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

by

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Bio:
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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.

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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, how we live that out so others can 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 ush. 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? 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.

**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 field of belonging did not gain much attention until Baumeister and Leary presented their 1995 landmark paper exhibiting a host of evidence that supporting the argument that 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 disprove their claims (1995). From those studies it was found 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). It was found 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 found that belongingness deprived individuals have been found to anthropomorphize 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).

**Group Attachment**

All around us social structures have become more 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). This is almost exactly the same definition of attachment that British researcher John Bowlby gives 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 field of research has emerged studying attachment, albeit mostly unhealthy in the areas of: technology, 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 et.al., 1999).

As 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. Thus, 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).

Much of the literature highlights attachments which 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 and 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. This is because it is 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 is more complex than this. "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 compared
which would be meaningless to someone else just because of where she is on her learning
trajectory. (Wenger 1999, 155). When it comes to community Myers encourages 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**

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). 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 in 2012. 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). Their 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).

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 is evident that the majority of research and responses which followed centered around the denial of the findings correlating in other countries, as well as debating how the definitions of "belonging" and belief were used by Davie and how others perceive them (Kettle 2005; Myers 2003; Storm 2009; Oakes 2015; Bockarova 2016; Wollschleger and Beach 2013; Francis and Robbins 2004; Knebelkamp 2003; Roest 2008).

Kettle reminded 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 this chosen-ness, we belong to Christ and so too then we belong to one another as adopted brothers and sisters of the Father. "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).
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 et. al, 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 prove in their research that a core cause of belonging in a congregation stems from social support.
exchanged with fellow congregants (Krause and Hayward, 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 rank and file 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 about in return. For the attachment to stick there must be an element of reciprocal dependence involved. "When significant others at church provide emotional support, they are letting support recipients know that they are loved and valued highly" (Krause and Hayward, 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; Krause and Hayward 2013, 253). 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 the theologian Berger who believes religious worldview 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). They continue by pointing out, "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**

"Community is the container within which our longing to be is fulfilled" (Block 2009, xii). For centuries, theologians have discussed the central role that a sense of belonging plays in religious life (Krause 2013, 271). In her book, *Community that is Christian*, Julie Gorman states, "Life is us and not just me" (Gorman 2002 16). "Community is the very source of personal identity. Individuals are not building blocks of community; community is, instead, the foundation of individual personhood" writes Goizeuta (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). "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. It is a relationship 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,

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" (Gorman, 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).

**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 " (2009, xii). 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 with in communities. "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" (Block 2009, xii). Belonging forms in loom of culture making.

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; Sherman 2011, 148) "We don’t make culture, we make omelets. 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 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).

Team Sport

We must create, but we also must share what we have created in order to change culture. 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 resources, using them
to create something new, and then sharing it. This is how culture is changed, by being shared, creation by shared creation.

My team of middleschool volunteers found 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 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 true-life stories which illuminated how God invites his people to co-create, the more the culture of our community changed.

Culture making requires sharing goods. If they are locked in a head or a studio, the goods are essentially not tangible and thusly will impact very few. Conversely a shared idea can provide jubilation. “The big bang happened when a strange new idea suddenly makes sense to a handful of people, who then transmit it to others. Experiencing one is like a revelation, a glimpse into the future” (Mason 2008, 5-6). Thomas and Brown 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).

Tangible

Culture was tangible at the beginning of time, in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve 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 including miracles like burning bushes, damp fleeces, and fish-eating resurrected sons.
The tangibility of 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 experiences for our middle school students to live out what they were learning tangible ways, we saw growth, fruit, and positive responses 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.

**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. Then, He 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. 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 the 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, 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 resources to create something of. One of the resources students can be equipped with is the gift of storysharing. “The repetition of our stories is part of what binds us to each other and to the values that shape us” (Barker, 101). What we teach and what we leave out of those stories speaks volumes about the culture we are creating (Glassford 2008, 72). It is critical to be intentional about telling the full Gospel story from creation to the new creation. When focusing on the full story, 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 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. 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).

**Narrative Learning for Community Belonging**

Learning and knowing the "family" stories fosters belonging. "Everyone has a story" (Linde 1993, 11; Kenyon and Randall 1997, 15). Theologian Lewis Smedes called a family a "community of memory" (Smedes 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. "Families learn significance of rituals and stories by participating in the congregations' ritual and stories" (Garland 2012, 333).

"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" (Adelman 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. 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).

"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, like most other portions of information, the how is another matter. 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” as well as those of the church and youth ministry (2001, 18). Mascots, retreats, inside jokes, the accident, the breakup, the reason the stain is there all become the stories that the community know. To be part of the community is know the stories so each in their own ways adds to the community sense of belonging.

“In addition, storytelling and storyhearing restore us to a sense of shared humanity. Narratives express the perennial human experiences of comedy, tragedy, hope, and pain. 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” (Dinkler 2011, 292). In the process, as both a child and adult belonging to the larger family of God forms us.

Schram writes, “Our formative stories plant images that last longer in our deep-seated memories than do lectures or sermons without illustrative narratives” (Schram, 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. These 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" (Nolan 2007, 322).

**Belonging in Learning and Knowing**

"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, 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 when they 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. "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 out experience 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).

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 social theory, Communities of Practice, are formed in the very locations we have examined thus far in the fabric of individuals, small groups, and the organization/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" (Wenger 1999, 173-174). These 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 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 it's boundedness. There 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. This 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 is 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 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 remarkably defines a jr. high boys' small group (Wenger 1999, 185).

The work of imagination entails amongst a host of other things: imagining ourselves 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 is when it is disconnected or based on assumptions so 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 work of telling those stories of faith in vivid ways, while making the abstract tangible with object lessons, artifacts, case studies, and experiential learning. These are the wheel house of youth ministry to help 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). This sounds much like mission trips, retreats, and church camp. He goes on to say "in terms of participation, imagination requires an opening. It needs willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations" (Wenger 1999, 186). This resembles that day in youth ministry where the new a girl made up a fictitious name for herself that everyone is now calling her and the jr. high boy who
reverberates with energy and well meaning enthusiasm both hop on the church bus for a weekend of encountering Jesus in the wilderness. 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 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 helping the collective to see how they fit into the much larger story of God. 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, 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, 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,
In Christian ministry discipleship can open these new paradigms and modes of relating. Power must be stewarded with humility, love, and an inquisitive spirit to prevent blinding and disempowering those who are following. (Wenger 1999, 180).

The reciprocal role of co-creating while convincing, inspiring, and uniting must be shared by the community gives a sense of ownership to all involved. Shepherding instead of wielding power is critical in aiding students to create boundaries for healthy, life giving discipleship. Using Jesus' model we can propose stories of identity as we describe rather than prescribe what the kingdom of heaven is like. In that spirit procedures and rules become obedience and care in a healthy attachment relationship with each other and with Christ. This is critical because a stated risk of this area is, "with insufficient participation, our relations to broader enterprises tend to remain literal and procedural: our coordination tends to be based on compliance rather than participation in meaning" (Wenger 1999, 187). The Christians community can appear to be just a long list of should's and shouldn'ts without a home base of belonging 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 connects with belonging and relationships, how technology impacts storytelling and co-creation, what factors or structures foster or hinder belonging in youth ministry and so much more.
Conclusion

"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 a co-creator and co-owner of that living in community, where we know the stories because we helped to live and tell them. My student Sam continued attending church with Prim every week, over the years his exploration of belief in the scriptures over lunch grew did his understanding of belonging as he got more active at church. He now not only attends the church, but worships with his wife Prim reads Bible stories to their kids at bedtime.

Tracy never returned after her teary visit to my office. However, I ran into her not long ago and she did discover a church where, 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", access 'resources that enhance their participation" and give them room to co-create with us, open "their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with", and "involve them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value" (Wenger 1999, 10).

We belong to a community where we have collective memories of caring for others as they have cared for us with casserole dishes, text messages, prayers by a hospital bed or side hugs by the football field. To engage, imagine, and align with a community of faith we must be present and open ourselves be active participants, and lean closer than we have before so the
sweet aroma of belonging can permeate our lives and learning trajectory with God's grace and belonging, saying to those who encounter us, "welcome home".
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