

For shy worshippers, church can be totally overwhelming

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LOS ANGELES (RNS)—If Jesus were to take a [Myers-Briggs personality test](#), would he rank as an introvert or an extrovert? He was, after all, popular with crowds, but he often retreated to pray in solitude.

As an undergrad, Daniel Perett wrestled with similar questions as a member of the evangelical InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Middlebury College. He soon discovered his introverted personality clashed with the group's prayer-and-share ethos.

"The expectation is if you really are having a spiritual experience, the first thing that you're going to do is share it very publicly," said Perett, 31, now a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame.

Pastor and author Adam McHugh is the author of the new book, *Introverts in the Church*. (RNS PHOTO/William Vasta/Claremont McKenna College)

In other words, "If the Holy Spirit were working in your life," you'd be talking about it— "You would be an extrovert," he said. But what Perett really needed most was time to process what was happening to him spiritually.

Perett insists evangelical Christianity—with a bigger-is-often-better strain deeply embedded in its DNA—is stacked against introverts like himself. And so, like other introverts, he began to develop coping methods rather than a deeper theology.

Perett started to speak in code. He sprinkled phrases like "God was

testing,” rather than “God was absent,” in his testimonials so that his peers would not realize he was actually trying to determine how—if at all—God was present in his life.

“It forces you to put on a spiritual show for everyone else,” he said.

Perett is far from the only Christian whose introverted personality has caused religious obstacles. Writer and pastor Adam McHugh has taken note and recently released a book called [*Introverts in the Church*](#).

“In my mind at the time, ideal pastors were gregarious, able to move through crowds effortlessly, able to quickly turn strangers into friends,” he writes in the introduction of the book published by InterVarsity Press.

But as an introvert himself, McHugh found the social demands of his job overwhelming, which led him to take a closer look at his specific personality type.

McHugh discovered that although introverts previously had been thought to be in the minority, more recent studies reveal introverts actually make up roughly half of the population. That doesn’t mean, however, that they’re always understood.

By definition, an introvert is someone who is energized by solitude rather than social interaction. An introvert might also love long intimate conversations; they aren’t necessarily shy, but they may very well dislike small talk. In short, introverts like to go deep, and they often like to do it alone.

As writer Jonathan Rauch described introversion for the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 2003, “introverts are people who find other people tiring.”

McHugh, for example, felt absolutely exhausted by all the retreats he was required to attend as an InterVarsity college minister in California.

Canadian Jamie Arpin-Ricci says he has endured similar frustrations as a pastor.

Arpin-Ricci, a Mennonite pastor in Winnipeg, Manitoba, said most Christians expect a pastor to be available at all times, which gives introverts like him and McHugh little of the much-needed downtime.

Arpin-Ricci said it's important not to fall into certain stereotypes—that introverts are antisocial, for example, or extroverts have plentiful but only shallow relationships. His church, the [Little Flowers Community](#), is intentionally community-led, giving him the freedom to hand off certain responsibilities—especially when he feels a more extroverted personality may be better suited to the task.

Donna Katagi, director of spiritual formation at [Cerritos \(Calif.\) Baptist Church](#), estimates her congregation is made up mostly of introverts who don't fit neatly into the category of demonstrative Christians that many believe define a truly spiritual person.

Although Katagi says her church engages in typical activities like refreshments after worship, she also says she's catered her spiritual formation program to meet the needs of her introverted congregation.

Outside of worship, Katagi says she'll break up members into smaller rather than larger groups to better facilitate discussion.

For his part, McHugh says he has learned to incorporate solitude during the day, and says he remains confident that introverts can make good Christian leaders.

"I had to just figure out my own rhythm," he said.