THE NEED TO BELONG: BELONGING AND BELIEF IN LOCAL YOUTH MINISTRY

by

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Abstract:
Belonging and Belief, both important, both necessary but does one need the other? What is belonging and how does it connect to our beliefs? What implications do belonging and belief have for youth ministries and their educational and pedagogical impact? This study will explore the literature on belonging and belief in the local church context allowing us to gain insights into a critical component of youth ministry and education.

Deerfield, Illinois
SEPTEMBER 2016

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In his book *Community: A Structure for Belonging* Peter Block writes, "to belong is to be related to and a part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase. It is the opposite of thinking that wherever I am, I would be better off somewhere else. Or that I am still forever wandering, looking for that place where I belong" (2009, xii). Belonging is about finding home, becoming attached and connected, being supported and giving, that even in the midst of struggle, I am not alone. Block describes the opposite of belonging as feeling "isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider" (2009, xxi). Our local churches and youth ministries are places we strive for families to call "home", where they feel welcomed and included. Yet, living that out so others will experience formation and growth in their belonging and belief is a slippery fish.

He came to church, in fact he came with her every week. He volunteered to serve snacks and usher. He listened to the sermons with respect and attentiveness. People knew his name and welcomed him each week with the surface small talk. Yet, there was something about him not very many people knew. I was shocked the day I learned Sam didn't believe. He didn't want his girlfriend Prim to be one of those people sitting alone in church, yet he did not believe one iota of what was being taught. He belonged, but he didn't believe.

I was so delighted the day that Traci came to church with her friend who had been begging for weeks. She was quiet and hesitant and visibly uncomfortable. I had many conversations with her before that day as she discerned if this was a place that believed what she did. Answering her simply worded, but deeply pondered and longing questions, I was struck by the depth of her trust and reliance in, and regular conversations with God. After a few visits to our church she appeared in my office with tears in her eyes. She asked me earnestly, "Is there
something wrong with me that people won't talk to me?" She regaled how she had loved the music and the preaching and believed it whole heartedly, and yet didn't feel like she belonged.

Belonging and Belief, both important, both necessary, but does one need the other? This study will explore the literature on belonging and belief in the local church context, thusly allowing us to recognize the true importance of these components. We will ask, “What is belonging and how does it connect to our beliefs?” while investigating the implications belonging and belief have as a critical component of youth ministry. We will also explore a framework for their educational and pedagogical impact.

**The Need to Belong**

As early as 1930 Alfred Adler formulated that "social feeling is the crucial and deciding factor in normal development" (11). Herve Carrier in his work *The Sociology of Religious Belonging* claimed, "belonging arises from taking part in the group, participating in it, and enter interacting with it" (1965, 58). Remarkably, the inquiry into belonging did not gain much attention until Baumeister and Leary presented their 1995 landmark paper exhibiting a host of evidence supporting the argument: developing a strong sense of belonging is one of the most fundamental human needs (498; Gere and MacDonald 2010, 93; Krause and Hayward 2013, 252; Krause and Hayward 2015, 223; Bastisa and Krause 2011; Maslow 1954). Baumeister and Leary contend "belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food" (1995, 498).

Baumeister and Leary's host of indirect support for their plausible arguments opened the door wide for new empirical research to uphold or invalidate their claims (1995). From those studies it was observed that the need to belong had strong influences on an individual's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Gere and MacDonald 2010). This work has
supplied a "fledgling body of knowledge on the processes underlying short-term reactions to fluctuations in belonging, biological responses to belongingness status, individual differences in reactions to exclusion threats as well as subsequent coping efforts and long term consequences of a thwarted need to belong" (Gere and MacDonald 2010, 93). The researchers observed the threats of social exclusion could affect an individuals' "cognition, affective reactions, and behaviors" (Gere and MacDonald 2010, 94). In the area of cognitive reactions and functioning, many studies revealed "chronic unmet belonging needs and threats to belonging led to impairments on complex, higher order cognitive processing, taxing on cognitive resources, and diminished performance on intelligence tests like recalling complex passages, and answering complex analytical questions" (Gere and MacDonald 2010, 94-95). Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo discerned that belongingness deprived individuals began to anthromorphize non-human agents perhaps to provide a social outlet, thus bringing credence to the “classic lonely cat lady stereotype” (2008; Gere and MacDonald 2010, 95). The areas of the brain in which belonging is processed also house the processing of physical pain, thus indicating a possible connection to the deep woundedness experienced when deprived belonging (Gere and MacDonald 2010, 104). This ground breaking research has examined a facet of the human psyche long neglected and have begun to create a picture of how important belonging is to our lives.

**Group Attachment**

The information age all around us has encouraged social structures such as Facebook and Twitter that have become invasive, quick, and mechanized, and yet there is a prevalent struggle to connect were we can "become grounded and experience the sense of safety
that arises from a place where we are emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically a member” (Block 2009, 2). British researcher John Bowlby gives a similar definition of attachment in his foundational works about a "secure base" where one finds safety and stability. He defined attachment as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (Bowlby 1988, 26-27). Initially, he explored the mother-child attachment relationship he entitled the “secure base”, which he later expanded to adults (Bowlby 1988, 27). Since Bowlby's work, an entire area of research has emerged studying attachment albeit mostly in the areas of: technology's unhealthy effects on the relative health of relationships, affectional bonds, leaders attitudes toward groups, and the formation of emotional connections to social groups and organizational settings (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007; Grossman, Grossman and Waters 2005; Howe 2011; Clulow 2001; Bowlby 1979/2005; Rholes and Simpson 2004; Cassidy and Shaver 2008; Smith, Murphy Coats 1999). Without secure bases and healthy attachments the fabric of society becomes vulnerable to decay.

Peter Block in his book Community: The Structure of Belonging suggests, "The cost of detachment and disconnection is not only our isolation, our loneliness, but also the fact that there are too many people in our communities whose gifts remain on the margin. Filling the need for belonging is not just a personal struggle for connection, but also a community problem" (2009, 2). If belonging is a community problem, then the ways we attach and connect as a group are also points of concern. Diane Garland describes belonging as the group form of attachment. In concert, belonging and attachment theory play critical roles in aiding individuals to connect with a faith community. For those who have experiences of belonging in the church, “it’s members can venture out into the world more securely because they know that, when they return
home, they will be welcomed, nourished physically and emotionally, and comforted if
distressed” (Garland, 2012, 58-59). The church fulfilling these needs follows attachment theory
as it encourages the individual to value and continue the relationship (Bowlby 1988, 57-58).

In the church, emotional and social group attachments are desired to form
between congregants and ultimately with the Trinity- the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a
result, we set about creating an environment of "comfort, support, and safety in times of need
and a secure base for exploration and growth" (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 434). In the same
way the church can serve as a "home base" providing encouragement and assistance in learning
new skills in the areas of social, emotional, and cognitive development (Forsyth, 1990;
Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 434).

The literature makes a distinction between attachments that are healthy and
unhealthy. As healthy attachment develops in adults, the ability to develop secure relationships
and coherent narratives form (Thompson 2010, 13). During instability or isolation there is more
of a struggle to find and trust anyone or any place as a secure base. Secure adults tend to
contribute to positive models in a group while enjoying proximity to other group members as
well as exhibiting confidence in the support of the group and it's activities. Less secure
individuals may have "difficulty construing their groups as available, sensitive, and responsive
attachment figures" (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 434-435). They potentially have problems
committing, engaging in productive organizational behavior, and can exhibit limited coping with
organizational changes. In the church, less secure individuals who struggle to attach healthfully
may perceive this disconnect as a lack of belonging or inclusion thus viewing themselves as
victims rather than part of the problem.
Another perspective proposed by Myers in his book *A Search to Belong* is based on Hall's theory of proximics (2003; Hall 1966). Myers posits that people belong to us as a group at different distances. Hall's theory was based on our use of spatial language. We use spatial language in relationships without even noticing: "small groups, close friends, distant relatives, family connections, neighborly attitudes" (Myers 2003, 36). Within this theory it is possible to experience a sense of belonging and in fact can belong without the groups' knowledge or others joining in sharing the experience. Belonging seems to be more about how it feels to the person and less about how the organization sees them (Myers 2003, 25, 42-43). A person's search for community can be as varied and complex as the people involved. Interestingly, "the truth is that people can experience belonging in groups ranging in size from 2 to 2000 or more" (Myers 2003, 18). Take the example of fans of team athletics, as sports fans two people can belong to the same team and feel connected and yet never know each others names (Myers 2003, 42-43). Wenger refers to this as a trajectory of learning that individuals are on differently from one another. For example, to an fringe student a peripheral experience of belonging could be central to her identity just because of where she is on her learning trajectory. (Wenger 1999, 155). When it comes to community, Myers recommends allowing people to remain at whatever distance is comfortable to them. Block encourages that we must go farther than this, "We need a community where each citizen has the experience of being connected to those around them and know that their safety and success are dependent on the success of all others" (Block 2009, 5). That dependence leads us from conversations about fear of our safety and security to ones about our "relatedness and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity" which Robert Putnam refers to as our social capital (Block 2009, 3; Putnam 2000).
Belonging and Belief As One

According to Granqvist, Christian views of attachment theory have been guiding a newly growing body of research in the psychology of religion and spirituality in the past two decades (2012, 176). One small stream of the literature on belonging and belief centers around one without the other, believing without belonging or belonging without belief. Most of these publications stemmed as responses to the work of sociologist of religion Grace Davie in her book *Religion In Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (1994). She used the phrase “believing without belonging” to describe “the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing” (1994, 94). From the literature it appears that the majority of research centered around the denial of the findings in other countries. Numerous responses to the research involved debates on how the definitions of "belonging" and "belief" were used by Davie and how others perceived them (Kettle 2005; Myers 2003; Storm 2009; Oakes 2015; Bockarova 2016; Wollschleger and Beach 2013; Francis and Robbins 2004; Knebelkamp 2003; de Roest 2008).

Krause and Hayward have added to that growing body of research with a study they did on the relationship between church-based social relationships and belonging with data from a nationwide survey of older Mexican-Americans (2013). They combed the field for literature and stated, "we can find only one study in the literature that assessed the relationship between church-based support, social support, and belonging among older Mexican-Americans and only one type or dimension of social relationships in the church was evaluated in this research" (Krause and Hayward 2013, 252; Krause and Bastida 2011). The one article referred to was also authored by Krause and Bastida in 2011 entitled "Church-based social relationships, belonging, and health among older Mexican Americans."
According to Krause and Hayward, "so far, most of the research of belonging has taken place outside the context of religion" (2013, 251). Even when researchers study belonging in the church, their work has been concerned primarily with whether belonging is associated with either physical health status (Krause and Wulff 2005; Krause and Bastida 2011) or a sense of psychological well-being (Greenfield and Marks 2007; Hayward and Elliott 2009; Hayward and Elliott 2011). In contrast, less attention has been given to how a sense of belonging in the church arises in the first place (Krause and Hayward 2013, 252; Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013; Semin, 2007). Krause and Hayward’s article was written to "address the gap in the knowledge base" (Krause and Hayward 2013, 252).

Stark and Bainbridge contended throughout their extensive work that the need to belong may be an even more compelling factor in becoming involved in a religious institution than religious doctrine and beliefs (1985). Even with threads of logic like this, the literature base since 1985 is scant at best. Krause and Hayward cite the lack of empirical research done on "factors that shape a sense of belonging once a person decides to become involved in a church" (2013, 269). In the same article, they also shine a light on the gap that "despite the central role belonging has played in religious life for centuries, it is surprising to find that a sense of belonging in the congregation, and the influence of church-based support upon it, have been largely overlooked in the literature" (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 271).

David Kettle noted in an article on belonging and belief that as we grapple with the nature of belonging, it is important to keep in tension the “mystery of the One to whom we know ourselves as belonging when we respond to Christ" (Kettle 2005, 514). The Christian faith being inherently communal. The very core of our belief centers around the holy, never ending dance of the Trinity, three in one, joined and belonging to each other. 1 Peter 2 focuses on how
we have been chosen by Christ, his "chosen people" (1 Peter 2: 9, NIV). In being chosen we belong to Christ and so too then, we belong to one another as adopted brothers and sisters of the Father. Kettle states, "Such belonging involves recognition that we belong to God, and readiness to live in service to God; that is to say, it involves belief of the kind awakened by the gospel, belonging and believing are inseparable" (Kettle 2005, 514). Unless our relationship with Christ is reflected in the relationships with our fellow believers, the Church will struggle to thrive in the ways it was created to.

**Social Support in the Church**

"A sense of belonging in a congregation involves much more than a stated religious affiliation (e.g., I'm a Catholic)" (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 252; 2015, 223). Instead, as Carrier depicts, "when a person feels they belong in a congregation the member sees himself as taking part in his group; identifying himself within it, he then participates in it and receives his motivation from it; in a word, he is in a state or disposition of interaction with a group, which understands, inspires and welcomes him" (Carrier 1965, 58-59). Belonging has much to do with espousing or subscribing to the values, norms, and beliefs of that organization (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 254). Following Blau's theory if a "person provides something of value to a member of a group, the group member will feel more attracted to them. The sense of attraction serves to more tightly integrate the support provider into the group" (1960, 545-556). The more collective or unstable the group, the more critical the peer pressure and attraction will become. Oyserman and Hogg each identified that a secure social identity contributes to a "positive feeling" of being included in some group and "motivation" to become part of them especially when faced with uncertainty (Oyserman 2007, 434; Hogg, Adelman, Blagg 2010).
Easterbrook and Vignoles contend in their work that a sense of belonging in a congregation stems in part from the level of "cohesiveness among the people who worship there" (2013). Semin phrases it a bit differently, "feelings of similarity that arise from the world views and values that are shared by group members provide a sense of mutual recognition and intelligibility that make it easier for individuals to feel they belong in the place where they worship" (Semin, 2007; Krause and Hayward 2015, 223). Krause and Hayward set out to demonstrate the truth or existence of a central focus of belonging in a congregation stems from social support exchanged with fellow congregants (2013, 253). They base this on Barrera's multidimensional construct of social support (1986).

Krause and Hayward's research broke the relationship between social support and belonging into five types of social support: "1) Emotional support received from fellow church members, 2) Emotional support provided to co-religionists, 3) Tangible help received from church members, 4) Tangible help given to people at church, 5) Spiritual support that is received from fellow parishioners" (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 253). They defined emotional support based on Barrera's construct in terms of providing "empathy, caring, love, and trust" (1986).

For an individual to belong they must identify the church as a home base of people not only who will care about them, but who he or she actually care for in return. For the attachment to stick there must be an element of reciprocal dependence involved. Krause and Hayward point out that, "When significant others at church provide emotional support, they are letting support recipients know that they are loved and valued highly" (2013, 253). In turn this response aids the receiver in feeling "they are part of the group" (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 253). Whether in the form of word or deed this concept underscores Homan's basic social science theory of reciprocating by giving support to the party who helped them. Baumeister and
Leary's perspective on lasting relationships is that "in order to satisfy the need to belong, a person must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare and likes (or loves) him or her" (1995, 500; Homans 1961). The concept of reciprocity when others depend on them at church is at the core of the support provider's feelings of having "earned their place and deserve to be there" (Krause and Hayward 2013, 253).

Krause and Hayward base their perception of spiritual support on Berger who believes religious worldviews are "socially constructed and maintained" (Berger, 1967, 45). In this framework spiritual support fosters "a sense of belonging by transmitting and reinforcing religious beliefs that play an integral role in binding the individual to the group" (Krause and Hayward 2013, 254). Berger defined spiritual support as a process that is "intended to shore up the religious beliefs, commitment, and behavior of the recipient in order to help them lead a more religious life" (Berger 1967, 45). Krause and Hayward describe this as "sharing religious experiences, helping support recipients find solutions to problems in the Bible, helping them lead a better religious life, and helping them to know God better" (2013, 253-254). These researchers contend, "Each of these activities is value laden and provides guidance on how to adapt the beliefs that are shared in the congregation and daily life" (Krause and Hayward 2013, 253-254).

**Community the Container of Belonging**

For centuries, theologians have discussed the central role that a sense of belonging plays in religious life (Krause 2013, 271). Block wrote, "Community is the container within which our longing to be is fulfilled" (2009, xii ). In her book, *Community that is Christian*, Julie Gorman states, "Life is us and not just me" (2002, 16). Goizeuta stated, "Community is the very source of personal identity. Individuals are not building blocks of
community; community is, instead, the foundation of individual personhood" (2002, 122). Gorman contends that God created us as "'persons', personhood is only known in relation to others. Our identity as relational beings is carved out of interpersonal relating. Because God knew and experienced community, he made his creatures capable of the same" (2002, 27-28).

One definition of community is that it "was and is kingdom living in the making" (Gorman, 38). Knobbe writes, "Community is essential to our Christian identity" (Knobbe 2011, 88-89). Gorman claims, "We can expect to see in the creature a reflection of the divine interdependency found in the community of the God head" (Gorman 2002, 28). N.T. Wright states, "it is...impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself" (Wright 2006, 1). God has been at the core of community from the beginning, "Community is rooted in the very nature of God's personhood and, therefore, existed before creation" (Gorman 2002, 25).

"The church is first and foremost a community, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God, the God we know in and through Jesus" (Wright 2006, 2). In every season of our lives, "we have an opportunity to be the presence of Christ. Together, we are the body of Christ as we grow as a community, it is a richer experience of Christ for all" (Knobbe 2011, 88-89). Knobbe continues, "As we embrace our separate roles within the community, we recognize God at work in our individual lives. We also discover God's presence as we depend on one another, pray with and for one another, support and challenge each other, minister to one another in times of need, and share in the sacraments together" (2011, 88-89). As the community we are to be as it says in Isaiah 58:12, the "rebuilder of broken walls" (NIV) while we "restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again" (MSG).
Knobbe writes of the church and belonging, "Belonging is a way of saying to someone, "everything here is yours because you are one of us." It has nothing to do with membership paying dues, but rather it is a shared sense of identity" (2011, 87). She goes on to say "When I experience a sense of belonging. I know that this is my spiritual home, my voice is heard, my needs are met, and my gifts are put to good use. The community understands my unique needs in terms of spirituality, formation, education, and prayer. Together there is a greater sense of responsibility to care for one another, and I can trust that my needs will be met in return in the Christian community. We all belong, because we are one in Christ" (Knobbe 2011, 87). Of single adults specifically she writes, "I think the same can be said of single adults and parishes and communities where the majority of the church membership is couples and families. The church is holy, not because singles are welcome, but because they belong. Those are who truly ‘belong’ know that there is little distance between the newcomer and the longtime parishioner" (Knobbe 2011, 87)

David Walker in his 2006 article on "Belonging to rural church and society: theological and sociological perspectives" captures a beautiful picture of our primary belonging relationship where he begins by claiming that it is with God himself (90). He describes in the Old Testament the "people of God is the best developed corporate understanding of what it is to belong" and in the New Testament the disciples with Christ in John 13-17 give "perhaps the most powerful expression of this belonging" (Walker 2006, 90). Belonging is expressed along the way in the covenants, poems and song, and to specific people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Walker, 90).

Walker focuses on the idea of belonging throughout is not "unidirectional but mutual 'We are your people and you are our God'" (2006, 90). With mutuality as the "abiding
factor, to speak of belonging is not simply to describe objects in ownership, but to acknowledge two way ties" (Walker 2006, 90). The belonging goes both ways. Relationships between God and his people and with the people and each other. From this divine belonging, Walker highlights a four fold natural belonging framework: belonging with people, activities, events, and places (2006, 90). Belonging with activities in biblical times focuses on Old Testament ritual and New Testament spiritual gifts and observances (Walker 2006, 91). Belonging with events focused on the covenant makings of ancient Israel and the early church like sacrifice and baptism. (Walker 2006, 91) Belonging with places focused on where they lived and the history of powerful promises that grew there and the new earth yet to come.

This concept of events and place are underscored in other research on belonging. Gorman writes of how God built community into Israel in their "shared events (Exodus), mutual celebrations, common history and forbearers" (2002, 97). N.T. Wright states, "Though we often use the word “church” to denote a building, the point is that it’s the building where this community meets. True, buildings can and do carry memories, and when people have been praying and worshipping and mourning and celebrating in a particular building for many years, the building itself may come to speak powerfully of God’s welcoming presence. But it is the people who matter" (2006, 1). Community helps to create the boundaries that shape our faith and our lives. The lack of these boundary guidelines we could easily find our lives in chaos and deep faith would be very difficult.

**Belonging in the Co-Creating**

Peter Block defines culture in two parts, one we have previously discussed. His second part definition of belonging "has to do with being an owner, something belongs to me "
He contends that, "To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community." He suggests what we find ownership in we will "build and nurture" (Block 2009, xii). The concept of co-ownership is prevalent in the works of Albert Borgmann and Andy Crouch where each depict culture as tangible and as a vehicle for transformation of culture within communities. Block adds, "Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers as if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice" (2009, xii). Our culture creates the loom in which belonging is woven.

Crouch claims the only way to change culture is to "create more of it through the creating of artifacts whether chairs, language, laws, art, or even omelets" (Crouch 2008, 67). Crouch illustrates, "We don’t make culture... We tell stories. We build hospitals. We pass laws. These are specific products of cultivating and creating. Artifacts and goods are what eventually, over time, become part of the framework of the world for future generations" (Crouch 2008, 28). Anyone who has ever worked with students knows that they create their own cultural artifacts everywhere they go. Everyday they are creating new words, new languages, new traditions and new secret handshakes. This practice is especially true of middleschoolers in the early stages of adolescence. Everything is changing for them daily, and so the idea of creating new things is not only easy for them, it is intuitive. In Crouch's and Borgmann’s theories, an old piece of culture must be discarded to make room for a new one (Borgmann 2003, 16; Crouch 2008, 68). Change must occur not just when things are broken and culturally disrupted, but when creativity and completeness are created and discovered (Crothers 2006, 140-141).

Culture was tangible at the beginning of time, in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve co-partnered with God in their naming of animals and fashioning clothes. Culture will
be tangible in the end with ships, gates, robes, and streets. We serve a God who is in the business of creating tangible culture in relationship including miracles like burning bushes, damp fleeces, and fish-eating resurrected sons. The tangibility of community and belonging culture starts with things that are created and held. In *Kingdom Calling*, Amy Sherman tells the story of Rev. Jeff White from Harlem New Song Church. He used tiny pink Baskin Robbins's spoon to demonstrate a "foretaste of ice cream to come" (Sherman 2011, 23). For middleschool students, the tangible teaching of holding a pink spoon full of ice cream in their hand and then taking the spoon home will stick much longer than just verbally telling them to show the kingdom to their peers. The same is true with teaching the tangibility of culture. Borgmann states, “The factor that most decisively channels the daily course of life is not moral theory, but material culture” (2003, 24).

Every time my youth ministry team created community experiences for our middle school students to live out what they were learning in tangible ways, we saw growth, fruit, and positive responses of deeper connecting and belonging from parents and students alike. Experiential discipleship learning activities, teaching, and trips astonishingly continued to grow in attendance and spiritual depth for students and leaders alike. What we discovered at the same time these experiences were creating stories, the very culture of the community changed. Previously disengaged dads made time to go on mission trips with their students, became weekly small group leaders, and even started their own small group all because of tangible culture in the form of a basketball court and a planned missions trip experience. Because those dads shared in the co-creation, we were all more bonded in the mutual experience.

We must create, but we also must share what we have created in order to shape a culture of belonging and community. We are never alone in culture. Crouch writes, I am
“accompanied by those who created it before me and share it with me; I can never really escape
my responsibility to those who come after me, whose horizons of possibility I will move in some
way, for better or worse” (Crouch 2008, 12; Walsh and Middleton 2008, 32). Creating begins
by taking our communal resources, using them to create something new, and then sharing it with
the broader community. This is how belonging culture is changed, by being shared, creation by
shared creation.

My team of middleschool volunteers found our community culture changed the
more we created experiences and environments for students to encounter God. When this
occurred, the students would leave and tell their friends about what they experienced with a
sense of ownership and would then invite more of their friends to come join them. Small group
time was one of the most meaningful spaces for students to weave their story into the larger story
of God. The narratives of their small group leaders and their peers helped them to sift out what it
looked like for God to invite them to create on a daily basis. In large group time, the more we
shared true-life stories which illuminated how God invites his people to co-create, the more the
belonging culture of our community changed.

Culture making requires sharing goods. If the goods are not accessible to the
group, “how can they produce change? Conversely, a shared idea can provide jubilation to the
larger community. Mason expressed excitement over the transformational change in the co-
creation process when “a strange new idea suddenly makes sense to a handful of people, who
then transmit it to others" it's like a "revelation, a glimpse into the future” (2008, 5-6). Thomas
and Brown also contend, “Creating culture is a social experience” (2011, 101). The participants
of their survey revealed, “it wasn't just the tools, spaces, and possibilities that the participants
gained, but they gained a sense of social identity” (Thomas and Brown 2011, 101).
Sharing Space to Create

God provided Adam and Eve with space to create in Genesis 1. He could have created all the animals and then named them himself, but instead he left space for Adam and Eve to create. God intentionally invited them to become co-creators with Him, to be tenders and caretakers, to grow and produce life, and bear fruit. We too are invited into this process and called to tend seeds as they grow. In order for students to discover and to live out the full story of redemption, we must create an environment that helps this to be possible. We must create a landscape that is encouraging, that has order, shalom, and space to create and thusly belong. We must create space where there is time, and where there is a scaffold for them to stand on to build the next layer of our communal story. A firm foundation and a support structure are essential. Creativity needs a structure (Crouch 2008, 22). A painting needs a canvas. God made order out of chaos in Genesis 1 and called it good. One way to come alongside students is to give them the space to create with a scaffold for support.

In order to equip students in gaining ownership and belonging within the community, one must begin by aiding them in seeing where good things can be created, whether it be an omelet, an organization, or a new type of seating. These are spaces students have the opportunity to create. “The moment of fusion between unlimited resources and bounded environment creates a space that does not simply allow for imagination, it requires it” (Thomas and Brown 2011, 118).

Second, we must also equip students with community resources to create something of. One of the resources students can be equipped with is the gift of storysharing. Barker notes, “The repetition of our stories is part of what binds us to each other and to the
values that shape us” (Barker 2008, 101). What we teach and what we leave out of those stories speaks volumes about the culture we are creating and belong to (Glassford 2008, 72). Intentionally telling the full Gospel story from creation to the new creation is critical. When focusing on the full story they have a part in, compelling space is revealed between not only was is and could be, but what was and what will be again (Thomas and Brown 2011, 102).

Another resource to equip students with is the gift of presence. The next generation will be captivated by the opportunity to create and belong only when the new story is more compelling than the old. When invited to co-create, students need to witness the modeling of creativity. The theme of mentoring and modeling is resonating loudly right now because many are desperate for space to create and belong. Block writes, "The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership; it means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability (Block 2009, xii). As our community defines its space we create a safe area for growth and belonging.

**Narratives in Community Belonging**

Learning and knowing the "family" stories fosters belonging. "Everyone has a story" (Linde 1993, 11; Kenyon and Randall 1997, 15). Lewis Smedes called a family a "community of memory" (1990, 241-253). A family is much more than a group of people; a family is the "current incarnation of a story that extends into the past and will have more chapters to come. Telling the family stories turns memories into present reality and holds that reality as foundation for the future" (Smedes 1990, 241-253; Garland, 2012, 322). Our congregations are even larger "communities of memory" made up of rituals, stories, and sacred moments of answered prayer. Garland adds, "Families learn significance of rituals and stories by
participating in the congregations' ritual and stories" (Garland 2012, 333).

Adelman offers, “When a group engages in the process of finding new meanings in ancient symbols, they keep the traditions alive” with two challenges: “to preserve the old tradition intact for the future; to do battle with the tradition so as to answer the needs of the self while creating new works for new worlds” (1989, 33). Garland writes, "Sacred stories may connect us to many themes of faith, themes of love, joy, creation, rebirth, repentance, and forgiveness, friendship, covenant, and faithfulness. (2012, 329). She goes on to state, "Because these are universal themes, sacred stories tell not only about how we are somehow part of the great story God is telling, but also how we connect with and are like other families" (Garland 2012, 329). As a collective group, spiritual formation can also occur through stories to “remind a particular faith community of its identity by highlighting decisive moments, heroes, struggles, achievements, cherished memories, and so on" (Ospino 2007, 328-9). We belong because we believe, know, reflect, and tell the stories. Dinkler strongly attested, “Indeed, we might say that stories are a prerequisite for religion; most religious traditions can trace their origins to a rich repository of stories, parables, myths, and legends” (2011, 287).

Gorman notes, "Every act of authentic self-disclosure makes one person's story a gift to the growth of another. When we genuinely understand another person's story, we grow as individuals and our spiritual nature is magnified" (Gorman 2002, 16). In Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 73 the very sharing of stories was emphasized as being of importance. The literature had much to say about the importance of belief and history stories being passed on, however there is much less on this occurs. Kreider writes, “Some families pass on stories and skills from one generation to the next. Children can learn their identity and devise dreams for their futures through imaginatively entering into the repeated family tales" (2001, 18). In the church and
youth ministry we see this often in the tales and legends that exist around mascots, retreats, inside jokes, the accident, the breakup, the reason the stain is there. To be part of the community is know the back stories, so creating and learning each in their own ways adds to ones sense of belonging in the community.

This powerfully happens in youth ministry when individuals take the risk to share testimonies of God's faithfulness and genuine deep prayer requests. Dinkler writes, “When a story is shared with others, not only do the teller and hearers discover that they are not alone, but storytelling in community also expands one's repertoire of possible responses to life by exposing us to others' (successful and failed) strategies for transformation” (2011, 292). In the process of discovering students are not alone, they experience a much fuller experience of belonging to the larger family of God.

As an added benefit learning takes place in the very story sharing and hearing. Schram writes, “Our formative stories plant images that last longer in our deep-seated memories than do lectures or sermons without illustrative narratives” (2003, 12-13). Formative stories are those that shape and guide us to grow in maturity wherever they are shared casually or formally at home, school, church, work or camp. Teenagers learn the significance of rituals and stories by participating in the congregation's. Powerful tales, whether they are personal, family, biblical, or folk stories, continually "nourish children because they give them a sense of knowing who they are as a member of a cultural group and a family” (Schram 2003, 12-13). Belonging and belief grow as the hearer and teller are spiritually transformed. Nolan concurred, stories are “the key to opening up the religious sensibilities of the child and lead to a deeper understanding of doctrine that in turn facilitated transformation of the will and actions” (2007, 322).
Belonging in Learning and Knowing

Wenger defines, "Learning is, in it's essence a social phenomenon, reflecting our deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing" (Wenger 1999, 3). Carrier posited a sense of belonging is "an inherently social phenomenon" (Carrier 1965, 58). With both learning and belonging being social phenomenon it is not surprising that Wenger labeled a portion of his social learning theory as “learning as belonging”. (1999, 5). In Wenger's working social learning theory outlined in his book *Communities of Practice*, he bases his work on Bandura's of social interactions affecting behavior (Wenger 1999; Bandura 1977). Social learning uses a psychological lens to view social interactions and interpersonal relations specifically: imitation, modeling, and cognitive processes relying heavily on observation as a source of learning (Wenger 1999, 280). In the following paragraphs, we will review a few hallmarks of this theory as it relates to belonging as learning in the church community.

Wenger bases Communities of Practice on the assumptions that first we are "social beings" which he claims is a "central aspect of learning much like belonging is to community" (1999,4). Secondly, "knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises –such as singing in tune, fixing machines, writing poetry" (Wenger 1999, 4). One finds a sense of ownership and belonging by understanding the processes and systems of a group. Third, Wenger suggests "knowing is a matter of participating" while actively engaging the world (1999,4). Engagement with others is necessary for experiencing active participation and community. Finally, he believes learning will produce "meaning" which he defines as our "ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful" (Wenger 1999, 4). Meaning making from the experience creates the connections that relationship is built upon.

Wenger suggests that shaping meaning has much to do with our community of practice and who
we are individually. He continues, "Our identity includes our ability and our inability to shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belonging" (Wenger 1999, 145).

As we look at our experiences on a meta scale, our identity as Christians is defined globally, but it is "experiences locally" in community (Wenger 1999, 150). He is alluding not to participating in only one limited event or people, but engagement in the broader sense of being "active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Participating in a playground clique or in a work team, for instance, is both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger 1999, 4). For students in our youth ministries, we know that their participation shapes more than what they do but who they are and who they will become.

In Wenger's estimation, a social learning theory must contain four elements to describe "social participation as a process of learning and knowing": 1) "Meaning" as a way of communicating our "(changing) ability — individually and collectively — to experience our life and the world as meaningful"; 2) "Practice: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action; 3) Community: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence; 4) Identity: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (Wenger 1999, 5).

Wenger's working social theories are formed communities of practice in the very locations we have examined thus far in the fabric of individuals, small groups, and the organization in our case the church. The theory centers on participation as the main vehicle for
understanding what it takes to "understand and support learning". For individuals, he suggests "it means learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities." For communities, it means "learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members" (Wenger 1999, 7). Belonging is required for new members to form and remain engaged and attached. For organizations, it means "learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization" (Wenger 1999, 7). Learning and belonging are part of every facet of this process.

Wenger proposes that in order to process identity formation and learning, three different modes of belonging should be considered: "1) engagement – active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning; 2) imagination – creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience; 3) alignment – coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises" (1999, 173-174). These modes are exciting for local church youth ministry because they describe many practices already in place. Combined together they can anchor learning in practice, yet "make it broad, creative, and effective in the wider world" (Wenger 1999, 217).

**Implications for Youth Ministry**

**Engagement**

The first mode of belonging as learning is engagement. Wenger defines engagement as "a threefold process, which includes the conjunction of: 1) the ongoing negotiation of meaning 2) the formation of trajectories 3) the unfolding of histories of practice" (Wenger 1999,174). Engagement lines up directly with the heart of youth workers across the
globe to create experiences that will help students to encounter Christ and make meaning out of the new life they have been given. In youth ministry, creating rituals and traditions, epic stories of misadventures, and “what we do on the last night of camp” all create the history of practice, both what to do and what to never repeat again. Conversations beside pizza or gravesides, questions answered in long van rides and on the run help students negotiate meaning in the midst of their messy lives. So, wherever they are on their learning trajectory and faith walk, we are meeting them with the gospel.

One limitation of engagement is its boundedness. Creating these boundaries are limits on time, complexity and scope of activities we can be directly involved in, as well as the "the number of people and artifacts with which we can sustain substantial relationships of engagement. Bounded character is both the strength and the weakness of engagement as a mode of belonging" (Wenger 1999, 175). Another challenge is making sure that engagement doesn't become so "locally ingrained, and socially efficacious that it becomes insular". If we become too inwardly focused no other viewpoint or voice will be heard and no one else will be able to break into our holy huddle. In that way a community of practice or youth ministry can "become an obstacle to learning by entrapping us in its very power to sustain our identity" (Wenger 1999, 175).

To support learning according to Wenger, engagement requires reciprocity, including the ability to connect with others in the group, to make contributions that matter to negotiations of meaning and how practices are shared, as well as aid in creating symbols, tools, and language to represent what is occurring (Wenger 1999, 184-185). As we discussed earlier the social support cycle in the church flows this same rhythm (Krause and Hayward, 2013, 253).
"A lack of access to either participation or reification results in the inability to learn" (Wenger, 184-185)

Imagination

The second mode of belonging as learning is imagination. Wenger defines imagination as a "process of expanding ourself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (Wenger 1999, 176). He likens it to "seeing your grandfather take out his dentures and knowing that you had better brush you teeth" or "looking at apple seed and seeing a tree" or "reading a biography and recognizing yourself in the struggles of a character" (Wenger 1999, 176). For Wenger, imagination is not fantasizing but picturing what transcends what we are experiencing currently in engagement (1999, 177). Imagination requires the ability to pull out in a reflective way and see things from a wider and/ or outsider's perspective. Some of our students do this more naturally than we do, often these are the pesky ones asking the "but what if" and "what about ____" questions. Imagination requires the freedom to "explore, take risks, and make unlikely connections" and "demands some degree of playfulness", which equally defines a jr. high boys' small group (Wenger 1999, 185).

The work of imagination entails amongst a host of other things: imagining our selves in someone else's shoes, seeing ourselves in new ways, sharing stories, explanations, and descriptions, experiencing new places and people, creating new models, patterns, and artifacts and, making meaning out of history and old artifacts and patterns, and generating scenarios and new ways forward (Wenger 1999, 185). The risk of imagination occurs when it is disconnected or based on assumptions. In turn, one must remain vigilant in building bridges from what is to what could be. Sasso illuminated, "Stories help us imagine what lies beneath the surface, to wonder at what we might otherwise take for granted. Stories leave lasting impressions on the
brain and heart that influence how we respond to life. They do not proclaim religious truths; they facilitate their discovery" (Sasso 2004, 68). The daunting yet exciting work is to tell the stories of faith in vivid ways aiding the discovery of the abstract through tangible culture making object lessons, and co-creation of artifacts, case studies, and experiential learning. These methods are often the wheel house of youth ministry in helping them envision more about their faith than they can see right now. "Imagination requires the ability to dislocate participation and reification in order to reinvent ourselves, our enterprises, our practices, and our communities (Wenger 1999, 186). Wengers’ description sounds much like the strategic dislocations reflect and connect that occur in youth ministry with classic mission trips, retreats, and church camp. He goes on to say "in terms of participation, imagination requires an opening”. There must be an opportunity for this level of engagement and imagination. Wenger suggests, “Imagination needs willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations" (Wenger 1999, 186). Real life youth ministry scenarios like occur with frequency. For example, on the same church bus hurtling toward the wilderness to encounter Jesus are: 1) the new a girl made up a fictitious name for herself that everyone is now calling her as she tries on a new identity 2) the jr. high boy who reverberates with energy and well meaning enthusiasm seeing everyone as his best friend. Imagination also allows room for non-participation to be part of the adventure, adding to the tension of moving parts (Wenger 1999, 186).

Alignment

The third mode of belonging in learning in this social learning theory is alignment. Wenger defines alignment as "the ability to coordinate perspectives and actions in
order to direct energies to a common purpose" (1999, 186). Block refers to this challenge when groups do not overlap or even touch and the dividedness is what creates a barrier to create a "more positive or alternative future" (Block 2009, 2). Instead of being siloed and separated from the rest of the church body, the challenge is often aiding the collective body of believers to see how they belong in the much larger story of God together. Wenger defines the work of alignment as: "1) investing energy in a directed way and creating a focus to coordinate this investment of energy 2) negotiating perspectives, finding common ground 3) imposing one’s view using power and authority 4) convincing, inspiring, uniting 5) defining broad visions and aspirations, while proposing stories of identity 6) devising proceduralization, quantification, and control structures that are portable (i.e., usable across boundaries) 7) walking boundaries, creating boundary practices, and reconciling diverging perspectives" (Wenger 1999, 186).

The fine art of herding cats also known as youth ministry is primarily about directing energies toward engaging in a relationship with Jesus. As shepherds of the flock, we get the privilege of managing "levels of scale and complexity that give new dimensions to our belonging. Alignment can thus amplify our power and our sense of the possible" (Wenger 1999, 180). In Christian ministry discipleship can open new paradigms and modes of relating through experiencing deeper and wider levels of scale and complexity. Power must be stewarded with humility, love, and an inquisitive spirit to prevent blinding and disempowering those who are following. (Wenger 1999, 180). Another transferable element of communities of practice is the reciprocal role of co-creating while convincing, inspiring, and uniting gives a sense of shared ownership and community to all involved. The difference of shepherding as compared to wielding power is pivotal in aiding students’ ability to create boundaries within healthy, life giving discipleship. Using Jesus' model we can share stories of identity as we describe rather
than prescribe what belonging and community in the kingdom of God is like. Within healthy attachment relationships with one another and Christ, what was once procedures and rules become obedience and care. This guards against those on the fringe or little participation to experience only the rules and compliance to procedures rather than meaningful participation (Wenger 1999, 187). It is often in these sorts of circumstances that Christian communities can appear to be just a long list of should's and shouldn'ts without the gift of a home base full of belonging, community, and social support.

**Further Research**

In the areas of belonging and belief in the church there is much work to be done. The fledgling stream of literature has many gaps to be filled in the areas of but not limited to: the needs of belonging within faith communities, spiritual belonging and attachment, how attachment occurs in church bodies in healthy and unhealthy ways, how social support structures impact and affect different church sizes, how and if proximics accurately connect with belonging and relationships, how technology impacts storytelling and co-creation, what factors or structures foster or hinder belonging in youth ministry, and so many others.

**Conclusion**

Kettle states, "Belonging and belief are inseparable" (Kettle 2005, 514). Block contends, "community is about the experience of belonging. We are in community each time we find a place where we belong" (2009, xii). In a community of faith, belonging occurs when we act as co-creators and co-owners of that community, where we know the stories because we helped to live and tell them. The story of my student Sam continued attending church with Prim every
week. Over the years, he explored the scriptures over his lunch breaks. Sam’s understanding of belonging and belief grew as he got more active at church. Today, he not only attends church weekly but worships with his wife Prim. Sam is the one who reads Bible stories to their kids at bedtime so they can understand the story of God together. Tracy never returned to the church after her teary visit to my office. However, in a brief phone conversation not long ago, Tracy shared of her discovery of a church. She shared that even though she doesn't completely “love it”, she feels like she belongs because "it's home" and she is needed as a Wed. night 4th-5th grade Sunday school teacher.

In youth ministry, we must strive to create spaces where students can engage in meaningful practices, discussions, and reflections that make a difference in their community, access resources which will facilitate to co-creation, and open their imagination to the potential of new learning trajectories (Wenger 1999,10). In youth ministry, we strive to create communities where students and their families can experience belonging through collective memories of caring for others as they have been cared for with casserole dishes, text messages, prayers by a hospital beds, and side hugs by the football field. To engage, imagine, and align with a community of faith, we must be fully present and willing to be active participants in that community. We must continue to intentionally lean in closer to the community than we have before, so the sweet aroma of belonging can permeate our lives and learning trajectory with God's grace and belonging, in turn saying to those who encounter us, "welcome home".
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