

Provisional title: “Autistic people in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Italy: How the church is challenged and changed by their presence”.

This research will investigate the inclusion of autistic people in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Italy. The reason for my interest in this field is because I have an autistic daughter, Celeste. In this research, I will investigate autism as a social construction within the church. A survey among the Italian Adventist pastors shows that there are at least 37 autistic people related to the Adventist church in Italy (which has less than 10,000 baptized members). After an examination of the Adventist church (specifically in Italy), the syndromes of the autistic spectrum, and the current state of research on autism in the field of Disability Studies and Disability Theology, the research will investigate the experiences of a number of autistic people related to the Adventist church in Italy, focusing on their ideas concerning God, church and the world, and the way they contribute to the life, mission and wholeness of the Adventist church in Italy.

The general frame of this research is the field of Disability Theology. Some important authors engaged in this perspective are Deborah Creamer, Nancy Eiesland, and John Swinton. Disability is not just an intrinsic characteristic related to intellectual or physical impairments, but it is also a ‘social construction’ related to the lack of inclusion towards minorities and differences, including disability. This invites the question as to how theology shapes the social construction of disability within the church, and at the same time how the presence of people with disabilities changes and challenges the theology of the church, making it more inclusive and able to witness to the world that disability is an active and indispensable part of a rich and gifted society. The originality of this research is studying and verifying these issues in the specific context of autism in the Adventist church in Italy.