of-living crisis, around how a bill, might not be able to afford a bill, which means their power won't be paid. Which means they might not have enough energy. Which might cause a blackout, which might cause accidents because of that. And it's like, that's from a five-year-old. And I was like...

EP That's a lot for a five-year-old to carry around, isn't it? Gosh.

JC Yes but going onto hope. I've seen over the past few years, especially through things coming from 3Generate, the church's willingness to stand up beside children and young people and to help them out. So, oh, I'm going to get the date wrong. I think



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it was 2019, the Methodist conference approved one of the 3Generate resolutions which meant, training for youth mental health first aid, which provided a discounted rate for everyone across the Connexion.

EP That's good, and is that something you were involved in at that time?

JC I was a rep at that time, but I believe others suggested that one.

EP Right, and James in your work thinking about neurodiversity and disability issues, you talked a little bit already about the challenges. Where might you see...I feel like we're jumping ahead a little bit, but let's do that. Where do you see a hope arising in your work through churches?

00:07:55

JB I think we see churches who are very willing to adapt what they do for others. I feel like I'm claiming a lot of work that I don't do very much of, and people do a lot more of than me. But I think we see churches who are willing to want to make a positive difference. I think we've seen that at Methodist Conference, for example, and all the way down. I think we see that people are willing to make adaptations that help.

I think there's also become a renewed... Energy is possibly not quite the right word. But a renewed focus on recognising people's gifts rather than what people maybe can't do. That actually we're learning again to recognise that everyone's made in the image of God, and actually that means people's potential can flourish. And I think we've also reached a point where stigma's dying out. I'm not saying it's gone. Actually I think the church is actually ahead of the curve on this.

We're not always ahead of the curve, I don't pretend we always are, but I think on this we actually are. And therefore, once stigma dies out then people can start talking about what adaptation we need. And I think Methodism has become particularly good at that. I can't claim it will be brilliant across the board. I can't claim that, you know, in every situation. But I do think that we've come to a point of recognising that, for example, a lot of our office holders, and ministers have various neurodiverse conditions. And actually trying to work to make their lives easier, which ultimately helps everyone else.

00:09:31

I mean, to just give an example, for me, for a committee I was on, to help me out, they started numbering all the documents on the agenda. Now, yes, that was an adaptation for my dyspraxia, but probably that made life easier for everyone on that



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committee. And that was a simple change that, you know, probably didn't take too much for the person to have to do, but actually then allows a full representative group.

JC Yeah, oh sorry... I hope you don't mind if I cut in here.

JB No, please do, feel free.

JC I also think, as evidence of the churches starting to understand that neurodiverse conditions and mental health conditions, are not really one in the same. Neurodiverse conditions will typically come about because there's a difference in the brain chemistry.

And although some neurodiverse conditions can be more susceptible to having mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression – oh I'm trying to think. Yeah such as anxiety and depression – the church is starting to realise ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia are not mental health conditions. They're medical conditions which impact people's lives daily.

EP Yes, sorry James, were you going to...?

JB Yes, sorry, I just wonder whether the other thing that we recognise is the fact yeah they're not medical conditions therefore not something to be cured. But also, that we're beginning to recognise that they bring strengths as well. For example, a lot are very creative or can be very focused, and these are very broad brush. I do realise there's a limit to that.

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And I think there is a difficulty there that it's very easy to talk about somebody like me, somewhere on the autistic spectrum, what would have been called Asperger's, but no longer is as compared to somebody who's very debilitated by autism and not able to communicate. And I appreciate that when I talk about gifts and not curing, that actually would feel very different to people caring for loved ones at that end of the scale. And I realise that's very tricky.

But I think we are learning that people have their unique gifts and actually that the whole population has their unique gifts. Because actually we don't all have the same gifts, whether neurodiverse or not. And I think once we begin to move away from that medical model, we can begin to celebrate that, and I think that's what we're seeing now.

EP Yes, and I wonder if, the people with, for example, ADHD or autism, who have anxiety, depression, that's partly because of the system in which they live that's not designed for them to flourish. Do you have any questions for each other about your



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thoughts or the sorts of work that you're doing right now?

JB I think one question I would have for James C would be, how do we...? As we move to celebrating things, I do sometimes worry that we can throw the baby out with the bath water, and almost ignore people's difficulties. And that we could go too far the other way. And I absolutely think we should be celebrating those unique gifts, but I'm very aware that as I celebrate my unique gift, there's still difficulties I have. And I just wonder how you think we can communicate that well to the wider world, if that makes sense?

00:13:21

JC Yes, I've actually been doing this as part of my work as well, and one thing I try to do in every piece that I do about neurodiversity, I basically go, right we have these fantastic benefits of having these conditions. But you must realise the conditions affect everybody differently, and what can be seen as a blessing for one person can be seen as a real, can I use the word curse?

EP I think you just did.

JC S for example, when you have a brain which can make a connection within seconds, I can completely look at a situation and go, right, that's not working. And I can explain how it's not working. But also, with a brain which often moves faster than my mouth, I've got my stammer. And it's basically like, you need to do this, this, and this. But it doesn't come across every single time as perfect instructions.

And people are often confused by my instructions and things like that. But yeah so it's about recognising a person's talents, but also recognising that this person still needs support occasionally. And the best thing to do is to ask them what support they need. I've actually got a question for James.

JB Oh dear.

EP Look out.

JC Yeah, so James, with your work with the different denominations and things like that, how do you feel other denominations are doing on this topic? Do you see where others are all working together to create an inclusive society?

00:15:10

JB I think in some ways our structure helps us. Because there can be much more of a... Not so much this is an expectation, but actually because we work very



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collaboratively. I think there's some great work, from what I can gather, and I'm no expert on it, that various Church of England groups are trying to do. I actually think where we can work together there is about resourcing.

So I've often thought that we could resource, and actually pool what is good from each. Because I suspect their structure has real strengths as well to helping it, or things that they've got, their resources. I also think it's about... I'm personally a big supporter of that we work together where we can. And actually I think if we could, I mean, I think, we work together on all sorts of other issues.

Although it's problematic lumping it all in with disability, I think actually disability in its widest sense is maybe the way to go, because there's so much there around how we approach things like especially the theological explorations, and things like healing and cure, I think, on how we can support people. So I do know there is a church that has some form of programme for people with neurodiverse conditions, actually that's the sort of thing that actually is worth pooling together into, rather than competing with each other.

00:16:43

EP Coming back to the question of younger people. I'm thinking about intergenerational work, because I should imagine there are older people in particular who might be neurodiverse but were never called that growing up. You know, they may have been called all kinds of things, but probably not that. And perhaps not seen for the gifts that they have. So I'm wondering what a younger generation can offer to these people, and the pros and cons of having a different view on neurodiverse conditions. Dave is rubbing his hands.

JC I think, especially during COVID and the lockdowns, we saw this kind of thing in practice. So I think because nowadays young people might be less afraid than the older generations to talk about their mental health and things like that and we're more willing to share our difficulties. So with ADHD for example, during COVID, what I've heard there's been a massive rise in the number of referrals for assessments. Just because on TikTok ADHDers were basically going, hey, this is my life. And, bing!

And because a lot of people have been willing to come forward and say, this is what ADHD is, and this is how it affects me, people have been able to recognise some of the possible characteristics in themselves. And they've sort of realised, oh wait, maybe I've got ADHD and I didn't even know.

JB I think we're beginning to see with other conditions, very similar to what



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happened with dyslexia where when dyslexia first became better known people began to realise that actually they weren't stupid, that actually they had a condition that caused them the difficulties that they had. I think there's something about being positive about difference.

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Because thinking of the people I know whether they've then got adult diagnoses or not, particularly who are elderly, who very evidently have some form of neurodiverse conditions, there was almost a lot of shame around who they were, their behaviour. You know, I think of one woman in particular who I knew, who has now died, who felt utterly ashamed that she couldn't keep her house tidy, because that was a failure. I could still feel like that, but at least I know why.

But actually I think there's something about, once people are on board, even if they don't recognise themselves in a particular condition. And I can totally understand why, if you're in your 80's you wouldn't necessarily want to get a diagnosis because sitting on a waiting list for two years is not going to be helpful. However, if people can see themselves in it and see a reason for their behaviours and actually learn that there wasn't something defective about them,

I think that's what people have carried. And I wonder whether young people realising there's nothing defective about them, which I think more and more. And actually I was very resistant for a long time to the neurodiversity label. I didn't like this... I still have some qualms of it in terms of how helpful it is as a descriptor, but the helpful thing about it is it takes away any stigma of a named disorder, and a condition, or whatever.

00:20:23

I'm not denying that conditions are underneath. And if people can sort of see themselves on that sort of spectrum, then perhaps that will help them to realise who they are, even just to the point of accepting themselves. They don't necessarily need to start talking about it, or seeking diagnosis, but I do wonder whether that could positively impact their mental health.

JC Yes, and feeding off James' comment, one of the biggest things holding people back and sort of stopping people from going, hey, look I've got ADHD. As in I've never known anyone else to do that, but sort of recognise and accept that ADHD is part of them. It's the stereotypes around it. So with ADHD, we're often told that we're lazy, we're disruptive, and things like that. And we're not really. And there's so many portrayals in



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media where sometimes they get neurodiverse conditions incredibly right.

So one character I incredibly link with is Jake Peralta from Brooklyn 99. Because although he doesn't say that he has ADHD, by just watching what happens in the series, you can tell he has ADHD. He even has one point where he has a bath of unread bills and stuff like that. And if I had a bath, that would probably be me. But there's also some portrayals which are sort of a stereotypical view of neurodiverse conditions. Some of them are just psychotic really and it's like, no.

EP Yeah. I'm wondering then if you see any characters in the Bible that you would resonate with?

JC I mean, I'm not sure really. James, do you want to go first?

00:22:34

JB In some ways, and it's the one that we all have a love-hate relationship with, is Paul. Because Paul was, let's be honest, quite obsessive about a few things. He was quite all-or-nothing, and that was both pre- and post- conversion. If you think of his zealously [sic] in persecuting Christians, and then his zealously in Christianity.

I think I always resonate a bit with Jonah I think because I totally appreciate the idea of just not wanting to do something so running away. I think of my own call story. I ran away from my call to preach for as long as humanly possible, until I decided that it was no longer humanly possible. And then had to give in. And I think actually there's all sorts of minor characters who you wonder...

Not that I'm necessarily claiming her as possibly or possibly not neurodiverse, but I thought a lot about the story of Hagar recently. And the fact that God met her in her absolute distress. And I think there's something about anxiety, etc. Hagar was treated awfully, and I could say a lot that I won't diverge into about the fact that we hail Abraham and Sarah as heroes of the faith, and yes they are in many ways, but actually they treated her abysmally.

But there was something in that, even in being treated abysmally, and if you think of systems and perhaps where churches haven't done things well. Where heroes of the faith maybe haven't always dealt with people with autism, ADHD, etc very well. And not necessarily intentionally, but where things have gone wrong. That actually God met Hagar and God assured Hagar he was with her. And I just find that quite a powerful, resonating story on so many levels.

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JC Yes, thanks James for giving me some time to think. I feel the one that springs to mind for me is, I'm going to get this wrong. Is the one that climbs the tree Zachary?

JB Zacchaeus, yes.

JC There's been a few times where it's been like I've come across a problem and I could just do the simple route of just... trying out the simple route. Instead, I go doop, doop, doop, doop [gestures to indicate 'all over the place']. And Zacchaeus, he could have just asked the crowd to give him space to move for him to see better. But instead, he climbs up a tree. And it's sort of like yeah, it works...

And I'm just that person who would... Because I'm incredibly impatient and I don't understand social cues all the time, I'd either be the person who would try to hastily get through the queue and struggle, or I would just climb up a tree. If I could climb up a tree, which I can't.

EP I'm just thinking a radical thought which is to wonder if Jesus was neurodiverse. Thinking about the way he was often misunderstood and direct. Yeah. I don't know if anyone's written on that. Listeners can let us know. But that would be interesting to ponder. I know there's work done on the idea of a disabled God.

JC Please send your answers on the back of a postcard to...

JB I think there's something really interesting whether Jesus was or wasn't, and whether about understanding the blessing of disability, neurodiversity, etc. And thinking about the fact that actually in scripture, disability was not this curse. So Jesus made it quite clear that the person who was born blind, his parents or him hadn't sinned. But also, when we think about Jacob wrestling with the angel, his limp came from that struggle with God, and was actually a blessing and revealed something.

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And so actually we think of the negative. And we often think we know what people want. Jesus was very good when he, at asking people what they wanted whereas we often think of people, oh, they must want to be able to walk, or they must want to be able to hear. And that may be true for some people and actually you know that's quite a reasonable thing, but equally that is not true for everybody. And actually what healing might look like actually could well be that society enables them to participate.

And I think that's where neurodiversity, is rather... actually If there's no cure, then it's about saying, if society, and the church, etc allows people to communicate and



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participate as they are. And I'm always struck by Frances Young, who is a Methodist minister, and Bible scholar. And she wrote in Arthur's Call, her book about her son Arthur who has very profound learning disabilities and about how some kind person in church, and they were being kind she says, and I'm sure they were, told her, but don't worry, Arthur won't be disabled in heaven.

And she cried for hours afterwards. Because if Arthur had none of his disabilities Arthur would not be Arthur. And what she came back with, which has always resonated with me, is Arthur will be Arthur, but Arthur will be whole. And that he will be able to participate, and he will be who he is without suffering. But actually Arthur will remain Arthur. Because there's parts of me that I think, I don't want to be cured of thank you very much.

00:28:35

JC And I think, sort of feeding off of what James has just said, the church has great empathy and great support for people with neurodiverse conditions. And we sort of need to open up our doors and sort of go out into society and try and transform the way society views neurodiverse conditions as well. Because one of the biggest difficulties I've found is that people view neurodiverse conditions as being constant, so you're constantly at that same level every single day. Whereas in reality you either have good days and you have bad days.

So with me, on a good day I could be up front of conference, speaking my heart out without any issues at all. On a bad day for me, when it gets really bad, and my mental health is impacting on my conditions, I can't cook, I can't clean, my executive functions have gone haywire. And it's like, I just don't want my ASD. And society has to recognise that sometimes people will ask for help one day and then not need it the next.

EP I wonder if the stories as well, about, because there are these stories about healing in the Gospels. And we tend to focus on, they couldn't walk and now they can. The physical aspect. It's interesting what you're talking about, about healing and cure as the element of cure is relational, is being seen for more than your condition, but with your condition as well, just as a whole person. And then the healing takes care of itself, in a sense. And that's, I feel like what Jesus did, is make those connections and maybe we can learn from that.

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JC I did a word in time a few months back, and one of the occasions which I had



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was the disciples healing an individual outside of the temple. And it just struck me as a way that we should not be interacting with individuals with disability. So for me, I loved Jesus' approach to healing. As well, he waited for the person to approach and for them to give a request and consent. Whereas in the Bible passage I had, the disciples went up to this person, and just went, you're cured. It's like, where was the need of the person? Where was the agency of that person?

So that's one of the issues I have with some people thinking they can cure autism, ADHD, and things like that. Because one of the first reactions which I've heard about from when an individual discloses that they've got a condition, someone immediately goes, we'll pray for you. And it's sort of like, I don't want prayer, I just want to tell you I've got this condition, and it's a part of me, and da da da da da.

EP And you are that, and you are a lot of other things as well.

JB I often go back to the story in, I think it's Acts 16, where there's the example of healing that feels very problematic. And it's where Paul drives out the demon, whatever that was, and however we understand that, of the slave girl who is supposedly is presented as she is possessed by a demon that allows her to tell fortunes. And there's no fault to her, it actually says that Paul was angry with her because she kept following him going, he's a servant of the great high God, come and listen to him. That he drives this demon out.

00:33:09

And we have no idea what happens to her after. And actually, whatever it was that caused this, whether it really was a demon, whether it was a mental health problem, I don't know, but actually was there any thought to the implication on that girl? Because presumably she went back to her owners and presumably now that she was no longer going to make them money, that may or may not had really awful consequences for her.

And I sometimes wonder whether that's the same with how people... And I've been guilty of it in the past where I've offered to pray for somebody a bit inappropriately, or offered thinking they must want to be cured. And actually is it because society has discomfort, and it's easier to heal than it is to engage? Not that we can heal, but it's easier to have that desire than it is to engage with somebody where they are.

EP So I think we'll come to an end fairly soon. I'm wondering if there's anything you want to leave our listeners with, in terms of where we go from here, thinking again



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about crafting hope. What can people do individually and corporately today, moving forward?

JC I'd say just engage in a non-judgemental and inclusive way which puts that person's needs first.

EP Simple as that.

JC Yes, simple.

00:34:35

JB I think the thing we can all do better is that question that Jesus asked people about, what is it you want? And actually looking to care for a whole, holistic person rather than what we think we need to do for somebody.

EP Which can often say more about us than them, can't it?

JB Yes.

JC James' answer was better than mine, can I nick it?

EP Yours was good.

JB It was good.

EP And they seemed heartfelt, so that's the thing of it, isn't it?

JC Just to say that we are here, we are part of your congregations, and you shouldn't be afraid of us. All we want to do is just worship God in the way that best helps us and best expresses our love of God as well.

EP Well listen, thank you so much for this conversation. I mean I've learned a lot and I think it's going to be lifegiving for people that listen to it. Thank you very much for your time, I hope that you enjoyed it.

JB Lovely, thank you so much.

JC Yes.

00:35:46