



Introverts in the Church of Jesus Christ | An Interview with Adam McHugh

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Kurt Francom: Today we are communicating with Adam McHugh in California. How are you, Adam?

Adam McHugh: Doing very well. How about yourself?

Kurt Francom: Very good. Did I say your last name correctly?

Adam McHugh: You got it.

Kurt Francom: All right. Very nice, very nice. Now, you are, tell us a little bit about what we need to know about you. The big thing I guess on this podcast, we generally have LDS or Mormons on as guests, but you are not a Mormon. So what are you?

Adam McHugh: It is true. I am an ordained Presbyterian minister. Though in truth I go to an Episcopal church.

Kurt Francom: Nice.

Adam McHugh: But I was ordained in the Presbyterian church about 12 years ago.

Kurt Francom: Nice. And so what is the, when you say you're ordained, what does that mean? Does that mean you went to seminary for a while or what does that even mean?

Adam McHugh: It means they made me jump through about a thousand hoops, is basically what that means. I went to Princeton theological seminary and that is required for ordination, not Princeton. But going to seminary, getting a master's of divinity. I also stuck around for another year and got a masters of theology and Greek New Testament

as well and had to do 2 church internships and one internship at a hospital as a chaplain, was actually very instrumental in my future calling. And yeah. And then I had to go to about a thousand meetings in order to get approved.

Kurt Francom: Wow. Wow. Intense.

Adam McHugh: It was a, I would never do it again. I'm glad I was young when I went through all that because now it sounds exhausting.

Kurt Francom: So does that mean, I mean, your day to day or are you some type of pastor to a church or what's your day to day job now?

Adam McHugh: I have the title now, you know, writer and speaker and retreat leader is really how I identify myself and certainly connected to churches and all that. So certified spiritual director as well, but I don't have a formal preaching ministry or not working full time.

Kurt Francom: And is that the typical path for someone who's gone through the different education you've gone to, that they end up with, some, running some type of a church or—

Adam McHugh: Usually or else, you know, working as a chaplain of some kind, which I did for a few years. But generally, you know, a Presbyterian minister is going to be a minister at a particular church and you're, it's not like other denominations where you move around from church to church, you sort of stay in one place and you're hired more like a regular person and you move on more like a sort of a regular job. It's, some churches, you know, you stay three years and then they moved somewhere else. It's not like that.

Kurt Francom: Nice, nice. So what is your experience with Mormons? I hope nothing negative.

Adam McHugh: Nothing negative. My, I have an aunt and cousins that, I grew up in Seattle, and we all grew up in, we're all in Seattle. And then when I was about 14, my aunt and uncle and my cousins who are really my best friends at the time, moved to Boise, Idaho, and got pretty well, and got connected pretty quickly with the Mormon church. And so that's really the extent of my experience with the Mormon church. And when they moved to a new place and that community was really the first to reach out to them and I know that they felt very embraced by that.

Kurt Francom: Oh, nice. So they're pretty devout at this point in the church?

Adam McHugh: They are, they are, you know, they've had, their ups and downs as we all do in our faith. So yeah, absolutely. They're very well connected.

Kurt Francom: Nice. Now the reason I initially reached out to you for this interview is you are the author of a book called *Introverts in the Church: Finding our Place in an Extroverted Culture*. And now what led you to writing this book? I think it's fantastic, inspired book that needs, needed to be written. So what led you to the point of writing it?

Adam McHugh: You know, honestly it was, it started out as very personal. It was almost kind of a self apologetic to begin with, so I, it was especially as I, so I worked in a church shortly after seminary and then after that, I really love college students. And so I worked as a college campus minister at the Claremont colleges in Southern California for 3 or 4 years.... That was where I really, I knew that I was on the introverted side of things. I always knew that I needed solitude to recharge and then I was a little bit quieter than some people, especially in new situations, but it was leading these incredibly energetic college students, with all of the social demands of being on a college campus, that made me really realize how much that shaped how I live and act and communicate. And it was a, it was a bit of a struggle to be honest with you. Just the social demands of campus minister that don't have quite the same boundaries that working in churches does. And so that was a big part of it. when I realized I'm super exhausted all the time. What is happening here? I couldn't figure it out and then, but then at the same time, I was leading a group of student leaders and it turned out that a lot of them were introverts as well, which was surprising to me. I hadn't been the one that had, hadn't been the one that had chosen them for that team I inherited that, they turned out to be actually mostly introverted and so they were having a lot of the same issues and a lot of the same questions that I was. And so it kind of became this, you know, this kind of experimental breeding ground for how to lead and communicate and minister and, you know, share your faith as an introvert. And that's really where the book introverts in the Church was born.

Kurt Francom: Yeah. So is this something that you wrote on the side with no intention of it being a book or did it naturally developed that way?

Adam McHugh: Oh it was a dream and ambition of mine for a long time to get published. So I had every intention on getting it published and I was, had a connection with an editor at Intervarsity Press in Chicago. And so it was always my intention. When I first sent in a book proposal, it was exclusively about introverts and leadership, ministry specifically. They said no to that which was crushing. But then I came back as more of a broader, more of a broader look at introversion in church culture. So not just, I have a lot on leadership, but also sharing your faith and introverts in community, introverted spirituality and just introverts in church in general. And so it became a much broader book which I'm grateful for because I think it's a better focus as a result of that.

Kurt Francom: Nice, nice. And I read the book and really enjoyed it and had several highlights and we'll hit on a few of those as we go through this. But I guess I've thought about this concept of introverts a lot, just in the LDS culture, different traditions we have. Sometimes they don't play well to introverts and then there's others that I think really do play well to introverts. But for you personally, you know, well I guess I consider myself an introvert. Not that I've taken a personality test or anything, and I'm not

assuming you have either, but what can you tell us about what an introvert is and how you started to begin to classify yourself as an introvert?

Adam McHugh: Yeah. There are a bunch of different ways to look at this. The most general way to say it is introversion is an inward orientation, whereas extroversion is an outward orientation. And it's really important to just realize that it's, introversion and extroversion is not an either or within, it's not a dichotomy. You're not either an introvert or an extrovert, though that's the language we often use just for simplicity's sake, but we all have the inward direction in our lives. and we all have the outward direction orientation in our lives and it's a continuum. It's a line and you sort of, your tendency is to fall on one side or the other, you feel most at home in a particular place. And so for me, sort of my inner world, my inner thoughts, impulses, feelings, impressions, that's where I feel most at home where I feel most comfortable. Whereas moving in that outward direction feels a little bit like leaving home for me. I'm capable of it and you know, when you're in the industry long enough, you have to learn how to do it well, but that still feels like walking foreign land for me, whereas I'm most at home with my inner world.... And then there's a few more specific characteristics of introversion and the one that usually gets the most attention is the question that drives it is, how do you refuel, given that we all have a finite amount of energy, where do you find your energy? How do you recharge it? And for introverts, it has to do with being in solitude. I can be out in the world interacting with people, talking to other people, having, you know, different experiences, but that drains my energy. And so I have to come back into myself, into privacy and solitude or into conversation, you know, with a really close friend or family member in order to refuel. And that's a big part, of introverts are, if you will, by solitude. Whereas extroverts, you know they can be, they can enjoy being by themselves, they can enjoy privacy, but too much of that is going to leave them feeling haggard and tired, and so they actually get more energy as they're out among people in the external world and you know, you go to an party and you can sort of identify the introverts, maybe not right away, but you can identify them about an hour later because they're starting to look tired, they're starting to retreat to the fringes, whereas the extrovert are getting louder and more excitable and more energetic and so that's the big part. The big distinction. The other one would be how we process information. Introverts tend to go quiet when they're given new information and they process silently and they think before they speak. Whereas extroverts tend to process out loud. They talk through things and you kind of, you hear and see their process a lot more than you do with introverts. And so it's often been said that introverts think in order to speak. Whereas extroverts speaking in order to think.

Kurt Francom: Love that. And it's the stereotype is that introverts are the shy ones, right? But as you said, you quote Susan Cain who's the author of *Quiet*, another fantastic book

on introverts. but you quote her as that introverts are not anti social, but they're differently social.

Adam McHugh: Yeah, I really liked that part of her book. There's a lot of stereotypes that go along with, with introverts that were shy or reclusive or were misanthropic that we don't like people. And that we just, weren't turtles that just seemed to come out of our, out of our shells or that we have social anxiety and of course introverts can have all of that, but that's not the proper density of an introvert. I'm an introvert. I'm not shy. I don't have social anxiety of not inclusive, but you know, obviously when you're introverted and you're misunderstood, that can lead to other issues as well. But that's not the proper definition of introversion. So Susan Cain says, we're differently social, which means we may prefer a fewer number of friends. We may prefer less active, less stimulation in our environments, but we're not anti social. We like people, we love people. And we love people very deeply, especially when we get to know them really well.

Kurt Francom: Yeah. And I would relate to that as well. I think if individuals saw me in a public setting and especially when I served as a bishop, it was like, you know, I didn't mind working the room. I didn't mind speaking. I didn't mind those things. But by the end of the day I was exhausted and going home, it just, I just loved being at home in my own bubble, doing my own thing and refueling that way. Right?

Adam McHugh: Absolutely. And then for me, you know, when I was working at a church and I was preaching every Sunday, you have that three or four hours on Sunday morning where you have, you know you're on. And there's something about being in the role that sort of gives you permission to do it. And people know like, OK, he's going to now, you know, introduce himself to people because he's the pastor, and there's something about that that's kind of empowering. But then I would go home and take like a two hour nap afterwards. I would just be exhausted afterwards.

Kurt Francom: Yeah, yeah. That's a great way to put it. So from your faith experience, what's the problem that introverts, what's the friction, that introverts experience at Church?

Adam McHugh: I think the main problem, and it's a much bigger problem than people realize. And everyone immediately, I'm not sure what happens in the LDS church, but in a lot of Protestant churches, there's the, this sort of informal greeting time somewhere in the middle of the worship service.... Do you have that in Mormon churches, where you'd like to turn to your neighbor and greet each other?

Kurt Francom: Nothing like formal that's maybe you know, that the bishop or someone would say to do, but there's definitely like the five or 10 minutes before sacrament meeting starts where people are either, you know, in their pew by themselves and maybe members of the Bishopric are going around shaking hands. So, but it's not necessarily a formal, you know, activity.

Adam McHugh: Got it. Well, in a lot of Protestant churches, there's this, turn to your neighbor part, right in the middle of the worship Service. It might come like after announcements or something like that. And that's what all, whenever I talk about this topic, that's what always gets the attention. People you know, introverts are like, that's my least favorite part. Like I'll go to the bathroom in the middle of that. Like it's so dreadful. And that's sort of becomes this lightning rod that gets the attention of the issue. But I think it's so, if we move away from that, it's a much larger issue and the main problem is in my experience and the experience of a lot of introverts, we conceive of the faith as, in a very extroverted way. And if you think about, you know, what are some of the ideal attributes of a believer in the communities that I've been a part of? It's someone who's gregarious, someone who is very eager to meet new people, to join new activities, to host people in their homes. Maybe someone who leaps into leadership very quickly and very easily and is just active and moving and all of that. And that becomes this ideal that we hold up as here's the ideal Christian. And what about those of us though, who don't actually fit that? And so we end up, it's not just a feeling of feeling kind of excluded, it's a feeling that somehow I am inadequate spiritually, that my faith isn't strong and if my faith were stronger than I would be more like that person. And that to me is the main issue that we face as introverts in churches. And so that's why I've spent the last few years talking about this, trying to say there are different ways to interact. There are different ways to express our faith and to participate in church communities that are equally faithful but different.

Kurt Francom: Yeah. And in the book you talk about this concept in the context of personal vulnerability. And you said that some churches also gauge commandment by the amount of personal vulnerability a person shows. Evangelicals really like to share. And that really jumped out to me because in the LDS faith, so every first Sunday is, during our traditional sacrament meeting, we have what's called fast and testimony meetings. So we have, you know, the announcements, we'll do some ward business if we need to. And then we have— an open mic, essentially, where anyone can come up and share their testimony or their feelings about the gospel. And it's always interesting to see who goes up, who doesn't, and sometimes there's almost this unspoken pressure that if you're really spiritual, you'll get up and share, and if you never do, people wonder about you.

Adam McHugh: Absolutely. That is so common across different traditions. There's this sense that public sharing is equated with spiritual maturity or depth, and if you're not comfortable with that, it can feel like you're lacking in some way. But for many introverts, that's just not how they process or express their faith. It's not about a lack of conviction or spirituality; it's just a different way of engaging.

Kurt Francom: Right, and I've noticed that sometimes the people who are most thoughtful and deep in their faith are the ones who are least likely to get up and speak in

a public setting. They might share profound things in a one-on-one conversation, but that doesn't always translate to the group.

Adam McHugh: Exactly. I think that's one of the big misunderstandings. We assume that the loudest voices or the most public expressions are the most authentic, but that's not always the case. Introverts often prefer depth over breadth, so they might have a few close relationships where they share deeply, but they're not going to be the ones volunteering for every activity or speaking at every meeting.

Kurt Francom: So what advice would you give to church leaders or members who want to make their congregations more welcoming for introverts?

Adam McHugh: I think, first and foremost, it's about recognizing and valuing different ways of participating. Not everyone is going to want to lead a group, or pray out loud, or share their testimony in front of a crowd. So create space for quieter forms of engagement—maybe small groups, written reflections, or opportunities for service that don't require being in the spotlight.

Kurt Francom: That's great advice. I think sometimes we unintentionally make people feel like they have to fit a certain mold to be fully included.

Adam McHugh: Absolutely. And I'd also encourage leaders to reach out personally to those who are quieter. Sometimes introverts just need to know that their presence is valued, even if they're not the most visible. Ask them how they'd like to contribute, and respect their boundaries.

Kurt Francom: That's so important. I know for myself, I've appreciated leaders who recognized my strengths and didn't pressure me to be someone I'm not.

Adam McHugh: Yes, and I think when we do that, we get a much richer, more authentic community. We need both introverts and extroverts, and when we make room for different personalities, everyone benefits.

Kurt Francom: I love that. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share—maybe a message for introverts who might be struggling in their faith community?

Adam McHugh: I'd just say, you're not alone. There are so many others who feel the same way, even if they're not talking about it. Your way of being and believing is valid and needed. Don't feel like you have to change your personality to fit in—find ways to serve and connect that feel authentic to you.

Kurt Francom: That's a wonderful message. Thank you so much, Adam, for your time and your insights. This has been really helpful.

Adam McHugh: Thank you, Kurt. It's been a pleasure.