

## UNDERSTANDING AND CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

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# WALKING EACH OTHER HOME

The early Christian church was a faith community primarily experienced as a social community, established to help the followers of Jesus to support and encourage one another. Drawing on both the words and example of Jesus, the call to discipleship was framed as an invitation to enter into community with other believers, becoming companions on a spiritual journey.

Community remains integral to the Catholic church and all Christian churches. The second Vatican Council emphasized that the Roman Catholic church should be understood not so much as the institutional church but as the collective people of God. The ecclesiology of church emerging under the pontificate of Pope Francis places an emphasis on outreach, community, and accompaniment. Connecting a generation of seekers who actively express a desire to belong and a hunger for community with a Catholic Christian faith tradition that is increasingly speaking the language of accompaniment and explicitly committed to the community building work of the new evangelization should come easily. To the contrary, the evidence suggests a clear and growing disconnect.<sup>1</sup>

“Many young people, even those who were born and baptized into the Catholic church, simply do not associate a sense of belonging with their experience of Church.”

The apparent challenge to establish a clear sense of belonging within traditional communities of faith presents a significant issue for those who engage in the work of catechesis and adult faith formation. Understanding belonging, how it happens and why it matters can provide insight to inform and

support ministry focused on community building in the context of Catholic schools and parishes. An understanding of the psychological imperatives and social contexts that motivate human behaviour to pursue a sense of belonging and of the human impulse to seek community is critically important.

## UNDERSTANDING THE NEED TO BELONG

“The need to belong and the desire to be accepted by others is common across all cultures.”

Much of human behaviour, thought and emotion stems from our psychological need to belong.<sup>ii</sup> Cultural influences, environmental conditions and individual attributes of personality almost certainly impact on the ways that the need for belonging, and acceptance is expressed but there is little question the need for positive regard and a yearning for interpersonal connection is a fundamental human need.

The desire to belong can be viewed through the lens of a variety of academic disciplines, but multiple perspectives and descriptions come to a common conclusion; the impulse to seek community is innately human. Neuroscientists and biochemists focus on the neurochemical interactions and physiological reactions that underpin the way humans instinctively respond to others and seek to interact.

Anthropologists trace the development of social organization, group and communal endeavour from the earliest days of human history, reflecting the reality that social beings were more likely to survive than solitary beings and that group life and cooperation were essential to ensure safety and survival.



Evolutionary scientists posit that competitive advantage and natural selection have reinforced and enhanced the instinctive impulse to seek out human connection over tens of thousands of years, suggesting the development of internal mechanisms that direct human beings into lasting relationships and social bonds.<sup>iii</sup>

**“ Behavioural and social psychologists and sociologists build upon this understanding with models and constructs that introduce psychological motivation, and social norms as additional lenses through which such behaviour can be viewed, suggesting that much of human behaviour, thought and emotion stems from the psychological need to belong. Human life is hard-wired, biologically and psychologically, to seek out social interaction and community.”<sup>viii</sup>**

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## UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY

In earlier eras the experience of community was often defined geographically. Much of the population lived their entire lives in close proximity to the communities into which they were born, primarily because physical and social mobility were more limited. Such communities tended to be smaller and more stable, and interpersonal connections and aspects of personal identity were primarily shaped by family, social status, trade or profession, and religious affiliation. The defining experience of belonging within a community tended to be understood as something that individuals were born into, rather than of their own choosing. Being a part of a family, a community, or a church was not a decision that an individual made but a reality they inhabited.<sup>v</sup>

In contemporary society, the desire for community is, if anything, more pronounced than ever but the notion of what constitutes community has evolved. The need to form and maintain positive, stable interpersonal relationships remains unchanged<sup>vi</sup> but the dynamic which defines a sense of belonging to a particular group has shifted. Today, the experience of community, interpersonal connection and personal identity are more likely to reflect personal life choices than life circumstances. Personal identity is increasingly understood and described as complex and multidimensional, and community is frequently experienced as something fluid

and transient in nature. Individuals routinely identify with multiple communities rather than necessarily the one into which they were born. They are more likely to seek community as a way of expressing their personal identity and more likely to draw aspects of their personal identity from their experience of community.<sup>vii</sup> While family remains important, friendship has taken on greater significance socially and culturally as a source of personal connection.

Communities of convenience coalesce quickly around common interests and personal preferences (e.g., the new parents group, the coffee shop, the technology platform, the fitness trend, or social movement) but dissolve with equal ease. Schools, social groups, professional associations, and workplaces are all potentially sources of community, however, connections with each tend to be of shorter duration today than was typical even a few years ago. In popular culture, the promise of community is sometimes presented as chance encounter or happy accident, simply awaiting discovery and readily within reach, but for many the experience of community proves to be elusive. The transformative impact of technology and a world saturated by social media seemingly has created an abundance of opportunities that purport to offer community, but breadth of opportunity does not automatically translate into depth of experience.

**“ It is increasingly apparent that nominally joining a community does not automatically engender a sense of belonging.”<sup>viii</sup>**

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY IN CATHOLIC FAITH TRADITION

Viewed through the lens of faith, and expressed in theological language, the desire for community and the longing to belong is not merely an expression of human nature but also an expression of the divine nature of humankind. A part of a Catholic worldview is the belief that God exists within this world and can be experienced through encounter with all of creation.

**“ As part of creation, each person, made in God’s image and likeness, and each human encounter provides an opportunity to recognize and experience the divine presence of God.”**

While a complete appreciation of God’s unconditional love and boundless mercy lies beyond human capacity to fully understand, the experiences of human love and acceptance found in relationship with one another are opportunities to begin to understand God’s infinite love.

Christian churches share an understanding that community is at the core of their existence. Sacramental practice and rituals were designed to support moments of discernment, decision, struggle, celebration, and loss within the context of community. In the ritual of baptism, early Christians were promised both to God and to one another. As a matter of belief, they accepted that they belonged to God. As a matter of practice, they pledged themselves to one another as part of a faith community. The common identity and sense of belonging within a community of faith was created to be a source of encouragement and affirmation as they accompanied one another.

*The General Directory for Catechesis of the Catholic Church* (2020) identifies 'belonging to community' as one of the essential dimensions of church and asserts that the parish is called to be a welcoming family where Christians share an awareness of being the people of God. Yet, experience and observation suggest that many young people struggle to see themselves as part of a traditional faith community, and while they actively seek the experience of feeling that they belong, they increasingly do not look for it in church.

To the contrary, the evidence suggests a clear and growing disconnect. Research across Britain, Europe, the United States and Canada consistently identifies a growing population of religious 'nones', most especially within the generation of millennials, and post-millennials.<sup>x</sup> Even those who were born and baptized into the Catholic church simply do not associate a sense of belonging with their experience of Church. Confoundingly, the decline of identification, affiliation, and participation in mainstream religion corresponds with the era when the expressed desire for community and hunger to belong has become so pronounced. It seems counterintuitive, if not outright contradictory, that a generation of individuals so focused and desirous of finding community so consistently overlook the possibility of finding it in organized religion.<sup>x</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING THE DISCONNECT

*Author of Going, Going Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (2018), Bob McCarty, offers a blunt assessment of the current state of the Catholic parish, suggesting that the traditional model of church does not consistently recognize nor prioritize the importance of belonging:

**“We don't have a belief issue; we have a belonging issue. That is a significant statement because it shifts our approach to pastoral ministry with the young church. The starting point becomes belonging, not believing. It's affective, not cognitive.**

There are some voices that will say that the real issue is that young people don't know enough about the faith, and if they knew more, they would want to be Catholic and be disciples of Jesus. I maintain that until they feel they are welcomed, and they belong, they don't want to hear about Jesus. It needs to be a different approach, but it gets you to the same place. I am not saying that belief is not important, but I am saying that in a post-modern secular world, belonging is the starting point.”<sup>xi</sup>

McCarty approaches the topic through the lens of contemporary sociology and concludes that genuine presence, an openness to difference, and a willingness to listen are critical norms of behaviour required if Catholic schools or parishes are sincere in the desire to embrace younger Catholics into the full experience of community. Deeply curious, he asks the following and invites consideration of what it means to be walking each other home:

“What would it mean for us as a faith community if we committed to walk with others on their faith journey? Where we don't determine the destination, but we do walk with them. That takes a degree of humility and probably patience and perseverance. I'm convinced that if we approach this with the mindset of recruitment or bringing them back, they will see that from a mile away and will know that it is not sincere. That is not true accompaniment.

**“Accompaniment means we walk with them. But if we become the kind of community that is willing to walk with our youth and young adults on their spiritual journey then we become the kind of community they want to be a part of.**

I'm convinced that it would energize the parish. They would go from being spectators in the church to participants... Can we create opportunities to listen to their story? There's a subtlety here. There's a difference between listening to understand and listening to respond. Can you suspend judgement and listen to their words and their concerns? That is accompaniment.”<sup>xii</sup>

## EXPLORING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW FAITH COMMUNITIES ARE FORMED

The suggestion that there is a need for intentional focus on building community in churches may seem counterintuitive given that church is a historical archetype of community, but many suggest that a major paradigm shift is necessary to effectively reach the younger generations of Catholics who are increasingly disconnected from the traditional parish structure. Does a sense of belonging result as an outcome when people of shared beliefs and shared values come together as church,



or is belonging more appropriately understood as the starting point, rather than the outcome, of authentic faith community?

## **BELIEVE, BEHAVE, BELONG**

In *Divine Renovation* (2015), Fr. James Mallon offers a thoughtful discussion of the underlying assumptions about the way that faith systems work, and the social and psychological dynamics that are at work as faith communities are formed, exploring two distinct schools of thought. Mallon argues a paradigm of “believe, behave, belong” has shaped the approach to community-building of many churches, including the Catholic Church, for centuries.

“For centuries now there has been an assumption that people coming to believe in Christianity — or in any faith — do it by accepting a set of beliefs about who God is, what the world is and the people in it, how they are related to each other. The ‘price of admission’ to the community is accepting the faith beliefs of the group. Once an individual begins to participate in the community, the example and expectations of other community members become the model and implicit statement of expected and appropriate behaviour. When the beliefs have been sorted out, and commitment to the group has been demonstrated by embracing the lessons about appropriate behaviour and acting accordingly, individuals begin to fit in.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Mallon suggests that while a shift away from this traditional model began in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council, the structure of parishes and the culture of Catholicism at a local level as it currently functions in many places is built around this traditional approach. The assumption that underlies this approach to forming communities of faith is that believers will come and present themselves to a faith community, professing belief, and seeking membership and the progression that leads to belonging includes familiar and predictable steps: register with a parish, attend regularly, participate appropriately, and align your life with the teachings and guidance of the church. These are the decisions and actions that signal legitimate participation and membership within the church, and those who follow these prescribed steps ought to or are assumed to experience a sense of genuine belonging within their chosen faith community.

This paradigm should not be misconstrued to suggest that belonging is unimportant—a worshipping community is integral to Catholic faith practice. However, this approach does reflect an assumption that a sense of belonging is not a starting point, but a desirable and necessary outcome that predictably and naturally develops when individuals share beliefs and adopt common behaviours. Ministry and

outreach shaped by the traditional paradigm often views the phenomenon of disaffiliation from church and weakening Catholic identity (essentially a failure to belong) as a symptom of a church that needs to place greater emphasis on belief and behaviour that can best be addressed through clearer doctrine (apologetics) and/or through greater emphasis on moral teaching in the belief that shared values strengthen social cohesion within a community.

While the global church continues to grow, most especially across Africa and Asia, the pattern of declining interest, identification, affiliation, and participation with organized religion evident in much of the western world leads many to question whether this traditional paradigm accurately reflects our current context. Mallon argues that it is necessary to reverse the traditional approach, and prioritize belonging as the starting point, rather than an outcome, for faith communities if the church is to connect meaningfully with the next generation of believers.

## **BELONG, BEHAVE, BELIEVE**

Pope Francis often emphasizes the importance of evangelization and encourages outreach and accompaniment, observing that the Church needs to go out into the margins because increasingly, the majority of the people out there are not inclined to come in. A traditional model, reflecting a ‘believe, behave, belong’ paradigm is essentially an inward-looking approach, preaching to the converted, rather than an approach embracing evangelization and outreach.

**“ In terms of faith practice, ‘no religious affiliation’ continues to be the fastest-growing segment of the population across most of the western world.”<sup>xiv</sup>**

If churches continue an inward focus on those already inside, trends suggest the churches will be increasingly empty.

Working from the premise that “belong, behave, believe” presents a natural and viable pathway to community building opens alternate approaches to the work of evangelization and faith formation. This perspective is consistent with a contemporary understanding of human psychology, social dynamics, and spiritual growth. Such an approach starts with the underlying assumption that in the current context, churches are more likely to encounter seekers rather than believers, individuals more likely in search of community and connection than doctrine and dogma, and more interested in good ministry than church membership.

A pastoral approach based upon this premise assumes a different progression towards membership in a community of faith;



**“ Seekers are welcomed into a community that focuses on encounter, hospitality, dialogue, and accompaniment.**

Through involvement and participation in the community, feelings of being heard, valued, accepted, and understood result in a sense of belonging and fosters healthy self-esteem. The value placed upon the experience of community encourages individuals to begin to emulate and embrace the practices, values, and behaviour of others within the faith community. A flourishing sense of personal identity, self-esteem and social belonging nurture the readiness and ability to find meaning and purpose in life,<sup>xv</sup> which in turn supports a desire to learn and understand more about the faith. Actively exploring the faith tradition ultimately leads to an understanding and appreciation of God's unconditional love and the underlying story of salvation history.

Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion* (2012), summarizes the spiritual progression that might flow from such an approach to community.

We belong to God and to one another, connected to all in a web of relationships, and there we find our truest selves. We behave in imitation of Jesus, practicing our faith with deliberation as we anticipate God's reign of justice and love. We believe with our entire being, trusting, loving, and devoted to the God whom we have encountered through one another and in the world. We are; we act; we know. Belonging, behaving, and believing — shifted back to their proper and ancient order.<sup>xvi</sup>

## THE FALSE DICHOTOMY OF EITHER/OR

Distinctive schools of thought and alternative understandings about the social and psychological dynamics that are at work as communities of faith are formed need not imply the inevitability of an either/or tension. Contemporary society is dominated by binary thought and polarized opinion, and the church itself is fraught with ideological and ecclesiological tensions. Both contribute to an environment in which false dichotomies are sometimes created unnecessarily that limit the capacity to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue. Catholic tradition understands worshipping together and

**“ Just as a traditional paradigm should not be understood to undervalue the importance of community, an approach based on an alternative paradigm should not be understood to suggest that belief and behaviour are less important aspects of discipleship.**

learning together as important aspects of practice and participation in parishes and in Catholic schools and equally recognizes that a faith community is a place of encounter, and accompaniment. One dimension is not more important than the others — each is integral to the enriching and enlivening experience of a faith community. While both approaches ultimately recognize the importance of community, no single pastoral approach can ensure that a sense of belonging ensues, nor does any single approach preclude the possibility of deep connection. Open and honest dialogue that embraces an approach of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' supports reflective practice that will lead to a deeper appreciation of the complex dynamics and multiple factors that can get in the way of deep human connection.

## LESSONS IN BELONGING

*Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe* (2015), provides insight into the dynamics that sometimes interfere with belonging, framed as lessons to be learned by those in search of belonging, rather than as advice or direction to those extending the invitation to enter into community. In fact, the observations are equally applicable to both. This approach moves the discussion beyond an overly simplistic condemnation of the institutional church for its failure to deliver on its fundamental promise of community and beyond simply bemoaning the decline in community and rise of individualism evident in contemporary culture by framing the challenges as a shared responsibility.

**“ Belonging is a lost art. It's not simply that we have chosen not to belong. It's that we've forgotten how. Up and down the generational continuum, all of us, no matter what our age, require lessons in belonging. Belonging may be a reality promised to us by God, but so too is it a reality we are to participate in. A sense of belonging is within our grasp, but it is not something that happens to us, but with us.”<sup>xviii</sup>**

The truth is that belonging is harder than it seems, and a natural desire for human connection doesn't mean that people are necessarily good at it. Whether in the context of casual social interactions, personal relationships or community building within faith groups connected by common values and similar beliefs, a failure to create and sustain a meaningful connection is only rarely a one-sided affair. The impulses that influence human behaviour in social settings are inherently messy and sometimes contradictory. Faith communities and institutional church sometimes adopt practices and behavioural norms that may undermine



rather than encourage connection, even as they assert the importance of community. Similarly, individuals may act on internalized defensive mechanisms, consciously or unconsciously, and adopt behaviours that become unintended obstacles to belonging.

## VIEWING OBSTACLES AS OPPORTUNITIES

Understanding the predictable patterns and dynamics at play as communities come together is important to inform ministry and outreach for pastors, animators and facilitators who seek to develop authentic community in intentional ways. Understanding the obstacles and barriers that can thwart even the sincerest of intention to nurture a sense of belonging may provide even greater practical value to those who lead such efforts.

‘What stands in the way becomes the way.’ Marcus Aurelius is first credited with these words, and the underlying wisdom that obstacles, viewed properly, can be reframed and understood as something positive because they point the way to opportunities. Brené Brown, author of *Dare to Lead* (2018) draws upon this insight to offer advice to leaders about how to identify concrete actions and responses to address behavioural and organizational cultural challenges that have the potential to get in the way of any desired outcome. Paradoxically, the very things that are initially seen as barriers and impediments are signposts that set out a path forward, pointing towards possible solutions. Viewed from this perspective, scepticism towards organized religion points to the necessity of an invitational approach, and the importance of hospitality. Suspicion of institutional authority and hierarchy points to the necessity of an approach which is person-centered, and participatory. Recognition that a sense of belonging cannot exist in the absence of trust points to the need to commit to actions and approaches that consciously cultivate confidence and earn trust. Reluctance to face uncertainty and risk vulnerability points towards the need for encounter and accompaniment. Difference of opinion and honest disagreement points towards the need for dialogue in spaces that are safe and supportive. What stands in the way becomes the way.

“Genuine Community must be understood, valued and worked on constantly...reflecting deliberate choices that we make again and again about where and with whom to offer our presence.”<sup>xix</sup> We are made for community but being a part of a community is hard sometimes because it requires commitment, compromise, and sometimes even conformity.

“We all long to belong, and to be accepted just as we are but the uniqueness of our being is always held in healthy tension with the reality that we sometimes chafe and struggle to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of others. Preseence, a commitment, to hearing the other, respect, and suspension of quick judgement are all essential if we are to enter into relationship with one another.”<sup>xx</sup>

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Understanding belonging as a dynamic and reciprocal experience that can be consciously cultivated through consistent attention to relationship-building holds many implications for those directly involved in programs and initiatives that encourage and support adult faith formation within Catholic schools and school boards. It is equally crucial for those who do this same work within a parish or community setting or within small communities of faith.

In *Renewing the Promise* (2018), the bishops of Ontario encourage Catholic educators to embrace opportunities for faith formation for all members of the community in ways that are inviting, engaging and purposeful.

“Catholic education must remain committed to the essential work of forming leaders in our faith tradition for the future... We need such leaders if we are to ensure that our schools are genuinely to be communities that build and nurture relationships, capable of accompanying and engaging with those within the community, and ultimately giving witness to the joy of the Gospel.”

While the basic impulse to seek community and the desire to belong are generally acknowledged to be hard-wired aspects of human nature, the actions, reactions, and behaviours that engender a sense of belonging can be learned and intentionally cultivated. Understanding the inherent tensions, motivations, anxieties, and complexities of the paradoxical hunger to belong and reluctance to commit to community provides an important foundation for reflective practices. Listening, discernment, honest appraisal, and constructive dialogue can be a source of important lessons to be learned for those committed to extending welcome, building community and cultivating a sense of belonging.

## Some Questions for Reflection

- How do we define what it means to 'be Catholic?' What does belonging entail?
- What does it mean to be inclusive of those who have a tenuous relationship or connection to the church, especially those who don't fully accept the Church's teachings and practices?
- What does a church that welcomes doubt, rejection, and questioning look like?
- How does the principle 'belonging leads to behaving leads to believing' inform how we accompany young people?
- How does Jesus' ministry with those on the margins inform us in our response to the disaffiliated?
- What is the grace that the disaffiliated are bestowing upon the Church? What is the Holy Spirit telling the church through the stories of those who are disaffiliated?
- How might our Catholic school communities welcome back the disaffiliated?
- What would the Catholic school need to look like/be like to respond to students, staff and families who find themselves on the margins of the Catholic community?
- How do we assist educators to understand young people's sense of connectedness to the church?
- How do we help educators to understand that their own struggles/questions/doubts/and disconnection does not diminish their power as witnesses and examples?
- How do we articulate a compelling and convincing rationale for why Catholic affiliation and practice matter that can elicit thoughtful consideration by young adults who are questioning and doubting the value of faith and religious affiliation with the church?
- How can we, as individuals and as a community, be more aware of the moments in young people's lives that cause struggles of faith and belief, questioning and doubt to emerge? How can we respond in these moments in ways that engage, build connections and nurture faith?

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 2018
- <sup>ii</sup> Pogosyan, *On Belonging*, 2017
- <sup>iii</sup> Benfield, *Our Need to Belong*, 2014
- <sup>iv</sup> Allen, *Making Sense of Belonging*, 2019
- <sup>v</sup> Lane, *Lessons in Belonging*, 2015
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- <sup>ix</sup> Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 2018
- <sup>x</sup> McCarty, *Going, Going, Gone*, 2018
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- <sup>xix</sup> Lane, *Lessons in Belonging*, 2015
- <sup>xx</sup> Saver, *Understanding and Cultivating Community*, 2018



