

Are Introverts Really Welcomed in Church?

I grew up in Pentecostal churches. For every service, we have a strict social regimen. As you walk in, you trade handshakes with each person you pass. For many, a hug is a likely option. It's a familial atmosphere populated by some of the friendliest people on the planet. By the time I've reached my seat, I've interacted with a dozen or more.

Once service begins, churches follow a structural pattern: A welcome from the pastor or another member of the ministerial staff followed by a series of songs. Then comes offering, the sermon, and a closing altar call or prayer. It's a routine nearly set in stone. It's become tradition, and a very comfortable one at that. I was raised in it. I expect it. I can predict it.

But I'm painfully uncomfortable throughout.

According to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment, my personality category (of 16 options) is INTP. The MBTI was developed around the theories and research of Dr. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychotherapist who originally conceived the personality theories we know as introversion and extroversion.

My "I" on the beginning of "INTP" stands for introversion.

For those less familiar with the concept, I can boil it down fairly simply: Introverts draw energy from solitude and quiet. Social interaction burns energy and leaves introverts feeling very tired after a time. Extroverts operate in the opposite manner. They draw energy from interaction with others and feel bored and restless with excessive time spent alone. However, people don't fall neatly into one extreme camp or the other. Many land in the middle, or between the middle and the polar ends.

My wife, for example, is an easy extrovert. She feels energized by spending time with other people. She enjoys small talk and getting to know the small details of others' lives. But she also enjoys time in quiet or spending time reading. She has a healthy balance.

I, on the other hand, feel exhausted after interacting with people. If I don't have time to prepare for a conversation, I have very little to say and will likely come across as stiff and rude. Social cues don't come naturally, so I actively try to remember what I should say and do in any given situation. Often this doesn't work quite right and I get looks of confusion directed back at me. For any introvert this will sound familiar. For any extreme introverts like me, you'll want to shout a hearty, "Amen!" Though, that's really what I'm getting to.

The Evangelical Environment

Evangelical churches are all about welcoming people. Many modern movements are pushing towards relaxed atmospheres where people can chat and socialize. Portions of service, even if only a few minutes, are dedicated to sending people out from their seats to shake hands and welcome people—usually prioritizing the newcomers among us.

During the sermon, the minister will try to create interaction with the crowd. Even in such simple terms as one of the "Turn and tell your neighbor _____," to emphasize a point or by compelling the congregation to join hands across the building for prayer.

For most people, it is likely that this works just fine. For many introverts, it disrupts their focus and makes them feel out of place and exhausted. The greatest strength of introverted minds is their power of concentration. It's that concentration that allows us to seize projects and break them down in a fell swoop. But instituting interruptions,

particular of a social sort, breaks down any train of thought and leaves you trying to remember how to shake hands and verbally greet someone at the same time (often I shake hands and just make a noise like “Garp,” if someone catches me by surprise).

Before I go further, however, I should remind you that to be an introvert does not mean overpowering shyness or a dislike of people. But it does mean that those interactions do not come as naturally as they do for extroverted personalities. Instead, we have to concentrate on each encounter and often consciously remember how we’re supposed to behave under those circumstances. This leaves us feeling very tired, and makes it difficult to concentrate on anything else at the same time.

Worship

When I was a young teenager, I would use my watch to time praise and worship during each service: 15–19 minutes, every single time. I distinctly remember a 12 minute set once. When I saw everyone sitting down, I couldn’t believe that it had been cut short. I quickly sank into my pew and relished the moment of quiet. I always felt remarkably guilty for this.

I felt guilty because evangelical churches prize worship. It’s an enormous draw to bring people into the church (if the music is good), and large portions of the congregation will quickly cite it as their favorite part of the service. As a child, I would watch the people around me become so involved (again, Pentecostal upbringing), and I would wonder what was wrong with me that I felt nothing. The prevailing thought at the time was the God wanted us out of our “comfort zones.” So I pushed myself. I raised my hands, I sang loudly (and off-key), and after each session—I just felt embarrassed. I didn’t feel like myself. It seemed so easy for everyone else and I just didn’t understand why I seemed to be immune. I realize now that people probably thought I reacted the same as everyone else. Like a lot of introverts, I learned the correct behavior

for the correct time, and I imitated the people around me. To this day, I have very, very few genuine spiritual moments during worship, which I generally find to be loud and distracting.

My most spiritual moments have been found while reading (either Scripture, philosophy, science, fiction, it doesn't seem to matter) and most often, while outside. Twenty minutes alone in the woods will grant me a seat closer to God than I've ever felt inside a church. Solitude breeds reflection and insight into my spiritual life. Epiphanies from Scripture pelt me from the silence. What you may be thinking now is, "Church doesn't take that away from you!" And it doesn't.

But is there really a place for me, and others with personalities like mine, where the environment feels tailored to extroverted sensibilities? I can't begin to cast blame, because the nature of the churches I grew up in was beautifully sincere. And I don't think for a moment that the people who greet me and hug me have anything but genuine intentions. They're happy to see me. I'm glad for that. But if I remain uncomfortable and I can't concentrate because the church culture mandates disruptions in my ability to listen and process the sermon, do I really have a place?

Do any of us? There's no official reference for numbers on introverts and extroverts. But numbers such as 25, 30 and 50% have been estimated by researchers. Are people being alienated from churches by our culture of friendliness?

The Visitor

When I visit a church, particularly larger ones, there's a system of processing visitors. They'll shake your hand at the entrance, likely hand you a packet of some kind, and in some cases help you find a seat or get your children into the children's church or nursery. All of this is, actually, very helpful. However, once I cross that threshold, I need to sit

back and soak in a new environment. Some programs move this too far, and by process begin introducing you to the pastoral staff. Some require you to fill out cards that demand excessive and personal information. A few even (heaven forbid) make the visitors stand and be recognized during service, or try to usher them to the front row. These are ways that may ensure a visitor never, ever attempts a return.

Research into the biology of personality has revealed a correlation between sensitivity of the medulla oblongata in the brain (where we get our “fight or flight” responses) and categorization into introversion or extroversion. Essentially what this means is that introverts are much more sensitive to outside stimuli than their extroverted counterparts. One study even showed that introverts listen to music on average 20 decibels lower than extroverts. We like the quiet. Noisy environments with a lot happening can become difficult to maneuver in. That’s why you’ll see quiet people try to take a seat and soak everything in. This makes visiting a new church a delicate experience.

An introvert is not a gazelle that you’ll startle by trying to make conversation. They won’t lope out the front door never to be seen again. But a barrage of interaction and loud noise can very easily make an introvert feel like a fish out of water. I know this well, because I’ve felt like one at church for a very long time.

The Solution

In 2009, I visited Westminster Abbey in London for a Sunday Service. It immediately became one of my favorite church experiences of all time. The Abbey was enormous, stone and silent. The priest spoke in a soft voice and I sat and reflected on the verses he read. It was an incredible experience. It felt like church made just for me.

But I don’t want to abandon my church history and my

denomination. I just hope to help to bring a conversation about how we can accommodate the sensibilities of the introverted population.

It's probably not a question you can ask at the front door, "Are you an introvert?" or place on a connection card, (Please circle one of the following). But I don't believe it's an unfair question to wonder if we can do a better job at finding ways to make church an easier experience for those who want to focus, sit quietly, and reflect. Psalm 46:10 reminds us to "Be still and know that I am God," but quiet and stillness are often viewed as "dead air" in an evangelical setting. I assure you though; it's a moment of euphoria for the quiet type, book worm, shy person, and introvert.

I don't expect people to stop socializing at church. It would be silly, and honestly, I would hate to see it go. The same as dealing with social interaction on a day to day basis at our jobs or in basic life, introverts generally find conversation with friends and family to be enjoyable. It would only be extreme cases who don't.

But how we treat people at the door and what happens once we get into the service are variables that can be controlled. Breaking up services with greetings which are far too brief to have substance leaves an introvert feeling adrift and distracts them from their reflection, effectively snapping them from a spiritual mode to social robotics. Asking them to join hands, raise their hands, or move elsewhere to pray creates a conundrum of figuring out how to respond or how to deal with additional social pressure unwittingly pressed on them.

In terms of praise and worship, I don't propose doing away with it. It's a powerful ministry, enormously meaningful to large numbers of attendees. But applying pressure to make people respond physically or "move out of their comfort zones" alienates the introverted population and makes them feel as

though something is wrong with them, as I did throughout my childhood and teenage years. Do we really believe that it is superior to worship loudly, emotionally, and with physical response than it is to worship quietly? I doubt many would say it is. But our culture and our behavior convey a consistent message.

Give us a moment of quiet. Teach evangelical Christians that the quiet is a place to be respected, a place where you can deeply reflect without distraction. Give us opportunities and you will give us a home. You'll give us a place to recharge rather than something that exhausts us further after a week of work. Extroverts really do love people and I very much doubt they'll mind accommodating their more quiet friends.

For me, and for many others, silence and solemnity are breath and life. It seems remarkable that these are so difficult to find in church. But the solution could be as simple as putting them there.

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