

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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December 2013 - Volume 21, Number 12

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Why a Sense of Belonging Matters

With our cultural emphasis on individuality, too many people are lonely and feel disconnected from others in their community. Because a sense of belonging can be linked to economic development, city planners and community organizers attempt to create environments where residents can enjoy a sense of belonging. Local churches also provide some of the fiber that weaves people together by offering them a place to belong and to be known.

Strong congregations organize in ways that help people feel close as they worship together, disclose life's joys and sorrows, and share their deepest beliefs. Strong congregations find approaches to encourage emotional attachment because having a sense of belonging is a basic human need. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who wrote about the hierarchy of human needs, cited belonging as the third most important, coming after only physiological and safety needs. For worshipers, the sense of belonging is how individuals *experience* community. Intentionally fostering a sense of belonging among members is one of the weight-bearing walls in the structure of strong congregations.¹

What Creates a Sense of Belonging?

Focusing on members' vertical relationship with God alone—with little attention to their horizontal relationships with other worshipers—slowly unravels the community's overall health. What exercises increase the congregation's heart rate?

Offering friendship. Close friendships generate feelings of belonging. One of the most important resources a congregation can offer to people is friendship. People flourish when we give them our time, attention, and acceptance. Unfortunately, congregations too often offer "help" to those in need without also offering friendship.² Likewise, worship services may be experienced in the same space, but the opportunity to make friends is not part of the equation. Strong churches create many avenues for people to learn the names and interests of others as well as group social time. Intentionally practicing multiple means for long-term members as well as newcomers to be known and to know

others is sacred work. As John O'Donohue asserts: "Friendship is the nature of God."³

The size of the congregation doesn't make a difference in whether people have close friends within the church or whether their participation is increasing or decreasing. Both large and small churches must engage in practices to address this fundamental human need.

Helping worshipers grow spiritually. When congregations help worshipers grow spiritually, they are also creating stronger bonds with others. Worshipers who are spiritually connected are also emotionally connected. The venue for spiritual growth varies but most people need to devote time to private devotional activities, seek to grow through worship service participation, learn from and with others in a small-group setting, and discover new truths through service and leadership. Frederick Buechner shares the conviction that "when faith stops changing and growing, it dies on its feet."⁴ Congregations that fail to meet these needs of their members place them at spiritual risk.

Creating opportunities for participation and service. Worshiper involvement and participation that grows over time signal that the sense of attachment and belonging is also rising. People gain a sense of



satisfaction from contributing to the congregation's ministries and feel part of a team.

Typically, a sizable percentage show up at worship but sit in the bleachers during other church activities. In the average congregation, only one-third of the worshipers engage in at least four of these ways: attending services; joining a small group; holding a leadership position; being a part of church decision making; and regularly giving money. Some churches believe that they lose members because new attendees drift away not long after joining. But in truth, these newcomers never formed meaningful attachments. Effective congregations build assimilation bridges by which newcomers quickly bond to new friends, groups, and service opportunities.

Meeting age and life cycle needs. Congregations with a healthy heart—those with a high percentage of worshipers feeling a strong sense of belonging—recognize how younger worshipers connect to places (e.g., through sports teams or mission activities). Worshipers younger than forty-four years of age count on being emotionally attached to their congregation as a key ingredient for their commitment and involvement. At the same time, congregations cannot take older worshipers' attachment for granted. In fact, congregations with an older age profile tend to have lower overall scores on sense of belonging measures.

Building positive engagement in the congregation's future vision. When a congregation captures worshipers' imagination about the church's future ministry possibilities, worshipers also have a greater sense of belonging. They are able to envision what the faith community working together can accomplish with God's help. Further, they have been offered a stake in that future by committing to share their time and talents to make it happen. Everyone acts on the shared belief that the best years of the church's ministry lie ahead.

When Being Friendly Is Not Enough

A true congregational strength consistently operates whether or not the worshipers or leadership are aware of it. Further, a real strength is embedded in the behaviors, beliefs, and values of the majority of worshipers. As a result, a number of worshipers can leave without diminishing this strength nor does it depend on a few key leaders. A genuine congregational strength gains momentum and muscle when it becomes central to the conscious identity of the congregation.

Without routine maintenance and regular exercise, the strength of a healthy sense of belonging among church members and the experience of community

quickly deteriorate. Strong congregations demonstrate four pathways to generating feelings of belonging. They:

- Develop groups that help people feel loved and give them the opportunity to express love for others.
- Promote friendships that give newcomers feelings of acceptance and self-esteem.
- Offer service or leadership roles and responsibilities that give people a sense of purpose, meaning, and positive self-identity.
- Present spiritual-growth experiences that deepen members' life-shaping values.

Each of these pathways are like load-bearing walls. Remove one or more of the walls and the structure is weaker and more vulnerable to mission failure.

The Bottom Line

“The hunger to belong is not merely a desire to be attached to something. It is rather sensing that great transformation and discovery become possible when belonging is sheltered and true.”⁵ This description underscores why strong churches make possible the greatest individual transformations and discoveries of all. With the significance of belonging in mind, review the structure, practices, and rituals present in your current worship services, educational programs, small groups, ministry outreach, and decision-making processes.

- Does participation give people the chance to make friends and deepen their relationships with others?
- Does involvement foster greater spiritual growth and understanding?
- Does participation help people to learn more about the congregation's ministry vision and help them find a place to use their gifts toward that purpose?

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

2. Christine Pohl, *Living into Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 170.

3. John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 15.

4. Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 173.

5. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 22.