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Introverts and extraverts reflecting on the experience of parish ministry:

Conversation between training incumbents and curates

Leslie J Francis*

University of Warwick, UK

Greg Smith

University of Warwick, UK

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Leslie J Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Centre for Education Studies

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Psychological type theory suggests that introverts and extraverts may approach Christian ministry in somewhat different ways. This theory was tested within the context of a residential workshop attended by 15 curates, 12 of whom were accompanied by their training incumbents. Twelve themes were identified within responses to the question, 'What does talk about introversion and extraversion illuminate in the ministry of incumbent and curate and in the life of the parish?' The six themes from the perspective of introverts included: experiencing and managing tiredness and exhaustion; and difficulties experienced dealing with extravert church members. The six themes from the perspective of extraverts included: reflection and reflective practice; and engagement with others as a source of inspiration.

Keywords: Psychological type, clergy, ministry, religion

Introduction

Psychological type theory, as originally proposed by Jung (1971) and developed by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), identifies four key psychological constructs that define significant individual differences within the normal adult population. Each of these psychological constructs is characterised as operating in two distinct modes or types. The two orientations distinguish between extravert types and introvert types. The two perceiving functions distinguish between sensing types and intuitive types. The two judging functions distinguish between thinking types and feeling types. The two attitudes distinguish between judging types and perceiving types.

Rooted in the psychology of individual differences, the core concepts of psychological type theory have more recently been integrated within the theology of individual differences by Francis (2005) and Francis and Village (2008). The theology of individual differences is grounded in a strong doctrine of creation consistent with the spirit of Genesis 1: 27. According to Genesis 1: 27 both male and female are created in the image of God, implying that the divine image embraces such individual differences. Sex differences reflect the nature of God, and not the consequences of the fall. By extension the theology of individual differences argues that other basic human differences as fundamental as sex differences may also reflect the divine image. By extension, ethnic differences reflect the nature of God, and not the consequence of the fall. By extension, psychological type difference (introversion and extraversion; sensing and intuition; thinking and feeling; and judging and perceiving) reflect the nature of God, and not the consequences of the fall. This perspective of the theology of individual differences has profound implications for the way in which the people of God reflect on sex differences, ethnic differences and psychological differences.

Psychological type theory has come to play a proper part in the fields of practical and empirical theology and pastoral science in general and in the science of clergy studies in particular (Francis, 2005, 2009). A significant contribution to the application of psychological type theory for understanding the dynamics of clergy was made by Oswald and Kroeger (1988) in their book, *Personality type and religious leadership*. More recently a series of empirical studies conducted among clergy has illuminated the connections between individual differences in psychological type and a number of areas of clergy practice and experience, including: ministry styles (Francis & Payne, 2002; Fawcett, Francis, & Robbins, 2011), preaching styles (Francis, 2010; Francis & Jones, 2011; Francis, 2012a, Francis, 2012b, Francis 2013; Francis & Smith, 2013), and work-related psychological health (Francis, Wulff, & Robbins, 2008; Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, & Castle, 2009; Robbins & Francis, 2010; Brewster, Francis, & Robbins, 2011; Francis, Gubb, & Robbins, 2012; Robbins, Francis, & Powell, 2012; Francis, Payne, & Robbins, 2013).

Introversion and extraversion

Each of the component parts of psychological type theory may relate in clear and distinctive ways to shaping clergy experience and expression of ministry. The present study concentrates specifically on the two orientations, introversion and extraversion. Introversion and extraversion describe the two preferred orientations of the inner world and the outer world. Introverts prefer to focus their attention on the inner world of ideas and draw their energy from that inner world. When introverts are tired and need energizing they look to the inner world. Extraverts prefer to focus their attention on the outer world of people and things and draw their energy from that outer world. When extraverts are tired and need energizing they look to the outer world.

Introverts like quiet for concentration. They want to be able to shut off the distractions of the outer world and turn inwards. They often experience trouble in

remembering names and faces. They can work at one solitary project for a long time without interruption. When they are engaged in a task in the outer world they may become absorbed in the ideas behind that task. Introverts work best alone and may resent distractions and interruptions from other people. They dislike being interrupted by the telephone, tend to think things through before acting, and may spend so long in thought that they miss the opportunity to act. Introverts prefer to learn by reading rather than by talking with others. They may also prefer to communicate with others in writing, rather than face-to-face or over the phone; this is particularly the case if they have something unpleasant to communicate. Introverts are oriented to the inner world. They focus on ideas, concepts and inner understanding. They are reflective, may consider deeply before acting, and they probe inwardly for stimulation.

Extraverts like variety and action. They want to be able to shut off the distractions of the inner world and turn outward. They are good at remembering faces and names and enjoy meeting people and introducing people. They can become impatient with long, slow jobs. When they are working in the company of other people they may become more interested in how others are doing the job than in the job itself. Extraverts like to have other people around them in the working environment, and enjoy the stimulus of sudden interruptions and telephone calls. Extraverts like to act quickly and decisively, even when it is not totally appropriate to do so. Extraverts prefer to learn a task by talking it through with other people. They prefer to communicate with other people face-to-face or over the phone, rather than in writing. They often find that their own ideas become clarified through communicating them to others. Extraverts are oriented to the outer world. They focus on people and things. They prefer to learn by trial and error and they do so with confidence. They are active people, and they scan the outer environment for stimulation.

Research question

The implications of the differences between the ministry styles exercised by introverts and by extraverts may become especially visible within close working relationships as may be the case between curates and their training incumbents. Against this background, the research aim of the present study is to listen to the way in which curates and training incumbents reflect on the implications of their personal preferences for introversion or for extraversion, to identify and analyse common themes that may emerge within such reflection, and to consider the implications of these common themes for the training, deployment, and pastoral care of the clergy.

Method

Participants

Six months after ordination to the diaconate, curates and their training incumbents serving in one diocese of the Church of England were invited to attend a three-day residential programme, drawing on psychological type theory, to explore the development of their professional working relationship. All 15 curates accepted the invitation, and so did 12 training incumbents. There were 6 women and 21 men. Profiles provided by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) identified 8 extraverts and 19 introverts.

Procedure

One component of the programme offered a detailed introduction to the theory of psychological orientation, distinguishing between preferences for introversion and for extraversion. The participants were invited to discuss one with another their self-perception of their preferences for introversion and extraversion and to arrange themselves in a horseshoe around the room grading themselves as a continuum from high extraversion to high introversion. This allowed each member of the group to see his or her position in relation to the position of his or her colleague. Curates and incumbents were then invited to

work in pairs to discuss the following task: What does talk about introversion and extraversion illuminate in the ministry of incumbent and curate and in the life of the parish? Think of complementarity and difference.

Analysis

Following their discussion, curates and incumbents were asked to decide on those aspects of their conversation that they would be prepared to share in the plenary session and to make clear notes of those points that could be shared with the two workshop leaders and co-authors of this study. The co-authors also made careful notes of the oral presentations. Both sets of notes were carefully studied to form the basis of the analysis.

Results

The analysis identified twelve main themes. Six themes were identified from the perspective of the introverts: experiencing and managing tiredness and exhaustion; dinner parties and the social life of the parish; difficulties experienced dealing with extravert church members; the Sunday pattern of services; the need to develop extravert skills; and the strengths introverts bring to ministry. Six themes were identified from the perspective of the extraverts: social engagement; reflection and reflective practice; immediacy and variety; exhaustion and the absence of social stimulation; engagement with others as a source of inspiration; and the disparity of expectations between introvert and extravert clergy working closely together as curate and training incumbent. These twelve themes will be discussed in turn.

Listening to introverts

The first theme concerned experiencing and managing tiredness and exhaustion. Jill, a medium scoring introvert deacon described her ministry as located in a busy sociable benefice where she seemed to be meeting people constantly. 'Since beginning this ministry,' she said, 'I have not had space to myself like I had in my previous job.' In her previous job

she had been used to going home at the end of a day's work, closing the door, and being on her own as a single person. Jill recognised that, as an introvert, she needs time to live in her internal world, time to meditate, time to get her equilibrium back. Jill explained that just before Christmas she felt completely exhausted and could not appreciate why, since the job is not really hard. Over Christmas she shut the door for three days and re-energised. Jill's training incumbent said that his immediate response was to be puzzled about why his curate was getting so tired. He, too, is an introvert and recognises that he needs to be more aware of his curate's need for her own space. He recognises that proper space to re-energise is as important for the life of the parish as going out and knocking on doors.

The second theme concerned the demands made by dinner parties in a relatively affluent rural parish. Reg, a high scoring introvert incumbent described the dinner party as sheer agony. 'Much to the embarrassment of my wife,' he said, 'sometimes I just have to go and sit in the loo, to get space to myself.' Picking up the same theme, Philip, another high scoring introvert incumbent recalled dinner parties that he had found energising. 'I have spent the whole evening in deep conversation with one person,' he said. More generally introverts recognise that the social side of parish life may not be the highest issue on their agenda, but that this is something that can be managed. Jack and his training incumbent (both introverts) were confident that their parish did not miss out. 'We have an active social committee,' said Jack. 'We just turn up and smile.'

The third theme concerned ways in which some introvert clergy experience difficulties with particular extravert members of their church. This issue was illustrated by the way in which Jeff and his training incumbent (both introverts) spoke of their churchwarden, a man for whom they had considerable respect. The problem, they found, was managing the churchwarden in situations in which he inevitably dominates. 'We find it so difficult to get a word in edgeways,' they agreed.

The fourth theme concerned the demands made by the Sunday pattern of services. Randolph, an introvert training incumbent, acknowledged that, after taking a couple of services on Sunday morning, he needs to manage the next part of the day carefully to give time to re-charge his batteries.

The fifth theme concerned the way in which introverts recognise that ministry demands a range of extravert skills, and learn how to master those skills. George, an introvert training incumbent, says that he has grown used to pretending to be an extravert on a Sunday morning. His church sees him in extravert mode and is convinced by it. What his church does not see is the cost that this carries. Graham, another introvert training incumbent, reflected on this and offered the following observation. As an introvert he had learned to do the extravert side of ministry over twenty years. Then last year he took a three-month sabbatical. Now six months after the end of the sabbatical he is still struggling to regain his sense of comfort with the extravert side of ministry.

The sixth theme turned attention to the benefits that introverts bring to ministry. Jim, an introvert deacon, described how he had been able to get alongside a group of mothers and toddlers, watching on the side, understanding what was going on, and sliding in unnoticed and accepted. Judy drew attention to her introvert ministry getting alongside people one-on-one.

Listening to extraverts

The seventh theme of social engagement was introduced by Duncan and his training incumbent (both extraverts). ‘We bounce off each other,’ said Duncan’s incumbent. Sunday is so invigorating as we move from one thing to another. Alongside the services there is a Sunday lunch group and a men’s event in the evening. ‘I keep saying to him that we could do this and we could do that,’ said Duncan. ‘We are both competitive. Then there is the Quiz Night.’ Duncan and his training incumbent are experiencing the social energy of their parish.

The eighth theme concerned the place of reflection and reflective practice in ministry. Tony, an extravert deacon, said, 'I find it really hard to reflect on things.' Tony prefers to move from one activity to the next rather than to spend time in reflective mode. Tony's introvert incumbent has learnt to help him to explore the reflective side of life.

I say to him, take this out of your diary, take that out of your diary, and get some reflection written down.

Tony appreciates the challenge and acknowledges that his incumbent 'is good at making me do it.'

The ninth theme concerned the extravert's need for immediacy and for variety. Tony's introvert incumbent says that he knows what he wants to change in the parish and that he is very content to play the long game. He is patient to work progressively towards change. Tony, however, says that this approach frustrates him: 'I want to do it and do it now.' Tony's incumbent knows that Tony needs a variety of experiences in ministry and a sequence of challenges. He has already planned a month's placement in a prison and a month's placement in the forces.

The tenth theme of exhaustion from the extravert's perspective was introduced by Lucie, a high scoring extravert deacon. Lucie finds that her parish, run by an introvert incumbent, does not recognise the social needs of an extravert colleague. Lucie observed that as a team they did not have a Christmas social and that felt really odd. In her previous life Lucie had been a teacher and then, she said, 'We went out all the time.' Now in a team where she is the only extravert alongside five introvert colleagues, Lucie feels herself to be the odd one out. Most of all it is the Sunday pattern of services that drains Lucie, working in a multi-church benefice and moving swiftly from one church to the next. She says:

I find it really hard running between churches and not having time to get to know people. Because I was not having the social thing, it really drains me.

Lucie's training incumbent said that his preference would be to be an eight o'clock Christian. Lucie's ideal service is the 10.30 family service with lunch afterwards.

The eleventh theme concerned the sense of isolation and lack of inspiration that some extravert clergy experienced sitting in their study trying to prepare a sermon. It was Lucie again who recalled the energising experience of the training event during which clergy were invited to work together in type-alike groups to prepare material for preaching on the Sunday lectionary. For Lucie turning sermon preparation into a social event is not only stimulating, it is creative and productive.

The twelfth theme concerned some of the disparity in expectations between an introvert and an extravert working together in the relationship between curate and training incumbent. Joe, an extravert deacon, said that he longs to talk things out with his training incumbent. When he has finished a task he needs to think it through aloud and get immediate feedback. His training incumbent says that he finds this completely exhausting and longs for Joe to go away and to write his reflections down on paper. Then he could read them, reflect on whilst he reads, and give considered feedback.

Conclusion

The present study identified three research aims: to listen to the way in which clergy reflect on the implications of their personal preferences for introversion or for extraversion; to identify and analyse common themes that may emerge within such reflection; and to consider the implications of these common themes for the training, deployment, and pastoral care of the clergy.

The first research aim was met by working with a group of 15 curates and with 12 of their training incumbents. After exploring their personal preferences for introversion or for extraversion, curates and incumbents were invited to work in pairs to discuss the following task: What does talk about introversion and extraversion illuminate in the ministry of

incumbent and curate in the life of the parish? The reflections of these clergy on this theme were accessed in two ways: by inviting the clergy to make clear notes of their discussion that were made available to the researchers; and by inviting the clergy to make an oral presentation in plenary which could also be noted by the researchers.

The second research aim identified twelve common themes within the reflections of the clergy, six of which were voiced from the perspective of the introvert clergy and six of which were voiced from the perspective of the extravert clergy. These twelve themes confirmed the view that introvert clergy and extravert clergy experience and express ministry in distinctive ways. For introvert clergy the consistent demands of engagement with people are draining and lead to tiredness and exhaustion. The demands of the social side of parish life, especially dinner parties, can become burdensome. Extravert church members may become overbearing. The demands of the Sunday pattern of services may be draining. The need to command a repertoire of extravert skills may disguise the real self within. While recognising that perhaps too many of the established roles of parish ministry may have been designed with extraverts in mind, introverts remain keen to celebrate the unique qualities that they bring to ministry.

For extravert clergy there is a recognition that the social energy of parish life brings out the best in them. The downside, however, is that reflection and reflective practice in ministry may not come easily to the extravert who prefers activity and social engagement. Extraverts may begin to struggle in the absence of sufficient external stimulation and variety in ministry. Extraverts may begin to struggle in churches where the pattern of expectations is set by an introverted approach to ministry. Extraverts may feel frustrated and incapacitated without adequate opportunities to talk through the issues that are impacting their ministry. Extraverts may long for interaction with or conversation with others while planning sermons.

The third research question invited consideration of the implications of these common themes for the training, deployment and pastoral care of the clergy. The data suggest three main implications. First, the introvert clergy seem clear that many aspects of the clerical profession have been shaped with extravert aptitudes in mind. Clergy training needs to equip introvert candidates with a realistic understanding both of the demands that ministry may place on them and of the strategies they may employ to deal with such demands and to allow introverted space for recuperation. At the same time, clergy training needs to affirm the distinctive skills and aptitudes that introverts bring to ministry and find ways of enabling introverts to exercise and to enjoy these aspects of ministry.

Second, the extravert clergy seem clear that there are aspects of ministry that they too find difficult. Clergy training may need to equip extraverts to access the benefits of quiet reflection and of reflective practice. Clergy training needs to help extravert candidates appreciate and accept their need to talk things through in order to access their own deeper insight and understanding. They may benefit from setting up opportunities to discuss their work. They may benefit from interaction with others while planning services and preparing sermons. Extraverts may find silent retreats and quiet times difficult and benefit from exploring more socially engaged paths of spirituality.

Third, both training incumbents and curates reflected on the difficulties, tensions or misunderstandings that can arise when an introvert curate is paired with an extravert incumbent or when an extravert curate is paired with an introvert incumbent. If the aim of the curacy is to enable curates to learn alongside a more experienced and skilled practitioner, it may be wise for the Church to take more seriously the place of psychological orientations in shaping the expression and experience of ministry exercised by individual clergy. Such a consideration may suggest that introvert curates could be more effectively nurtured by introvert training incumbents and the extravert curates could be more effectively nurtured by

extravert training incumbents. Such an experience could be more rewarding for training incumbents and more affirming and enabling for curates.

The limitation with the present study is that it is based on data generated by just one group of curates and training incumbents. The scientific response to this limitation is for the study to be replicated by other research among other samples of clergy.

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