

TheoCenTriC

Ravings of an amateur pastor, hack theologian, and wannabe mystic

Putting Small Groups in Their Place

A Summary of Joseph R. Myers' [The Search to Belong](#)

Contrary to popular opinion, small groups are not the only place where true community can be experienced. They simply provide one "space" in which genuine "belonging" can occur. There are other "spaces" in which belonging can happen. True community is not limited to one "space" - the personal space of a small group - but is found when "belonging" occurs in all four spaces: public, social, personal, and intimate.

The Search to Belong

Put simply, "[b]elonging happens when you identify with another entity - a person or organization, or perhaps a species, culture, or ethnic group" (p. 25). People are looking for healthy relationships, a home, a place to belong, a group with whom to identify. We could say they are "church-shopping" but the better metaphor is "church-dating":

What I believe may be happening is that people are dating our congregations. They are looking for communities where they can become a part of the family. You do not shop for family. You date to find family. (p. 130)

In recent years the church has assumed that the need for belonging is best (if not exclusively) met in the context of small groups. The conventional wisdom is that true belonging only happens in smaller settings where personal and private matters are shared.

Joseph Myers challenges this assumption in his book, [The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups](#). Myers believes that belonging is more complex and comprehensive than commonly recognized. Belonging occurs in spaces other than the personal space of small group interaction. Belonging also occurs in the public, social, and intimate spaces of life.

Myths of Belonging

In order to demonstrate that belonging is bigger than small group interaction, Myers begins his book by addressing the "common myths" of belonging used to support the theory that small groups are the best (if not the only) place where true community is experienced.

- **More time = more belonging.** "In reality, time has little to do with a person's ability to experience significant belonging" (p. 11). It is possible to immediately identify with a person, group, or organization and thus feel a sense of belonging.
- **More commitment = more belonging.** Myers labels this a "romantic view" that fails to take into account that "when we search to belong, we aren't really looking for commitment. We simply want to connect" (p. 12).
- **More purpose = more belonging.** "Sometimes people who have a common passion and purpose *do* connect. But a common purpose or vision or goal does not guarantee that people will connect" (pp. 15-16). He quotes Kennon Callahan to demonstrate that the search to belong involves more than a common purpose: "People are not looking for ownership of objectives or for functional, organization, institutional goals. Their search is far more profound and desperate than

that. They are looking for home, for relationships. They are looking for the profound depths of community" (p. 13).

- **More proximity = more belonging.** True community often transcends space limitations. It is not necessarily true that closer proximity brings a greater sense of belonging. People separated by continents in chat rooms can experience a greater sense of community than people stuck in the same elevator.
- **More small groups = more belonging.** Small groups are limited in the kind of connections they offer. "Small groups deliver only on one or two specific kinds of connection. 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 two to 2,000 or more" (p. 18).

Because of the limitations of small groups, Myers is "against small groups being used and marketed as the 'end-all' solution for answering the individual's search to belong" (p. 18). Using Edward T. Hall's *proxemics* theory, Myers argues that "there are four spaces we use to develop personalities, culture, and communication. Those spaces are: public, social, personal, and intimate" (p. 20). In order to experience true community "we need significant belonging in all four spaces: public, social, personal, and intimate" (p. 41).

Four Spaces of Belonging

Each space has its own unique way in which belonging is expressed and experienced. Confusion arises when we expect belonging to be expressed and experienced the same way in all four spaces. Each space provides its own unique way of experiencing community. To expect otherwise is to invite frustration. Following are the four spaces with a short description highlighting the distinct way belonging is experienced in each space:

- **Public belonging** happens when we connect through outside influences. It isn't about connecting person to person; it is about sharing a common experience. Think of fans at a football game, members of the PTA, shoppers at a grocery store. In each case an outside influence brings these people into a common grouping. They connect because of the outside influence, not because of shared personal information" (p. 41).
- **Social belonging** is often denigrated as superficial, but it is vitally important. "In many ways, social belonging is the 'small talk' of our relationships" (p. 45). The neighbor relationships of social belonging allow us to "share snapshots" of who we are with others. A shared social space also "provides a safe selection space for us to decide with whom we would like to grow a 'deeper' relationship" (p. 46).
- **Personal belonging** involves the sharing of private information. It takes place in a safe setting where trustworthy confidences are built. "[W]e connect through sharing private - although not 'naked' - experiences, feelings, and thoughts" (p. 47). The people to whom we belong are friends or "close friends" rather than acquaintances.
- "In **intimate space**, we share 'naked' experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Very few relationships are intimate. Intimate relationships are those in which another person knows the 'naked truth' about us and yet the two of us are 'not ashamed'" (p. 50).

"Putting People in Their Space"

"All belonging is significant. Healthy community... is achieved when we hold harmonious connections within all four spaces" (p. 51). Confusion occurs when we think community is confined mainly to the personal space of small groups. True community is experienced when we discover belonging in each

space - the public, social, intimate, as well as the personal space of small groups. If small groups are promoted as the only or best environment in which true community will be experienced, they will ultimately prove unable to bear the weight of expectations.

A further problem arises when people expect personal relationships in small groups to be intimate relationships. This dilutes the meaning of the word, "intimate." If we use the term "intimate" for how we relate in the personal space of small groups, what term is left to describe our relationship with our spouses or best friends?

If we expect every personal relationship to be intimate we will soon experience frustration and disillusionment. Intimacy is not the ultimate goal of belonging, but rather, the way belonging is experienced in intimate space.

We tend to think of intimacy as the "Mecca" of relationship. But would all relationships be better if they were intimate? Think of all the relationships in your life, from bank teller to sister to coworker to spouse. Could we even adequately sustain all these relationships if they were intimate? (p. 51)

If we demand that every relationship, in order to be significant, must be personal or intimate, we will ultimately frustrate our attempts at personal and intimate relationships. At the same time, we will ignore the great value of public and social relationships.

We must escape the temptation to make "intimacy" the goal of every type of belonging. Community and belonging are bigger than "intimacy" and are experienced beyond the boundaries of intimate relationships. In order to experience the breadth of true belonging, all four spaces must be viewed as valid, significant, and important components of true community.

Again, human beings communicate and develop a sense of belonging in all four spaces. All four spaces are where we connect, grow roots, and satisfy our search for community. And harmony among the spaces - all four of them - builds healthy community in individuals and organizations.

Notice that I am not saying that we must process people from public to social to personal to intimate.

Notice that I am not saying that "intimate" is our ultimate goal. Intimate is not the most important, the most real, or the most authentic relationship.

The secret is to see all connections as significant. All of these spaces are important, real, and authentic in people's lives. (p. 63)

Belonging is More (Not Less) Than Small Groups

"A healthy strategy for those working to build community entails allowing people to grow significant relationships in all four spaces - *all four*" (p. 52). According to Myers "a congregation is healthy when it promotes significant belonging in all four spaces and helps people grow in each space" (p. 107). We cannot create belonging but we can surely remove obstacles to belonging in each space (see pp. 72-73).

The goal is "harmony," not "balance":

'Balance' implies equal amounts. I am not promoting equal amounts of significant belonging in each of the four spaces. What I am promoting is that health is found when we have a harmonious relationship among all four spatial connections. (pp. 147-148)

This means that we will have far "more public belongings than social. More social than personal. And very few intimate" (p. 51).

Truth be told, even in the best "small-group"-centered churches, only about 30 - 35% of the congregation participates. Furthermore, "only a fraction of the 30 to 35 percent who do participate are actually being helped" (72). Myers believes we are going in the wrong direction when we pressure everyone to have a "small-group" experience. We do this when we assume that only the small-group experience provides true community and belonging.

Small groups are good, but they are not the only or best solution to creating community within a church setting. A healthy church must seek to provide environments where true belonging can occur in all four spaces. A healthy church must not undermine the value of belonging in the public or social space. A healthy church must not create unattainable expectations in regard to small groups by demanding that each small group meet the intimate needs of each individual. A regular evaluation of how a church encourages belonging in each space would go a long way toward promoting true community.

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[Mike Klein](#) on Nov 16 2003:

About the myths of belonging. Hopefully the book gives us some reasons to believe that Mr. Myers has some status to make these claims. My other concern is that his "myths" are just as dogmatic as any book on small groups that I've read. Do any of the things listed automatically result in "belonging", of course not. But can any of those things result in belonging? I think so. I have seen each of those "myths" result in belonging although not necessarily in a small groups setting. For me I mostly agree that the small groups movement oversold the potential benefits, mostly because a great small groups ministry requires a lot more work than most churches are willing or able to commit to it. And I also would agree that small groups are not the only route to belonging or even the best route in many cases. But I'm concerned that the myths could convince some that maybe they don't "belong" because their feeling of belonging comes from their small group involvement.

Error!

[Roger Hiduk](#) on Nov 15 2003:

I agree to a point. If "small groups" are just another program there is a good chance that "belonging" won't take place. This assumes that "belonging" is the primary purpose. Belonging is important but is not necessarily the only desired outcome of a "small group". What about mission? Also, in a traditional setting public and social belonging sometimes take place on Sunday morning, for better or worse. Deposit 2 cents.