

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH BLOOMFIELD

OUR ADULT AUTISM SUPPORT GROUPS

Our very special people have come to value the Ignatius lands on the northern edge of Guelph, Ontario. We are of various faiths—Catholics of various traditions, Anglicans, United, Presbyterian, Methodist, Jewish, Sikh--as well as humanists who care deeply about community and the well-being of the world's peoples and environments. Above all, we are attuned to the sensitivities of vulnerable adults who are often misunderstood and marginalized in our mainstream society but feel accepted, calm and content at Ignatius.

What we have in common are our experiences in living with Autism Spectrum Disorders—being autistic ourselves, or as family members and friends of people with autism. We are associated with Guelph Services for the Autistic, a not-for-profit charitable housing trust incorporated in 1980, and dedicated to helping adults with autism to live with dignity in their own homes and in our community.

Important elements of our approach are:

a) Focus on the individual person:

- friends and family “listening” to the person,
- person-centred planning and supports,
- self-directed plans for good lives in home communities,
- choices of how and with whom to live,
- encouragement of self-expression by whatever communication modes work most reliably.

b) Emphasis on natural social relationships with and supports from among family, friends, neighbours, community—using the following:

- circles of support also known as personal support networks,
- aroha or incorporated entities of personal empowerment and support,
- strategies for community inclusion.

Some of our members have been loosely associated with the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph for years. Several have been on retreats at the Loyola Centre for Spirituality. One of our men volunteered with the former Ignatius Farm Community in the mid-1990s and is a member of the Friends of Ignatius. More formally, we have been meeting on the Ignatius Centre property quite regularly for nearly three years, as support groups concerned with building community for and with adults who have autism.

We use the Centre and its grounds year-round. We meet for the day every Wednesday of each week. We also hold meetings and events year-round on weekends and in the evenings. Our activities take place both indoors and outdoors, but primarily outdoors year-round. We value the outdoor sacred spaces and evidence of spiritual history in the whole property. We have also been touched by the beauty and empathy of the indoor spaces developed by the Canadian Mental Health Association there.

At present, we have two initiatives based at Ignatius, and supported by volunteers. Vital factors for both are the calm peace and space, the sense of community in which marginalized people feel accepted, and the welcome that the Jesuits and Ignatius staff have extended to us and to other

special groups. This sacred space, so close to a major centre of population, and so easily accessible from all over southern Ontario, is a priceless treasure that should be valued and protected.

1. In one initiative, we are developing a sense of community through land-based work by adults with autism and their families and friends from Guelph-Wellington and the Region of Waterloo. The whole group meets regularly for discussion and mutual support. Once a week, several young autistic men, with their supporters, spend the day at Ignatius, volunteering wherever their help is needed, mainly out of doors. An overlapping group of volunteers cares for the unique Ignatius Courtyard garden and helps with other environmental projects on the property. Through our co-operation in these activities, we exercise body, mind and spirit and we learn to understand and be interdependent with each other. We want to build on this foundation, so that our autistic friends can feel they belong to a caring community throughout their lives.

2. In the other initiative, known as Bridges Over Barriers, several adults with autism gather at Ignatius from all over southern Ontario and even from Michigan. None of them speak with their voices, but they express themselves with special communication methods to share faith in one another, ideas and community. Several times a year since January 2004, members of this group, with family members and friends, have been developing skills as communicators and sharing technology ideas and friendship. Between sessions of expressing themselves and discussing the challenges they face, they take long walks over the Ignatius lands. The very special character of these gatherings is enhanced by the calm quiet spaces and the sense of God and of history in what they regard as a sanctuary.

As part of this initiative, religious issues and matters are already discussed and shared within this group in an unstructured way. However, in April of 2006, one of the families in the group is relocating to the Guelph area entirely because of our initiatives. The mother of the autistic person is a United Church Minister. We are working towards and optimistic that we will be able to establish an organized multi-faith service on the Centre's lands on a regular basis.

Both of these initiatives are based mainly on the southern side of the Ignatius property, close to the projected site of new Big-Box business. Because of the complex challenges of their neuro-immune and sensory systems, our adults are highly sensitive to the likely impacts of commercial development on the proposed scale.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUALITY AND SACRED SPACES FOR ADULTS WITH AUTISM

People with autism are usually hypersensitive to most stimuli—sound, sight, smell, touch, taste-- as well as to air temperature, pressure, and humidity, balance and the sense of their bodies in space. In particular, they are likely to react with distress to loud or disharmonious sounds and to the press and bustle of crowds, notably in shopping centres but also in large and noisy gatherings of people.

The sensory systems of autistic people have extreme difficulty, both in integrating messages coming through the various senses at the same time, and in filtering out background “noise” to focus on significant meanings. Their senses are bombarded with stimuli of all kinds. Their threshold of tolerance for sensory input may seem low to other people, and may be suddenly reached. They may erupt in outbursts and meltdowns that they cannot control. Or their sensory systems may shut down, so they may seem totally frozen.

People with autism are deeply ashamed of outbursts they cannot control. They certainly suffer from the way their behaviour is usually interpreted. Other people typically react negatively, with one result that the opportunities for adults with autism to experience the joys of living become more restricted. For some adults with autism, their lives can seem a series of grievous disappointments and losses.

A fair proportion of people with autism cannot use their voices to speak—a most frustrating disability that is often misunderstood by others as an inability to think or feel. They need other people to support them and to listen deeply when they express themselves with other technologies. True communication happens in places that are calm and quiet, when the communicators can focus on the meaning of what they are trying to express and their trusting relationship with their friends.

One of our members, who does not speak, tells us in a poem “what it’s like to be me”:

*I’m a bundle of sensations:
I get the urge*

to touch and pick
and I must follow my urges.
Can you see my urges?
I can't tell you:
I just show you.
I'm a bundle of nerves
and a jumble of thoughts.
I'm in constant motion
and my mind's always going.
I wonder what it's like to be you.
Do you wonder what it's like to be me?
I'm a time bomb waiting to explode
and a tear waiting to fall.

Adults with autism have often experienced hard and hurtful times being misunderstood and ill-treated. Many autistic people are highly sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others--whether these are negative or positive. They also respond to the qualities of places and spaces, some being perceived as inspiring vistas and prospects and some as safe refuges. Times of acceptance and understanding by true friends in peaceful and beautiful places can calm and heal them. Ignatius is seen as such a sanctuary where, for a while, they may feel whole and content:

It feels so nice this being content.
It is balance and good health.
It is love and friendship.

*It is feeling secure and safe.
I am content and I thank you for that.*

Adults with autism seem to have a highly developed spiritual sense—the subject of at least two recent books. One is *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum: Of Falling Sparrows* by Abe Isanon (ISBN-13: 9781843100263, 2001). Another is *Autism and the God Connection: Redefining the Autistic Experience Through Extraordinary Accounts of Spiritual Giftedness* by William Stillman (ISBN: 1402206496, forthcoming, 2006). Another mother of one of the adults in the Bridges group is a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and has just published a book with her autistic son, in which spirituality is an important theme. The Bridges group is discussed in the book; *The Road Trip: Life With Autism*, by Gloria Pearson-Vasey and J. Kevin Vasey (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005). ISBN 2-89507-603-0. Their family probably won't be moving (from Lambton County), but they will continue to travel here to take part in our regular meetings at Ignatius.

Some of our people also contributed perceptions and experiences for Stillman's book. In advance information about his research, Stillman wrote: "Every one of us is a spiritual being, and perhaps no one knows this better than parents of children with autism. So many individuals with autism seem to 'vibrate' at a frequency different from others because they are inherently gentle and exquisitely sensitive. They may more readily perceive all things seen...and unseen. This may come through in a divine manner that is natural not supernatural." Among other manifestations of their spirituality, a person with autism usually has "a deep appreciation for the beauty of nature, forests, lakes, streams and plant-life", "an unspoken connection with dogs, cats, horses,

butterflies and other creatures,” and an “innate spiritual or religious sense that compels others in positive ways.”

The world seems that way for a man in our group, who was asked by a close friend who is a Presbyterian layman to discuss his sense of spirituality for an article in *The Presbyterian Record* (published in May 2005). He explained:

“As a teenager, I first felt some sense of spirituality in my soul. I felt a sense of awe at times outdoors, in the country. I felt there were miracles all around me. I didn't always see them. I think I am often in the presence of spiritual people, so it rubs off. I knew that man did not create the world so it must have been a miracle.

“I think that autistic people need spiritual care. My soul is hungry. It is not enough to have a home, food and work. For my soul, I need music, prayer, meditation, and being outdoors in quiet beautiful places. Gentle natural colours calm me—greens are my favourite, and also the blue of the sky, and soft browns and greys of the earth and rocks.

“I can really tell you that we have feelings for others. I need to have spiritual moments. My soul is nourished. We really need to feel connected to God. Church is one way. But I know I can feel more connected at other times and in other places too. I'm interested in learning about various religions.

"I think there are moments of spirituality at church. But church can be hard for my system with all the noise, busyness, and people I don't know. It is hard to feel it with all people, but I get a sense of spirituality from some.

"It is good to be in a spiritual place. I am specially aware of spirituality when walking outdoors, being in the country, and in the company of friends who understand me.

"I need to be kind of free in expressing myself. I mean more about my feelings. Please include my soul in our conversation. I think I am just about most exuberant person I know.

"I think God is everywhere and in all of us. In my mind, loving people is loving God."

People who live with autism, either because they are autistic themselves or as parents and siblings, often have had unhappy and unfulfilling experiences in mainstream churches. Families may have tried to continue as church members when their autistic children were small. Adults with autism may think that churches could offer meaning for their lives and kindly people to understand and accept them. We know very kind church members who mean well, but few adults with autism find that church services satisfy their soul hunger. All their senses are excited by the various elements of a service of worship. For example, sounds echo in large cavernous buildings and may be electronically amplified. Standing in one place for congregational singing is hard for someone who may try to adapt by sitting during hymns, so that his ears are below the level of most of the sound. Most members of congregations may project a strong pressure to conform to their social norms and a disapproval of any behaviour that is at all odd. The indoor space, closely packed congregation and sense of disapproval may induce a desperate desire to escape outside. If

there is no safe place to go, the time bomb may indeed explode. After that, an autistic person (or his family) feels too ashamed and afraid to return to church.

It has been liberating to discover the freedom of spiritual expression that is possible at the Ignatius Centre. Perhaps like Canada's native people, people with autism do not make rigid distinctions between what is sacred and spiritual and what is material and mundane. They see and feel places and people in their totality. It seems that, as for native people, "the boundaries between objects, animals, humans and spirits blur," and "natural sites of great beauty or unusual form take on a spiritual dimension." [Quotation from Kate Harries, "Spirits and the material world," *The Globe and Mail*, Monday 13 February 2006, p.9.]

One man speaks for our group when he says, of his experience at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre lands in the past two years:

"I come to Ignatius to have time with friends, to meet in a quiet place that is not disturbed by cars and crowds. I work in the Courtyard and I am calm because of the quiet peace. I'm in a special place of God and nature and history. I know there is Jesuit history and native history there.

"Many of my friends are autistic and so am I. It means we are people who are sensitive to noise and nervous at times with crowds of people. Lights, traffic and pollution are problems we have to deal with every day. But at Ignatius we have a sanctuary. I hope [the big store] can go farther from Ignatius, where we cannot see it or feel the effects"

HARMFUL EFFECTS FOR THE AUTISM SUPPORT GROUPS OF LOCATING NEW COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT CLOSE TO THE IGNATIUS CENTRE

Plans to locate a shopping centre of 155,000 square feet on the southern boundary of the Ignatius property would harm the fragile balance between chaos and contentment in the lives of autistic adults. Our promising initiatives that have begun so well would be jeopardized. Dreams that we have encouraged would be dashed.

We understand that a shopping centre of the projected size would be comparable to the Willow West Mall in western Guelph. Our adults would suffer in both their physical and sensory health and in their spiritual development by having commercial development on that scale so close to their sanctuary of peace and wholeness.

Their physical and sensory health would suffer in the following ways:

1. There would be increased levels of noise, from the store and parking lots, and from the associated traffic of vehicles and people. As well as the hum of car engines, there would be sounds of braking, slamming doors, car horns, and electronic door openers. People with autism are very sensitive to all these sounds, and cannot filter them out.
2. Increased traffic on Highway 6 would also produce more atmospheric pollution. People with autism, with their compromised immune systems, can have serious breathing problems when the air quality is degraded.

3. Traffic associated with the shopping centre would also impact on safety for anyone approaching the Ignatius Centre. Impulsive and sudden changes of direction by drivers would make this stretch of highway more hazardous. People with autism are typically hypersensitive to the moods of others and can become nervous and seriously agitated in these conditions.
4. Lights around the shopping centre and parking lots would cast an artificial glow at all times and emit a hum that upsets people with autism.
5. Litter and visual pollution of a shopping centre would spill over into the larger environment.
6. One or two large stores may well attract more retail development, so the scale of these sensory problems would only increase in future.

Our adults with autism would also suffer harm in developing their spiritual lives and the wholeness of their personalities:

7. The sensory distractions and ill-effects listed above would significantly restrict or prohibit them from using the outdoor areas of Ignatius for religious or spiritual activities. Given their physical circumstances, Ignatius is in effect the only church/sacred environment in Guelph where they can practice or express their spirituality. They would lose the freedom they have begun to experience and that we are actively working to build at Ignatius.
8. The commercialism of a large shopping centre so close would also seem strident and discordant, incompatible with the qualities of peace and tranquility that they have come to regard as so priceless at Ignatius.
9. Others of the many faith groups, that value the Ignatius Centre lands and have been accepted and welcomed there, may well also find the nearby commercial development unbearable and move on. If so, the sense of spiritual community that is a special part of Ignatius now would be

diminished for those who try to continue meeting and practicing their freedom of spiritual identity there.

Our adults with autism and other vulnerable and sensitive people will lose a precious sanctuary that is now so accessible and took 90 years to develop. The Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph is a unique and irreplaceable resource. A Big-Box store can be created in many places, and other sites are available.