

BELONGING

Compiled by Rev. Todd Freeman, 2024

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." - Matthew 25:35

"The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature...Every one longs for intimacy and dreams of a nest of belonging in which one is embraced, seen, and loved." -John O'Donohue

"Belonging is a felt sense in our bodies of safety, power, wholeness, and welcome. It is a relational quality that can be cultivated and practiced." -Brian Stout

"Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance."
- Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

"Belonging is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group. It is when an individual can bring their authentic self to [church]. When [members and visitors] feel like they don't belong, their [participation] and their personal lives suffer. Creating genuine feelings of belonging for all is a critical factor in improving engagement. It also helps support [mission and ministry] goals."
(Adapted from "Diversity and Inclusion: Sense of Belonging" at Cornell University.)

"Despite its importance, many people struggle to feel a sense of belonging. Socially, a significant portion of people suffer from social isolation, loneliness, and a lack of connection to others... Struggles to belong are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically excluded from mainstream culture." (NIH - National Institutes of Health; National Library of Medicine.)

Actions and initiatives

("Diversity and Inclusion: Sense of Belonging" at Cornell University.)

- **Create intentional connections.**

Bringing people together can provide an environment where people feel they belong.

- **Help build trusting relationships.**

- **Invite opinions and perspectives into the conversation.**

- **Engage in purposeful storytelling.**

Encourage [church participants] to share their individual stories. Understanding aspects of another person's story can dissolve interpersonal barriers and help show the many layers, dimensions, and experiences about a person we otherwise would not know. It helps people be seen.

A quantifiable definition that states we belong at [church] when we are: -Harvard Business Review

1. **Seen** for our unique contributions; recognized and respected Coqual
2. **Connected** to [others at church]; authentic social interactions with others
3. **Supported** in our work; given what we need to get the work done [in the life, mission, and ministry of the church]
4. **Proud** of your work and your organization's values and purpose; aligned with its vision

CREATING COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING

– from the **TIES Center**, developed for schools to enhance belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The hope is to translate this from a school setting into a church setting. <https://tiescenter.org>

Dimensions of Belonging

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/introduction#Dimensions-of-Belonging>

Belonging is experienced when [members and visitors, children and adults] are present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed.

Everyone wants to be valued and have a sense of belonging in their community. The need for valued belonging is true for [members and visitors, children and adults] in a [church] community as well. Although belonging is equally important for all [people], [those who seem “different”] are less likely to experience a deep sense of belonging.

Developed to directly address the creation of [church] communities in which each and every [person] is included in all aspects of [church] life, *Creating Communities of Belonging*...describes ten dimensions of belonging.



Belonging Reflection Tool



Although individuals can use this reflection tool, it is designed for collaborative reflection. To the greatest extent possible, talk with and listen to others at your [church]. For each of the ten dimensions of belonging, **reflect on what you are doing well and what could be done better or differently**. To ensure this reflection leads to observable action, agree on **taking at least three actionable steps** that will make a noticeable difference in promoting inclusion and belonging at your [church].

PRESENT

Belonging begins with presence. It is hard to feel like you belong if you are never or rarely part of the array of activities and events that make up the life of a community. **To be present is to be involved [every Sunday] in the same places as everyone else in your [church].** It means being part of the everyday fabric of [church] life—just like anybody else.

When [members and visitors] are present together, they are more likely to get to know one another, accept one another, feel comfortable around one another, and build relationships with one another. This is sometimes called the “**proximity effect.**” The more [people] come into contact with one another, the more likely it is that their interactions will cultivate a relationship. Although there is much more to belonging than merely sharing the same space, being present is a necessary starting point.

Questions for Reflection

- Think about the relationships you have, both with close friends and acquaintances. How has being in proximity to one another (being present in the same spaces together) been part of helping these relationships form?
- Look around your [church] building this week. Are [all people] a part of the everyday fabric of your [church]? What tells you that this is or is not the case?
- Talk with others at your [church]. What are the barriers to presence that they notice? These might be physical barriers, attitudinal barriers, or practice barriers.
- Make an action plan for your [church]. What steps can you take—individually and with others—to help [everyone] have a presence in [the sanctuary, Fellowship Hall], classrooms, hallways, and other [church] settings?

INVITED

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/invited>

There is something quite powerful about being picked by someone else. It is encouraging to know that others want to be in your midst; that your [church] is desired or even needed. ***To be invited is to have your presence or participation sought out by another person.*** Being invited involves being considered—and then pursued—by others.

Questions for Reflection

- Think back to your own elementary or middle school experiences [at church]. What did it feel like when you were invited to another child's party or social activity? What did it feel like when that invitation never came? How did each of these experiences impact your sense of belonging?
- Notice whether [everyone is] participating in the same breadth of [church] activities as others. To what extent is the presence or absence of invitations impacting this involvement?
- Ask [ministry team moderators] what (if anything) makes them hesitant or resistant to having [certain people on their team]. What steps could you take to address or alleviate those concerns?
- Develop a list of activities, [small groups], or programs at your [church]. What are some ways you could share these opportunities with [others] in ways that would encourage greater involvement?

WELCOMED

[Churches] should be thoroughly welcoming places. The way [members and visitors] are greeted and treated by others communicates quite a bit about their place within the community. ***To be welcomed is to be received by others with warmth, friendliness, and an authentic delight.*** In other words, people find pleasure in your presence. Students tend to feel welcomed when others greet them, strike up a conversation, ask about their day, and join them in shared activities.

Questions for Reflection

- Think about the various communities you personally belong to. What makes you feel welcomed in each of those spaces? What does not? How does the extent of this welcome impact your sense of belonging?
- Observe and reflect on the experiences of [members and visitors] that you know. Do [they] feel truly welcomed in your [church]? What tells you this is or is not the case?
- What do [members and visitors] at your [church] say are the things that make them feel welcomed there? If you don't know, ask them.
- Are there certain [people] you are less excited to see [on Sunday], or struggle to welcome in your [church]? What steps could be taken to change this situation?

KNOWN

[People] love to hear their names—whether announced or called across the [Fellowship Hall, classroom, etc]. But the joy of being known involves more than just being noticed and recognized by name. It also comes from being understood deeply and personally. ***To be known is to be seen as a unique individual and appreciated for all of who you are.*** Having relationships with people who really understand and affirm you is an important aspect of belonging.

Questions for Reflection

- Think back to a time when you felt like a stranger or outsider within a particular group or community. What did it feel like? What helped you move from the periphery to the center of those relationships?
- What was your “reputation” back when you were an elementary or middle school student? How accurately did it represent the whole of who you were? How did it impact your sense of belonging at [church]?
- Listen to the ways people talk about [others] at your [church]. In what ways might the...labels people use present an incomplete or inaccurate portrait of the [people] they serve? What alternatives are there for describing these [people]?
- How well are [others who seem “different”] known at your [church]? [Are the] ways they are supported inadvertently limit the number of people who get to know them personally? Talk with your colleagues about any changes you could make to [engagement] at your [church].

ACCEPTED

[Churches] are unique communities in which the lives of [members and visitors] from many different backgrounds come together. As [they] learn [to be around each other each Sunday], they regularly encounter others whose characteristics, experiences, and circumstances differ from their own. Promoting acceptance amidst this diversity is central to supporting belonging. ***To be accepted is to be embraced gladly without condition and viewed as an equal.*** Knowing for certain that you are liked by others contributes to feelings of self-worth, gives you a sense of roots, and makes [church] a more enjoyable place to be.

Questions for Reflection

- Everyone has experienced rejection at some point in their lives. How would you describe the feeling of being left out of a group that was important to you? What impact did this have on you?
- Reflect on the culture of your classrooms or [church]. What are the attitudes of peers and staff [others, especially those who seem “different”]? Do their words and actions tend to communicate true acceptance, or something else such as rejection, discomfort, or mere tolerance?
- What active steps is your [church] taking to promote an understanding and embracing of diversity? Consider how these efforts could also focus on the acceptance and belonging of [others, especially those who seem “different”] as a part of a broader focus on equity, inclusion, and diversity.
- What do you think peers and staff at your [church] need to know in order to be more accepting of [those who seem “different”]? How might you equip them with this information and guidance?

INVOLVED

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/involved>

Learning, [worshiping, and fellowship] are a primary purpose of [church], but not as a solitary event. A distinctive feature of [church] is that [people] are all learning together—not alone. **To be involved is to be actively engaged with and alongside peers in shared learning and common goals.** Learning together is a magnificent way to learn. [Members and visitors] are meaningfully involved when they participate in cooperative learning with [each other], work toward collective learning goals, and navigate challenges together as peers. Teachers support this deep involvement in the curriculum when they hold high expectations for all [children and adults] and design opportunities for [those] with varying abilities, strengths, and needs to learn from and with one another.

Questions for Reflection

- Reflect on a time when you successfully navigated a shared challenge or met a learning goal with other people. What is different about learning together compared to learning alone? How did learning together contribute to your sense of belonging?
- Observe [children and adults] in their classrooms to determine the extent to which everyone is involved in common learning goals and activities. What do you notice about the involvement of [those with different learning abilities?]
- Brainstorm several ways that you can support the learning and active involvement of all [children and adults] in the classroom. What is one new strategy you can try out first to help students with and without disabilities make progress in the curriculum together?

SUPPORTED

Our true capabilities are evident not in what we can do on our own, but rather by what we can do when given the right opportunities and support. To be supported means having the individualized resources needed to reach one's full potential and thrive in everyday life. Supports are a bridge—they help people go from where they are to where they want to be. Supports can involve changes to the physical environment, adapted materials, technology, or other tools. But feeling supported is more than these resources—it is a social experience. [Members and visitors] are most likely to feel supported when they are part of a community in which they are known personally, where people see their potential, and where they are provided the assistance they need to be successful.

Questions for Reflection

- Reflect on a time when you felt deeply supported, and on a time when you did not. What distinguished these two experiences? What impact did each have on your sense of belonging?
- This week, look for instances when [members and visitors] seem to be receiving just the right amount and types of support. What lessons can you learn from these situations that could be applied to other [people], activities, or goals?
- Some types of support can be stigmatizing and stand in the way of belonging. Talk with other teachers or [leaders] at your [church] about their approach to supporting [others, especially those who seem “different”]... How can support can be provided that enhances belonging without increasing stigma?

HEARD

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/heard>

Everyone wants to feel heard and understood. Knowing that your voice is really valued is not only empowering, but it also helps you feel more connected to others. ***To be heard means that your perspective is sought, listened to, and respected.*** Amplifying the voices of [all] promotes their self-determination, self-worth, and sense of belonging. Whenever [people] feel heard at [church]—by both adults and their peers—it reminds them they are important, that their voice matters, that they have ideas to contribute, and that they are valued.

Questions for Reflection

- Think back on a time when you felt misunderstood, ignored, or overlooked in an area that was important to you. How did this experience impact your sense of belonging?
- How often and how well do peers invite, listen to, and understand the perspectives of [others, especially those that seem “different”] at your [church]? Observe [people’s] interactions to discern what you could do to support peers in each of these areas.
- Talk with [others]. What steps could you all take together to help all [people] feel heard, especially [those] who may have a harder time sharing their perspectives?

BEFRIENDED

There is nothing quite like a friendship. Friendships are among our greatest sources of support, affection, understanding, comfort, and fun. **To be befriended means having peer relationships marked by mutual affection and reciprocity.** Having a friend means having someone in your life who says, “I choose you too.” A friend provides someone to play with, talk with, spend time with, and grow up with. There is no denying that friendships contribute to our well-being. They give meaning to our lives, make us who we are, help us navigate challenges, and bring us joy. Every [person] needs enjoyable and affirming relationships with their peers that provide companionship and fun.

Questions for Reflection

- Think back to your own friendships when you were in [church before now] . How would you describe what it meant to you to have (and be) a good friend? How did these relationships change as you moved through [church to now]? How did friendships impact your sense of belonging?
- Take time to learn about the peer relationships of [others, especially those who seem “different”] at your [church] by observing and talking with [others]. To what extent are peer relationships marked by qualities of friendship? For example, do [people] talk, play, and spend time together across settings? Are the benefits mutual? Do [others] feel like they can be themselves in these relationships?
- Work with [others] to brainstorm a list of the practices at your [church] that are supporting or hindering the development of friendships among [others, including those who seem “different”]. Choose 1-3 practical things you can do together to provide greater opportunity and support for [others] to become and strengthen friendships.

NEEDED

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/needed>

The richest forms of community are marked by a real reciprocity among all members. Every person is seen as having skills, talents, and strengths that can benefit others and the broader community. The same is true in [churches]—every [person] should be seen as a significant member and recognized for the contributions they can and do make. **To be needed involves being valued by others and considered an indispensable member of the community.** It is not uncommon, however, for some [members and friends] to feel less needed than others.

Questions for Reflection

- Think about a community in which you play an active part. How does having valued roles in that community shape your sense of membership and belonging?
- Create a list of all the ways that [others] at your [church] take on leadership roles or important responsibilities. To what extent are [those that seem “different”] also contributing in any of these ways? Why or why not?
- Throughout society, individuals with significant impairments are often seen first and foremost as the designated recipients of assistance and support, rather than as people who can provide assistance and support to others. Are similar views evident among [others] and staff at your [church]? What could you do to shift these perspectives in more affirming directions?
- Who do teachers at your [church] tend to turn to when they need help or assistance from students? Identify a few practical ways that you could help them consider a broader range of students who might have something to contribute.