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# Leadership

## The Introverted Leader

Even if you struggle to be a "people person," you have much to offer the church.

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I am an introvert, and my personality type has fueled a meandering and bumpy journey that has led me in and out of Christian community, both as a layperson and as a pastor. This has been a journey of both self-discovery—as I have been learning how to make peace with my personality and to work out of it instead of against it—and of God-discovery—as I have been growing in my ability to see God's hand in my introverted life and ministry. On this journey I have been regularly accompanied by disappointment and hope, two companions that have worked together to push me onward.

## Temperament and Calling

I stand at a mailbox on a street corner in Princeton, New Jersey. As I stare at its familiar blue color, I wear only one winter glove, because the other ungloved hand clutches an envelope. It is a brisk afternoon, with the late winter winds gusting, negating the effects of the sun. New Jersey commuters, hoping to find a nonexistent shortcut through the married-seminary-student neighborhood, pass by me with puzzled glances at this scene.

It is the day that my potential for leadership in the Christian community has come to an end, without ever truly beginning. What I hold in my reddening hand is my resignation letter from the ordination process of my denomination. I have wrestled mightily with this process for four years, and just an hour earlier, I had resolved that I am not called to ordained ministry.

Eight years later, I have come to realize that my death matches in those days were not vocational per se but were primarily temperamental. Even before I began pastoral ministry, I was convinced that my personality excluded me from it. There was no room in ministry for someone of my disposition—or so I thought. In my mind at the time,

ideal pastors were gregarious, able to move through crowds effortlessly, and able to quickly turn strangers into friends. They could navigate diverse social circles and chat about any number of topics. They thrived in the presence of people and were energized by conversation and social interaction. Though they could work alone, their pulses quickened when they mingled among the people of their communities. They were charismatic and magnetic, capable of drawing all kinds of people to themselves by virtue of their likeability and able to persuade people to follow them based on charm alone. I saw them surrounded by eager church members, percolating with warmth, streaked with the admiration of their community.

I, by contrast, relished times of solitude, reflection and personal study. I enjoyed people, and I found satisfaction in depth of relationship and conversation, but even when I spent time with people I liked, I looked forward to moments of privacy. I found crowds draining. I could stand up in front of hundreds of people and preach a sermon without nervousness, but I often stumbled through the greeting time afterward because my energy reserves were dry.

Though I did not know this eight years ago, there is a label for this personality feature that I once thought crippled my potential for ministry: introversion. But more than my introverted temperament was involved in producing such agonizing doubts. Partly to blame was the one-dimensional image of leadership that I had constructed. There was an irresolvable conflict between that artificial image and the temperamental characteristics of introverts. I subconsciously believed that ministers and other Christian leaders needed a certain set of personality traits in order to thrive in ministry. I tried to beat and squeeze myself into a mold of leadership instead of becoming the kind of leader that God designed me to be.

Fortunately, disappointment has not been my only fellow traveler on this road. I have also been accompanied by hope: hope in the calling, healing, and transformative power of God. My journey has not been guided by my own heroism or impressive displays of faithfulness, but by God's sovereignty. The same mysterious force that seemed to prevent me from depositing my resignation that day has also been a constant voice calling me into church ministry, parachurch ministry, and chaplaincy. God is bringing me through a process of self-acceptance, both in terms of my introvert identity and also in terms of the gifts and contributions I bring to the Christian community.

### Hiding out with Moses

In the archetypal story of a reluctant leader ([Exodus 4:10-13](#)), Moses protests the call of God every time God's voice summons him. Though leaders of all personality types have balked at God's calling, Moses' personality and life exhibit the telltale signs of introversion. [Exodus 4:10](#) literally reads "I am not a man of words ... but I am heavy-tongued and heavy-mouthed." Most introverts can relate to the feeling of our tongues sticking to the floors of mouths, our lips straining to move. We have hesitated and stuttered, not out of torpor but out of the need to think before speaking. We have hoped, along with Moses, that God will excuse us from the harrowing task of

leadership because of our fears of failure and rejection, because of our nightmare of ineloquence on a public stage.

From the beginning of Moses' story, the narrative theme that stands out is that of hiding. Under the cover of two fierce midwives, Moses' mother looked into the eyes of her newborn son and knew she must hide him from the bloodthirsty Egyptians. After he became too big to conceal, she made an ark for him and hid him among the overgrowth of reeds along the river bank. Discovered, he was raised in the home of the Pharaoh's daughter until, one day, he came across a fellow Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian.

So Moses killed the Egyptian and then hid his body in the sand. After Pharaoh heard of this, he aimed to kill Moses, who fled and hid in a foreign land. Then, as a shepherd in Midian, Moses drove his flock "beyond the wilderness" ([Ex 3:1](#)). I get the sense that Moses was escaping as far away as he possibly could, a warrior turned shepherd, a leader turned alien, an introvert turned refugee. Even when the Lord appeared to him in a blaze of fire, with a voice declaring the transcendent Name, Moses hid behind his fears, and then behind the elocution and charisma of his brother, Aaron. Moses went before the Hebrew people and into Pharaoh's throne room clutching his brother's coattails.

As I look at my own leadership experiences and as I talk with introverted pastors, seminarians, and those considering leadership in some capacity in the church, I see a similar theme of hiding. We may hide in the shelter of our studies and in the warm embrace of our books, behind our lofty theologies and nuanced understandings of vocation and spirituality. We may conceal our true personalities behind extroverted personas, out of fear of not meeting the expectations of others—or of ourselves. Sometimes we play "the introvert card" in order to avoid taking a risk or doing something uncomfortable.

However, in more than a decade of Christian leadership I have come to see the significant contributions introverts make to others and have learned effective introverted models of leadership. So we must distinguish between our energy level for a task and our gifting for that same task. Just because we lose energy doing something does not necessarily indicate we are not a good fit for it. I am convinced that calling, not personality type, is the determinative factor in the formation and longevity of a leader. It was no coincidence that God met Moses in the very place that he tried to flee, nor was it accidental that Moses would later drive another flock, the people of Israel, into that same wilderness to the mountain of God. God's call sheds light on our darkest hiding places.

What stands out to me about my conversations with introverted pastors is their firm conviction that they labor in the power of God. They did not necessarily choose church ministry because they found a perfect match for their gifts or personality type. My friend Chris said, in spite of the fact he was operating out of weaknesses much of the time, "I still believe God has called me to pastoral ministry. I have had to conclude that

God may call some people into work for which they are not perfectly suited, for his greater glory."

When Moses objected to God at the burning bush, saying that he was a clumsy speaker, God did not disagree with him. The Lord did not say, "Not true, Moses, I've heard you speak and you inspired me! You're going places as a preacher!" He said "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak" ([Ex 4:12](#)). I will be with you. I will give you the words. These are the bedrock reassurances that God offers to those he calls to lead. Our leadership credentials are the wisdom and the Spirit of the Lord. God doesn't promise that leadership will be easy or always natural. God promises that his presence will go with those whom he calls, and in his presence is a power that transcends all human abilities. It is out of God's power, not self-power, that leaders minister to others.

### Thriving as an Introvert

Calling belongs to God, and it is the foundational reason why introverts venture into Christian leadership. A sense of vocation is what sustains us, and though we do not determine our vocation, we can learn how to protect it and to thrive in it through self-care, spiritual disciplines, thoughtfulness about how we expend our energy, and a healthy perspective on our role in the ministry of the church.

Perhaps the most vital ingredient to longevity in ministry for a leader is self-care. We devote so much time and energy to caring for the spiritual and emotional needs of others that we can neglect our own needs—both to our detriment and to the long-term detriment of those we care for. The less we pay attention to ourselves, the less we have to offer others over the long term.

Self-care must move in both an internal and external direction. Internally, introverted leaders must seek wholeness in their spiritual and emotional lives. Mother Teresa counseled her missionary sisters that "the interior must become the main power of the exterior." We need to cultivate our practice of spiritual disciplines, which for many introverts is a natural strength. In spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, writing, biblical meditation and fasting, we consciously place ourselves in the presence of God.

Many introverted pastors regularly take personal retreats. My colleague said that when she goes on a silent retreat, it takes 24 hours for the running thoughts in her head to dissipate. Another pastor would take a weeklong retreat every August at a nearby monastery in order to prepare spiritually for the fall and to start the exegetical work on his next sermon series.

A missionary friend of mine regularly takes four-day retreats to a Catholic abbey in the California desert, where she participates in their practice of the divine hours. She finds it easier to connect with God through silence, art, and ritual than through the chatty fellowship and unstructured worship of her church.

Our self-care must also move in an outward direction. Even though our internal process is incredibly valuable, there is clarity that comes from speaking out loud. God never intended for even the most introverted person to live life without connecting to others. Isolation is never an indicator of spiritual health. As introverted leaders, we need to surround ourselves with a small group of trusted people who are able to show us our blind spots and receive us without judgment.

There are many places where we can find the support that we need. Many introverted ministers enjoy relationships with introverted colleagues. People with shared experiences help normalize our experiences as introverts, and in simply trading stories and struggles, we find greater self-acceptance and strength. The therapy setting is also a valuable setting for introverted leaders. The one-on-one environment is a natural fit, and I have found that in therapy I am put in a situation where I, a habitual listener, am forced to speak about myself. The confidentiality and professional trust in the therapeutic setting enables me to open up the layers of my life that I don't generally show others. Given that introverts are prone to burnout faster than their extroverted counterparts, I would even say that regular therapy, spiritual direction, or some form of relationship with a trusted counselor should be mandatory for introverted pastors.

Mature introverted leaders have learned how to monitor their energy levels. They are experts in knowing how to save and restore their energy. Therefore, if introverts want endurance and joy in ministry and in their personal lives, we must be thoughtful about scheduling. When I was a hospice chaplain, I learned to space out my appointments with patients so that I would have recovery time between meetings. More importantly, I had to learn how to decline even appealing invitations when they interfered with my rhythms of self-care. To an introverted leader, the magic word may not be "please;" it may be "no." I know an introverted pastor and sought-after conference speaker who, during busy months, will preschedule "NOTHING" days into his calendar a few days per month when he bans himself from any events or meetings. He shares his calendar with a few trusted friends who hold him accountable to leave those days open.

However, even as we are intentional about our scheduling, we must leave room for the surprising work of God. Introverts can become so absorbed in our internal worlds that we miss the needs of others around us. Our scheduling and emotional boundaries must not preempt the divine interjections that shape so much of our identity and our work. We must remember that the events that form the foundation of our calling—the incarnation of the Son of God and his resurrection from the dead—were cosmic interruptions in a world that had grown callous to God's love.

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