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Linking clergy psychological type profile and church growth
in the Diocese of Chester: A pilot study

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Abstract

Two recent studies (one in England and one in Australia) have linked church growth and church decline with the psychological type profile of church leaders. The present study, conducted within the Diocese of Chester, compares the psychological type profile of two groups of clergy who had served in the same parishes for five years or more: 29 leading declining churches and 19 leading growing churches. The data found a significantly higher preference for perceiving among those leading growing churches, although there were no significant differences in terms of the orientations, the perceiving process, or the judging process.

Keywords: church growth, church decline, clergy studies, psychological type theory

Introduction

Psychological type theory has become increasingly visible within the past two decades in congregational studies and in clergy studies within the two fields of the empirical psychology of religion and empirical theology (see Francis, 2009; Ross, 2011; Village, 2011; Lewis, 2012, 2015). Psychological type theory has its roots in the pioneering work of Jung (1971) and has been developed and extended in a variety of ways, particularly through the operationalisation of psychological type constructs by instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). At its heart psychological type theory distinguishes between two core mental processes: the perceiving process that is concerned with gathering information and the judging process that is concerned with evaluating information. According to psychological type theory each of these two processes is expressed through two contrasting functions. The perceiving process (P) is expressed through sensing (S) or intuition (N). The judging process (J) is expressed through thinking (T) or feeling (F). Psychological type theory also distinguishes between two orientations or sources of psychological energy and between two attitudes or approaches to the external world. The two sources of psychological energy are styled introversion (I) and extraversion (E). The two attitudes toward the external world are styled judging (J) or perceiving (P), reflecting the psychological process directed to the external world.

Two recent studies, one in Australia and one in England, have reported evidence to link the psychological type profile of church leaders with church growth and church decline. In the first study, Kaldor and McLean (2009), working within the context of the Australian National Church Life Survey found that:

Churches that are growing numerically or where there is an owned vision for the future are more likely to be led by leaders who are extraverted, intuitive and, to a

lesser extent, with a perceiving approach to the world. This profile is the opposite to the most common personality type among church leaders. (Kaldor & McLean, 2009, p. 151)

In the second study, Voas and Watt (2014), working within the context of the Church Growth Research Programme initiated by the Church of England, found that extraversion and intuition served as significant predictors of church growth. While 10% of clergy who preferred introversion and sensing reported substantial church growth, the proportion rose to 31% of clergy who preferred extraversion and intuition. While 30% of clergy who preferred introversion and sensing reported church decline, the proportion fell to 15% of clergy who preferred extraversion and intuition. Voas and Watt (2014) concluded:

To put it another way, I-S clergy among our respondents are three times as likely to preside over decline as substantial growth; E-N clergy are twice as likely to experience substantial growth as decline. (Voas & Watt, 2014, p. 56)

These findings that church growth is associated with extraversion rather than introversion, with intuition rather than sensing, and with perceiving rather than judging are consistent with the following model of ministry. Extravert clergy may be more adept than introvert clergy at engaging others in social interaction or at energising social institutions. Growing churches may need to engage new people and energise their ongoing congregational commitment. Intuitive clergy may be more adept than sensing clergy at grasping the bigger vision for the direction in which the local church should or could be led. Growing churches may need an inspiring vision to engage the involvement and commitment of new participants. Perceiving type clergy may be more adept than judging type clergy at displaying flexibility and adaptability to new and changing opportunities. Growing churches may need a flexible style of leadership that can recognise and respond to changing dynamics introduced to a community by new members and new participants.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to test the power of psychological type theory to predict patterns of church growth and church decline in one Anglican Diocese when added rigour is added to the research design in two ways. The first refinement is to restrict the study to parishes which have been served by the same priest for five years or more. The second refinement is to distinguish between declining and growing churches on the basis of carefully managed statistics within the Diocese. In this context parishes can be assigned to three categories: growth showing an increase over a five year period; decline showing a decrease over a five year period; and static falling between the other two categories.

There are, nonetheless, two limitations with this model. First, within a Diocese of around 200 clergy, a 50% response to a personality measure leaves a sample of around 100, and a number of the participants may not have been in post for at least five years, reducing further the statistical power of the analysis. Second, the model does not allow for control variables.

Method

Procedure

The *Ministry Today* survey was delivered by post to 203 clergy serving in the Anglican Diocese of Chester in the north of England. Participation was voluntary and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The survey comprised eight sections, including several standard and recognised instruments. Of the 203 surveys distributed, 104 were returned of which 99 were thoroughly completed and useful for the analysis undertaken in the present paper.

Participants

Of the 99 clergy whose data were analysed in the present study, 24 were female and 75 were male; 3 were in their thirties, 20 in their forties, 51 in their fifties and 25 in their sixties; 80 were married, 12 were single, 2 were widows, 2 were divorced, and 3 were divorced and remarried.

Measure

Psychological type was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS: Francis, 2005). This is a 40-item instrument comprising four sets of 10 forced-choice items related to each of the four components of psychological type: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). Participants were asked for each pair of characteristics to check the 'box next to that characteristic which is closer to the real you, even if you feel both characteristics apply to you. Tick the characteristics that reflect the real you, even if other people see you differently'.

Church growth and church decline were assessed by comparing the mean of the average Sunday attendance reported for the two years 2007 and 2008 with the mean of the average Sunday attendance reported for the two years 2011 and 2012.

Data analysis

Using SPSS, t-tests were employed to test the differences between the mean scores recorded on the scales of extraversion, sensing, thinking and judging recorded by clergy leading growing churches and clergy leading declining churches.

Results

Of the 99 clergy who completed the psychological type profile, 63 had been serving in the same parish for at least five years. Of these 63 clergy, 12 were leading static churches, 19 were leading growing churches, and 32 were leading declining churches.

As well as generating the dichotomous type categories, the Francis Psychological Type Scales also generate four continuous scale scores: extraversion with low scores representing introversion; sensing with low scores representing intuition; thinking with low scores representing feeling; and judging with low scores representing perceiving. These ten-item scales recorded the following alpha coefficients of internal consistency reliability: extraversion, .83; sensing, .74; thinking, .68; and judging, .81.

- insert table 1 about here -

Table one presents the mean scale scores of extraversion, sensing, thinking and judging for two categories of churches: growing (N = 19) and declining (N = 32). These data demonstrate that, compared with the declining churches, the clergy leading growing churches recorded significantly lower judging scores, and by implication significantly higher perceiving scores. No significant differences were recorded on the other three indices.

Conclusion

Building on the findings reported by Kaldor and McLean (2009) in Australia and by Voas and Watt (2014) in England, this study set out to explore the power of psychological type theory to predict patterns of church growth and decline in one Anglican Diocese where local information could both identify the clergy who had served the same parish for at least five years and also be sure of the quality of the data on the basis of which distinction was made between declining churches, static churches, and growing churches. The bivariate analyses reported in table 1 confirm the basic conclusion of the previous two studies that psychological type theory serves as an effective predictor of church growth and church decline. However, the components of psychological type theory active in this prediction emerge somewhat differently in this study from the way in which they emerged in the previous two studies.

The picture that emerges from the present study places the weight on the process that is used in the outside world. Clergy who use their preferred perceiving function in the outside world (sensing or intuition) are more likely to be leading growing churches than clergy who use their preferred judging function in the outside world (thinking or feeling). These are the clergy who are alert to their changing and shifting environment (whether focusing on data or on ideas) and who are willing to delay decision-making in favour of getting a fuller and richer picture or vision. It is possibly this openness and flexibility that allows their churches to develop and grow.

The different result from that found in the previous studies may be a consequence of the way in which the research question was tightened and focused in the present study. First, data were only taken into account from clergy who had been in the same parish for at least five years, thus allowing mature relationships to emerge. It could be that the apparent advantage of extraverts in the other studies may be a consequence of extraverts building relationships more quickly than introverts. It could be that the apparent advantage of intuitive types in the other two studies may be a consequence of intuitive types creating vision for their ministry more quickly than sensing types. Second, the evidence for growth or decline was calculated on the basis of relatively reliable and robust data gathered within the Diocese rather than on self-assessments offered by the clergy.

What the present study has demonstrated is an intriguing outcome from a carefully designed analysis. The weakness with the study concerns the small sample size and the restriction of the sample to one diocese. These are, however, limitations that could be addressed by systematic replication of the research in other locations.

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Table 1

Psychological type by church growth and decline

	Decline		Growth		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Extraversion	4.76	2.95	5.53	3.10	0.9	NS
Sensing	5.38	2.44	4.58	2.17	1.2	NS
Thinking	5.48	2.84	5.11	2.02	0.5	NS
Judging	8.79	2.69	6.63	2.71	2.7	.01

Note: Declining churches, N = 29; Growing churches, N = 19