

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

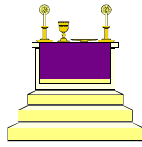
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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Personalities influence worship

Personality differences strongly influence how we picture God, how we recognize God's presence, and how we respond to God. That means our personality traits influence what kind of worship services we feel the need for. Other characteristics also influence that, and so do our beliefs about what God is like, but personality seems to have a big effect.



In this *Connections* I'm therefore asking you to look with me at some ways in which our personality traits can affect our worship needs. I'm using the terminology of the Myers-Briggs method, the most-used way of categorizing personality types. It describes personalities in terms of four pairs of characteristics. In each pair, neither trait is better or worse than the other, and we all need to use both of them at times to function most effectively, but we each use one more often and more comfortably than the other.

■ The outer world or the inner world

The first pair of characteristics, represented by the letters **E** and **I**, reflects our way of reacting to the world around us. **Extraverts** focus mainly on

the world of people, places, and things and are energized by their contact with it. **Introverts**

focus mainly on the inner world of thoughts and feelings instead. Being in the midst of people and interacting with groups of people requires effort for introverts. They find it more draining than energizing.

For worship, therefore, extraverts want to be with people and touch and speak to each other, and the more people, the better. They're likely to want lots of sound and activity, too. Celebration is their style, and when they want to express enthusiasm for a part of the service or for what they see God doing, they're likely to express it with applause and movement.



"Yuk!" for me, "Wonderful!" for others

After a worship service during which I've felt "Yuk!" and wanted to jump up and object to what I heard, others are often saying, "What a wonderful service!" This tells me that what I'd consider wonderful would leave many others cold or even make them stop coming.



Of the sixteen combinations possible from the four pairs of personality traits that the Myers-Briggs method describes, my combination occurs least, so the kind of worship service I'd find ideal might not appeal to many other people. And few churches can offer more than one or two different kinds, so I'm not likely to find worship services that fit my preferences.

Individualized corporate worship?



How important is that? Worship is giving ourselves, not being nurtured, so in a sense, personal preferences don't matter. The focus belongs on God, not on us. But in another sense personal characteristics matter a lot, because we can't give what we don't have. We can't give something that's not our real self.

What's the solution, then, for those of us for whom many parts of typical worship services are obstacles? Should we simply attend them anyway, to help make them available for the people who find them helpful?

Is it inappropriate to even consider individual preferences for corporate worship? Is it a contradiction in terms, to speak of what one *Connections* reader referred to as "individualized corporate worship"? If worship is corporate, maybe we shouldn't expect individual likes and dislikes to be considered. That's evidently how Christians functioned in earlier times. Have we simply become too picky about worship now, along with wanting six scents and nine colors and three textures to choose from when we buy bath soap? These questions are important to ask in our churches.



Many factors besides personality affect our worship wishes. Another important one is where we've been and where we now are in our faith journey. That's next month's *Connections* topic.

For many introverts, however, talking with people around them during the service, especially people they don't know, is uncomfortable and distracting. Being asked to hug or hold hands is a turn-



off. And applause, movement, and loud, bouncy music destroy the reverent atmosphere many introverts consider important. They're more inclined to express their appreciation to musicians or other participants by speaking or writing to them afterwards.

Quiet time for reflection during worship is important for introverts. Their minds are busy during such times, and their pencils may be busy, too, as they reflect by writing. But extraverts tend to think out loud instead, and to them, silence seems like wasted, boring time in which nothing is happening.

An introvert's worship wishes

As an introvert I wish for generous amounts of time for reflection during worship, upon entering and after the scripture reading and the sermon. I'd like instrumental music during some of these times, but silence during others.

I wish all worshipers would enter silently, and on entering I'd like to get a printed handout with a thought-provoking quote to reflect on. One side would be blank for writing thoughts or questions that come to mind during the service. The handout could also announce church activities and joys and concerns, which I'd rather not have announced orally. Last-minute information could be posted on a board at the entrance.



During worship I don't want to be asked to greet the people around me, discuss anything with them, or hold hands with them during prayer. I may give a hug or extend a hand to a fellow worshiper, but silently and by my choice.



Wishes that contradict each other

Worship planners obviously have a dilemma here. What many extraverts consider essential is a hindrance for many introverts. Extraverts make up about 75% of the U.S. population, so they're likely to see what they want as what everyone wants. And if a church can provide only one kind of worship, it understandably will choose what extraverts prefer.

■ The trees or the forest



The Myers-Briggs system uses **N** and **S** to represent a second pair of personality characteristics, which it calls **iNtuition** (represented by N because I is used for introversion) and **Sensing**. In receiving information from the world around them, intuitive people see patterns. They notice the layout of the forest more than they notice features of its individual trees. They see in an all-at-once way that they often can't give specific reasons for, and they're likely to use metaphorical, symbolic, figurative language to describe what they see.

To the people Myers-Briggs calls sensing types, the conclusions that N people come to often seem baseless, and the language Ns use often seems meaningless. Sensing types focus on details and take in pieces of information one at a time, in order, starting at the beginning. They tend to think in literal language, not in symbols and metaphors. Touches, tastes, smells, and sights speak strongly to them.

The U.S. population is about 75% sensing types and only 25% intuitives. I wonder if this distribution contributes to the fact that so many members of our congregations see most of the words of rituals, creeds, and scripture as literal accounts of historical events.



■ Personal or logical

Myers-Briggs uses **F** and **T** to represent **Feeling** and **Thinking**, another pair of characteristics that heavily influence much of what happens in churches. F people tend to evaluate things mainly on the basis of how they will affect the individuals involved, while Ts want to be logical and objective. Thinking-type people are more likely to look at how a certain decision or policy will affect the most people, rather than how it will affect the particular people they know and are close to personally.

Fs are strongly influenced by personal stories, but for Ts, what matters more is likely to be whether what they hear is interesting, seems reasonable, and makes them think. To reach the Ts in our midst, many of whom we're now turning off, we'd probably have to start expressing our message in ways that seem more logical and reasonable to them.



These two traits are equally distributed in the U.S. population, but most churches have many more Fs than Ts. Thus many pastors find that when members say a sermon was especially good, that often means it moved them to tears. What Fs appreciate most in hymns and sermons, however, may seem like mere sentimentality to Ts. And the shortage of Ts in churches means we can easily miss their needed viewpoint.



An NT's worship wishes

As an N and a T, I find the meanings of words very important, and I see significance in how people use words without realizing what they're really saying. My ideal service wouldn't include outdated words like "thee" and "wouldst," or words that give unrealistic impressions of God, as if God were literally a person and especially a male person. It wouldn't refer to Jesus as sweet or as best friend. It would speak about Jesus and God in today's words and in ways consistent with today's knowledge.

Hearing ideas and beliefs expressed in unexpected words and in a variety of ways makes me think about what's being said, and for me that's important for worship, so repetition of the same words in every service hinders worship for me. Although I know short, repetitive phrases can be lenses through which to see God, my ideal service wouldn't include rote, dated features like the Gloria Patri, Apostles' Creed, or Doxology. In fact, it wouldn't include anything to recite or any sung responses.



In my ideal worship the sermon would be a short thought-provoking talk relating Christian beliefs to a current event or issue. Here's how a *Connections* reader described such talks given by a favorite pas-

tor. "He always seemed to be working out something that he himself was pondering about faith or practice or what it means to be human."

My ideal worship service would be followed immediately by a gathering for discussing questions raised by the service's content or attenders' reflections on it, and other faith-related topics. That would be real community for me, the "little church" I long for within the "big church" but rarely find.



■ Open-ended or nailed down

The fourth pair of characteristics Myers-Briggs labels is represented by **J** and **P**. **J** stands for **Judging**, but it may more accurately be called decision-making. A **J** person wants to decide and take action, not to keep waiting a long time for more and more information. In contrast, a **P**—for **Perceiving**, also a rather misleading label—doesn't want to close the door too quickly and miss possibilities that haven't yet been considered. Like **F** and **T**, these two traits are about evenly distributed in the U.S.



We need the missing types

If we want to reach people of all personality types and benefit from all the traits that we need and God provides, we must appreciate and pay attention to the views of the types that are under-represented in our churches. Knowing that we have fewer introverts and that they aren't likely to speak up as much as extraverts, we need to ask about their worship needs. Knowing that we have a disproportionately small number of Ts, in our fear of hurting anyone's feelings we must be careful not to ignore the need for reason and logic that Ts notice.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

The combination of S and J traits creates a temperament strongly oriented to tradition, history, obedience to official authority, and adherence to standard operating procedures. The institutional church emphasizes these features, so a disproportionately large number of people with this temperament are drawn to it. Thus in the church we need to make deliberate efforts to listen also to our members and to outsiders of the other temperaments, which are under-represented in most congregations. We need to hear from the people who recognize and see the implications of trends at work in society. We need to hear from the people who focus more on the future

than on the past, and those who see the need for experiment, nonconformity, and change.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.
—Romans 12:6

It's important for our churches to hear from people of all personality types and to help them all find suitable opportunities for ministry, real community, and worship. Several nearby churches might join forces to provide the kind of worship services, studies, and discussion groups that people of the less-plentiful types need. All types are God's gifts, so it's important for us to appreciate, nurture, and welcome them all.

Barbara



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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To read more about personality types . . .

Please Understand Me, by David Keirse and Marilyn Bates (Prometheus Nemesis; 1978 and 1998)

Personality Type in Congregations, by Lynne M. Baab (Alban Institute, 1998)



Type Talk, by Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen (Delacorte, 1988)

Discover Your Spiritual Type, by Corinne Ware (Alban Institute, 1995)

If you'd like to read an issue of *Connections* in which I described my life-changing discovery of personality types, see the [June 1993 Connections](#) on my web site, or let me know and I'll mail you a paper copy.

The missing music

I love music but I include little music in what I describe here as my ideal worship service. Why?

I'd prefer leaving out hymns, anthems, and contemporary Christian songs because so many of them have all-masculine and out-dated words that I find offensive.



The beauty of classical music reveals God and expresses faith for me, but few of the choral and instrumental works that especially fill that role for me would fit the length and style of the meditative service I'd prefer, so I'd rather hear or sing those works in other settings.