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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO COMMUNITY
CREATING BELONGING BY INTENTIONALLY INCORPORATING CHRISTIANS INTO
THE LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Michele Musegades Doel
March 2020

Approved by:	Dr. William Thompson	Advisor
	Dr. Glenn Nielsen	Reader
	Dr. Timothy Dost	Reader

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To my friends that encouraged me, my family that guided me,
and my husband that grounded me.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

The Apostle Paul, Acts 20:28

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PREFACE

One Sunday, a couple of minutes into the start of the church service I was attending, a family with three young children entered the narthex. They hesitantly opened the doors and entered the sanctuary before selecting seats in the back row. They did not look like the Caucasian families in the pews around them. It was clear from their awkward posture and their fidgety children that they did not know what book the rest of us were reading from or how to know what page to be on. A woman and I occasionally leaned over with smiles to offer guidance so they could feel comfortable and join in with our worship. A few more minutes in and the squirming children were enticing glances from several people sitting in that section of the sanctuary. A bit longer and an usher walked over from his seat three rows ahead and let the parents know that “if they would like, there is a nursery for the children downstairs where they might be more comfortable.”

What that usher did not know, was that the children were too old for the nursery, the family did not know how to get to the nursery, and that the nursery was actually not open that day because no staff had been found to care for children. In embarrassment, the parents got up to leave. They had made it through one hymn and a couple Scripture readings (which they clearly couldn't hear as they were busy trying to ignore the dirty looks and quiet their children). The other woman and I caught the parents on their way out and offered to take the children downstairs so the parents could enjoy the rest of the worship service. That woman ended up giving up her time of worship to watch the children in the narthex since there was no childcare.

I do not know if that family ever returned. I actually would be shocked if they did. Why should they want to come back to a large, confusing building without maps or directions to

things like the nursery, where people give dirty looks to those who are not aware of their insider knowledge of what to do during a worship service and how to use a bulletin.

The motivation for this paper came from situations like this one and many others where I saw new people looking lost in a congregation. It is important for congregations to continue to invest in people once they get them inside the doors of the church. I long to see congregations be intentional in their efforts of helping both new and longtime members to continually grow in faith and feel at home with one another. It is only inside those environments that people will be strengthened to go out into the sin-stained world and boldly proclaim the Good News

ABSTRACT

Doel, Michele, M. "Building a Bridge to Community: Creating Belonging by Intentionally Incorporating Christians into the Life of the Congregation." Master's thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2020. 86 pp.

How simple is it for a new member to become incorporated into the life of your church? There is a creational need for all humans to have a sense of belonging to God and to those around them. This human need for relationships and community means that congregations *should* be experts at involving people and building up their relationships with one another. This thesis builds off the author's experience as an intern at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Columbus, Indiana. It discusses programs that help people assimilate and that build a sense of belonging in community. It then considers the disconnect that causes many people to miss out on programs and leads to inactivity. It lastly fills this gap by discussing methods that congregations can apply to build bridges to community producing programs in order to aid their members in building community and finding a sense of belonging among the congregation.

CHAPTER ONE

INCORPORATION AT ST. PETER'S

Stating the Problem

When people join the large congregation of St. Peter's, they quickly admire the architectural beauty of the sanctuary, the congenial head pastor, the caring and teaching associate pastors, and the emphasis on programs for community support and outreach. The senior pastor leads an engaging "Bible Investigation Class" for those who want to become members or just learn Lutheran theology and the history of the congregation. For those who are ready to continue learning or to serve, there are multiple Bible study classes, small groups, and outreach ministries to join. One such class helps people learn their spiritual gifts. St. Peter's is a place of rich congregational involvement. The description below will illustrate that.

What is this like for new members? While I served as an intern at St. Peter's, I spoke with a number of new members. Most of the people that talked to me about their life as new members admitted they felt like they were on their own to find a group to join. They didn't see the spiritual gifts class as helpful in guiding them to their next phase of spiritual growth. With four church services, five staff led classes, over forty small groups, and numerous outreach programs in which to volunteer—a place ripe for opportunities to become involved—it can quickly feel like an overwhelming maze of options. New people can feel lost in the wrong social crowd, confused in a Bible study that is too in-depth, or exhausted from volunteering in places that are not a good fit for their gifts. However, when they are joined to the right group, they can grow in their talents, in faith, and in healthy relationships. Below, I will describe the wealth of opportunities for engagement at St. Peter's. Then I will return to the challenges for incorporation of new members in this rich congregational life.

Life at St. Peter's

During my deaconess internship I was able to see a church that intentionally seeks to meet people's spiritual and relational needs. St. Peter's Lutheran is a church of thirty-five hundred members with twelve hundred people worshipping each weekend. It is located in the town of Columbus, Indiana. Building community and caring for people as individuals are two of the main objectives of the church's staff. One of the values described in their Vision Statement is that "the people of St. Peter's reflect the heart of God... with a personalized approach."¹ "Personalized" indicates that there is never just one route to getting involved or to finding a solution to a problem or question. When someone walks into St. Peter's with an out-of-the-box question or an out-of-the-ordinary set of circumstances, it becomes an opportunity to exemplify the love of Christ by helping them with a personalized approach. This individualized approach happens even in simple situations such as if a person were to walk into the office with questions about how to set up online tithing. Rather than simply printing out the how-to sheet for the person to work through at their home computer, a staff person would help them walk through the online automatic transfer of funds program step by step at an office computer. Besides desiring to show love to people as unique individuals, St. Peter's staff works to help people find a place to belong in this large congregation. The goal is to develop a close-knit group of people that shows each other God's love so they feel like they have a role in the church.

St. Peter's uses a variety of activities and ministries to help give people a sense of belonging. Below is a description of ways their ministries go beyond serving a single purpose or mission to meet people's needs in a variety of ways.

¹ "Our Purpose & Vision," St. Peter's Lutheran Church, accessed November 8, 2019, <http://stpeterscolumbus.org/about-spl/our-purpose-vision>.

Worship Service Offerings

As a large church, St. Peter's offers multiple worship opportunities. The variety of services provides both intended and unanticipated results. First, the times of the services offer the factor of convenience; the options are Sunday early or late services, Saturday night service, and Thursday night service. Second, the four services offer variety. Two of the services, called "Classical Praise," are traditional Lutheran services that essentially follow the order of service found in a hymnal. The other two services, called "New Song," are a contemporary style, having a band rather than an organ. They have different songs, but still loosely align with the traditional order of service.

A benefit of the different service times includes access to worship for those who work or are out of town on the weekends. The variety of music used increases the opportunity for people to feel comfortable in worship with the style of music most preferred. The unexpected benefit of these worship options is that people have begun to identify themselves with the service they most regularly attend. Like when fans ask who you are cheering for when turning on the football game, St. Peter's members ask one another what service you attend and what style you prefer. It quickly becomes a way that people feel unity with one another when they learn that they attend the same worship service or share the same style of service at a different time. With multiple services people find a sense of belonging in unanticipated ways as they seek to feel comfortable and connected in a large, eight-hundred-person sanctuary.

Small Group Ministry

As St. Peter's sought to create community and unity, they instituted an organized small group program. They launched it with a fall sermon (and forty-day devotion) series. As deaconess intern I was tasked with creating new groups, organizing the material to be dispersed,

and planning a method for organizing and tracking the small groups and participants. After arriving in mid-July, I quickly learned as much as I could about the church and current small groups. I then prepared to launch the new small group program in sync with the fall sermon series that began in mid-August.

The fall series was called “The Red Letter Challenge.” It was based on the book by the same name, written by Lutheran pastor Zach Zehnder.² Accompanying the daily devotional book were materials that Pastor Zehnder prepared for use by the children’s ministry, confirmation classes, and small groups. The weekly curriculum tied the devotions that were to be read individually to the pastor’s sermons. This gave an opportunity for people to learn beyond what they heard in church and to discuss the materials with fellow members. The fact that St. Peter’s used each piece of optional material was an intentional effort to build community across each age group. The goal was to strengthen the sense of belonging that participants felt as everyone was learning the same information. The fall series successfully unified the congregation around a central goal: to work through forty days of learning together and take on the challenges suggested in the devotions. After the fall series, the small group program continued. Through the following winter, Advent, and Lenten sermon series there were materials available for groups to use based on the weekly sermon. Other options were also available for groups, such as a video-based study, Bible book study, or topical study.

Throughout the year the staff learned how best to serve and plan for the small group ministry. Many groups joined that had been originally created years prior when the church did a 40-day study and sermon series on the book *The Purpose Driven Life*.³ Since those groups

² Zach Zehnder, *Red Letter Challenge: A 40 Day Life Changing Experience*, (Mount Dora, FL: Red Letter Living, 2017).

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

already had a plan for who would meet and who would lead, many of them did not tell the staff that they were meeting. Therefore, they were not tracked or supported by the staff. However, they were still receiving the benefits of belonging to the large congregation and to their small group. The benefits include the resource of the church and the Christian friendship and support that comes from the small group atmosphere. We learned from those groups that we could not know everyone who needed the group materials. To ensure that everyone had the ability to lead their group, we put the materials on our website so anyone could download them. Therefore, the materials were not limited only to the known leaders on the email list.

We also learned throughout the course of the year from the small groups whose participation surpassed our expectations. We planned and created groups that worked well for people's schedules. We attended to social factors and compatibility needs. However, some groups were just random collections of people, who joined together because of how scheduling worked out. Yet these groups often "opened up" the most and developed a strong sense of identity as one unit. They taught us that age, stage of life, career and health needs may have little to do with building community and a sense of belonging in a small group. We witnessed that we could not entirely predict how people will grow together. We observed amazing ways that God works through people to build up His children.

Volunteer Opportunities

Several volunteer opportunities to serve through the church also creates a shared sense of belonging and identity at St. Peter's. While some volunteer ministries only meet a couple of times per year, others meet twice a month or every week. The fact that people have shared hobbies, talents, or passions unifies them and gives a sense of identity. This identity (as one who participates in a particular volunteer group) gives people the opportunity to feel a sense of

belonging to the group, its goal, and its leader/organizer. Therefore, volunteering with particular groups, focused on a specific task, offers a great opportunity for members to gain a sense of belonging.

Worship Service Volunteers

Much like the worship services offer ways for people to feel connected to one another, worship teams create a sense of comradery. Some people who volunteer to help with worship services do so simply to serve. However, multiple teams create a sense of shared identity through serving together. The roles that people serve for the worship services include those of ushers, sound system operators, slide projector operators, communion preparers and assistants, security volunteers, and offering assistants. By working with the same people each time they serve, they build relationships among fellow members. By serving together, they develop a close sense of belonging, ownership, and pride in their church family.

Auto Maintenance Ministry

This ministry hosts an event twice a year for volunteers to work on cars belonging to neighbors of the church. People who sign up their vehicle rarely have sufficient funds for automobile maintenance, even to get an oil change or investigate a check engine light. The volunteers develop teamwork by planning ahead for the type of servicing the vehicles will need and by working in sync on event day. Through this biannual event, these mechanics and car enthusiasts find identity and an incorporation into the church's mission to serve and to witness to the surrounding neighbors.

Church Choir, Orchestra and Band

While the choirs and orchestra did not perform as regularly as usual due to a director

vacancy during my internship, a clear sense of belonging and community existed between those who participated in church music. Community is part of the DNA of these groups. The rehearsals include social time for people to connect with one another. They also have a group prayer time so people can share about life and their prayer requests with one another. The bands for the “New Song” worship services also have a sense of belonging as the organizer ensures opportunities for getting to know one another personally through group prayer time, social time after practices, and group planning meetings at a local coffee house to grow friendships in a relaxed setting.

Lunch Buddies and Reading Buddies Programs

Students in St. Peter’s elementary day school who are struggling socially or with academic performance are paired with volunteers from the church in the Lunch Buddies program. Once a week the lunch buddy takes the student from the cafeteria to have a special lunch in the church’s café meeting area. Likewise, students in second, third, and fourth grades who are not at the appropriate reading level are put into the Reading Buddies program. Adults from the church who volunteer for this program sit with a student four mornings a week to help them grow their reading skills and vocabulary. These programs offer the opportunity for adults to feel included in the mission of the church by reaching out to school students. They also develop relationships with the students and show that they are valued. Overall, the programs show students they are cared for by the church and have a place where they belong.

Yard Dawgz

This ministry, organized by one of the staff, invites members to adopt a section of the church property to care for. Volunteers are in charge of mowing, raking, gardening, and seeding

any lawn or flowerbed in their section. People who volunteer to care for the property have a sense of belonging to the church by taking responsibility for its care and upkeep.

Nursery and Youth Volunteers

People have multiple places to volunteer in the care of children and young people. These include the nursery, children's ministry, junior high youth, confirmation students, and high school youth. Among each age group, the staff members in charge intentionally grow the volunteers by having quarterly Bible studies and training meetings. These provide direction and create a sense of belonging. The nursery volunteers always serve on the same team so they can grow relationships with one another. The children's ministry volunteers meet quarterly to be encouraged through a devotion and to be supported by having a time to ask clarifying questions and seek guidance. The high school youth leaders meet for dinner bi-monthly so the director can show appreciation for their work. It is also an opportunity for the leaders ask questions, learn about upcoming devotion topics, and receive guidance for working with their students. By creating strong teams of volunteers and investing time to prepare the volunteers, the youth ministry directors help them grow together and identify with the ministry in which they serve. They also grow in relationships with the young members of St. Peter's.

Angels of Love ministry event

Those who serve on the yearly Angels of Love planning board have a great amount of joy in working on this annual event. It has been held at St. Peter's for many years and has become a Christmas tradition, both for the church and the city of Columbus. This event helps the community to find a sense of belonging with the church.

Angels of Love takes place in the days leading up to Christmas. Families who are unable to

afford special Christmas gifts for their children are invited to provide a “wish list” for each child. St. Peter’s members then buy and wrap gifts for the families to pick up at the event. When they arrive for the event, families gather in the school gym for songs and a short Christmas sermon. They then pick up their bags of Christmas gifts, as well as select items from a room of donated supplies. These supplies include ornaments, hats, gloves, toothbrushes, and socks. Despite the loud noise of families who are unaccustomed to sitting through chapel services, this event makes a big impact on the many neighbors who attend.

In fact, in a number of instances, people from the community who participated in the Angles of Love ministry listed St. Peter’s as their church home, for example, when they entered the hospital. They look to St. Peter’s in time of need and know it is a place that will show love to them. Therefore, the coordinators of this event have discovered that people consider themselves part of St. Peter’s because this yearly event is their connection to the Gospel each Christmas. It has become an amazing opportunity both to exemplify Christ’s love and to teach about Jesus’ life and mission.

Bible Investigation Class

St. Peter’s Bible Investigation Class teaches the basic Biblical truths that St. Peter’s Lutheran Church believes. One takes this class to become a member of the church. It is also open to people who are interested in simply learning about the church. Those who are already members also can attend if they want a refresher course on why St. Peter’s holds the beliefs it does. The head pastor, Mark Teike, makes the class an engaging hour where participants get to know one another during the time spent together. Many friendships are formed in this class and participants get to know and connect to Pastor Teike. They also grow in a sense of belonging to the congregation. The class helps people better understand not only what the church believes, but

also why it believes so. Essentially, Pastor Teike helps write the faith story of the attendees into the one-thundred-fifty-four-year-old story of the congregation.

SHAPE Class

When people become members of St. Peter's, having completed the Bible Investigation Class with Pastor Teike, they can choose to take the SHAPE class led by George Denholm, a Director of Christian Education and long-time staff member. In this class, people take multiple tests to learn about themselves in an effort to connect with opportunities to serve and grow in the church. The tests include a DiSC personality assessment, a spiritual gifts assessment, and a passions assessment. They learn about the church's views on volunteering and how individuals are unique. They study together what Scripture says about our spiritual gifts, passions, and use of time. This class does a good job of teaching people about themselves. It is a great, intentional step in helping people feel valued and that they belong to the heart and mission of the congregation. However, it does not always successfully connect them to a ministry to get involved with or meet people.

Youth Ministry

The youth at St. Peter's are given multiple opportunities to gain a sense of belonging to the congregation. These opportunities are offered so that they can learn to be part of the church as they near adulthood. The high school youth group uses small groups when they discuss the evening's devotional message. The groups are based on gender and the class year they are in school. Two to three adult leaders guide conversation and build relationships in each group. This small group layout gives the youth one or more adults at the church they know and can trust. Through the leaders' investment of time, the youth learn that the congregation cares for them. The church, youth group, and worship services become a place they feel welcome and included.

Each week St. Peter's hosts Grilled Cheese Thursday for high school students in Columbus. During their lunch period students can come to the St. Peter's youth rooms to eat grilled cheese sandwiches at no cost. This opportunity for the St. Peter's youth and other students to be served by youth leaders increases their comfort level with the church. Thus, they will feel at home when walking into the building and spending time in the youth rooms.

Furthermore, the youth ministry during the Sunday school is varied. The mix of activities is for the purpose of helping the students become more involved in the church. The youth's involvement is especially important in serving to help them transition to church life as adults. The students rotate quarterly through different Sunday morning opportunities. The opportunities they rotate through are to attend a high school students only class together, then join one of the adult classes, then volunteer in a ministry that runs during the Bible study hour. By all doing the same rotation for the same quarter, the students can talk about their experiences and see other students attending similar opportunities in the adult ministries. These opportunities help the youth see how they fit in as an adult in the congregation by slowly incorporating them into a variety of Sunday school hour activities. By sampling some of the different opportunities, they gain a sense of belonging to both the adult classes and to some of the volunteer groups.

Celebration Picnics

Each fall the church embarks on a campus wide sermon series to kick off the congregational activities. At the end of the series, the staff members find creative ways to bring the congregation together to celebrate as a congregation. After some series, they have had a Sunday afternoon barbeque with games for kids and live music. At the halfway point of one of these sermon series, they had ice cream outside the narthex after each service. The church members at these events celebrated that they had learned together in community and grew

together through the social interactions. Therefore, these picnics serve as celebrations of milestones in learning and growing as Christians, are opportunities to meet fellow members, and enable small groups to celebrate the end of their Bible study series. All of this reinforces their sense of belonging to the church and its community.

Wednesday Night Connections

On Wednesday nights, St. Peter's hosts a "Connections" time of a community dinner and multiple classes. Some of the classes are Bible studies, some are support groups, and others are meetings for various groups or boards. Both St. Peter's members and people from the community attend the classes and dinner. This dinner has become a place of fellowship where people can feel included in the life of the church and be involved beyond worship services.

Support Groups

A key component of the Wednesday Night Connection evenings are the multiple support groups. They offer support and belonging for many different needs and for various stages of life. By meeting the needs of these people in difficult situations and offering a safe place to talk about shared struggles, St. Peter's shows participants that the church loves and cares for them. They grow to see the church as a welcoming place and feel accepted and included. Four of the main support groups are Caring Community, Angels of Hope, CrossSpan and addiction support groups.

Caring Community

The Caring Community group is for people dealing with a variety of struggles and hard times. These struggles include loss of a job, mental illness, balancing finances while living in poverty, and other challenges. Led by Debbie Teike and based on her devotional book *The Art of*

Invitation, the group teaches tools for success while offering participants encouragement and tips for resources to aid them. It helps both with personal growth and relationship building. The group is social work based but brings in faith and encourages participants to pray and to attend worship. Despite being open to anyone in the community, everyone can feel a sense of belonging in this group. Attendees can see that St. Peter's is a church that cares for them.

Angels of Hope and CrossSpan

Angels of Hope is a bi-weekly group for families who have suffered a miscarriage or infant death. In December they host a memorial service to remember each lost child. This comforts people and validates the grief and loss that family members feel. This ministry also gives each family a gift in honor of their departed child.

CrossSpan is a weekly group for families that care for someone with Alzheimer's disease. Caregivers can attend with or without their loved one. The group often operates differently each week based on who attends and whether or not a loved one with Alzheimer's is having a particularly difficult evening. This group gives support for many people in town by offering guidance to those whose loved ones are affected. It is a place where attendees understand the struggles of being a caregiver and are able to discuss their challenges without judgement. The support for those attending Angels of Hope or CrossSpan comes from leaders who have had the same or similar struggles as those who attend. This creates comradery between the leaders and members of the groups. It also gives attendees a sense of belonging to St. Peter's as the church that hosts the group supporting them.

Addiction support groups

St. Peter's has a full counseling program with six counselors and an intensive outpatient

program. As part of the outpatient program, clients must also attend two support meetings per week. These support groups meet throughout the town and surrounding area. The church also hosts multiple of these addiction support groups to aid clients and others who struggle with addiction in the community. The support groups the church hosts are: Overeaters Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery (a Christian, twelve step program for anyone struggling with hurt, pain or addiction), and Smart Recovery (a four point program to help people learn applicable skills and tools to recover from any type of addictive behavior). Each group is a safe community in which attendees grow and belong. By church leadership participating in leading the meetings, people also see that the church cares for them. The leadership's involvement gives attendees a sense of belonging to St. Peter's. The groups often become steppingstones to people becoming part of the congregation.

Fitness Classes

St. Peter's has a fitness instructor and hosts multiple workout classes each week. The purpose of these classes is to help people honor their bodies through good health practices. The design of this ministry program includes affordable workout classes and sports training camps. It offers a path for people from the community to get involved with the church. While this group serves multiple functions, it does aim for building community. Classes can be places where people feel included in activities at the church and can serve as transitions into attending worship. As a result, participants may be incorporated into the congregation as members.

Care Ministry Team

The care of the sick and homebound of St. Peter's is spearheaded by the Care Ministry pastor. He works with a team of members who are ready to share the love of Christ with their brothers and sisters. This team shares the load of caring for shut-ins by assigning a couple of

people to visit to each volunteer. The volunteers then visit the shut-ins weekly or monthly depending on individual needs and desires. The care team also ensures that someone is driving to all of the hospitals and rehabilitation facilities to pray with those who have been admitted on a daily basis. The people being served may have fallen ill and need prayer. They may also be church members who are anticipating the birth of a child. This team illustrates the love of Christ by reminding others that they belong to the flock of St. Peter's and are loved by Christ. The team meets monthly for support, advice, and Bible study so that they too are supported. They are strengthened by one another as they serve, pray, and grow.

Young Adult Friday Nights

St. Peter's is growing its ministry to young adults. Young adults are identified as those who are starting their careers and/or those who are in the early years of marriage and family life. This ministry includes St. Peter's young adult small groups and Friday night volleyball or basketball games. St. Peter's is increasing their intentional efforts to ensure that the young adults of the church do not feel overlooked. As they invest time with other young adults, these members begin to feel an additional level of inclusion in the life of the congregation.

Problem to be Studied

People who enter a church can vary greatly in their capacity to become engaged and develop a sense of belonging. While one person from the start never misses a weekly church service and volunteers wherever she can, another person may struggle to take a Bible class for the first time. While one person may already have friends or relatives in the church, another person may not know any congregation members. Still another person may be desiring to get engaged and want to join this church, while another may just be exploring whether this is the right community for himself. What every one of these people have in common is that they have

individual needs to belong. A congregation like St. Peter's, as is described above, is a wonderful place for meeting the needs of many people—both on their membership roster and people that are served by their programs. However, a plan for engaging people who do not yet sense they belong must be in place. How people get connected in a way that best meets their needs for their phase of life is important to discern and plan out. Therefore, the problem this thesis will address is how we might better connect people to the various opportunities for involvement that a congregation may have so that they more fully belong to the church.

The Thesis

In order to help people become involved and active in the life of the church, congregations need to be aware of the different ways that they are able to serve people. This awareness begins with identifying all of the normal activities available for participants so that a church can become attentive to the various ways it can meet the needs of its new people. Then congregations need to discern how best to connect new people to ministries for their needs and gifts. Without an intentional process, people are often plugged into the group that is the easiest to connect with or the volunteer opportunity that is the most desperate for help. If a church were instead to invest time in supporting perspective members and longtime members by joining them to the right study to grow their faith or volunteer group to use their talents, this effort could help churches thrive and grow. It could also help their new members to gain a greater sense of belonging.

This paper will explore the need for an intentional bridging process to assist congregations in meeting the basic creational need for belonging. It will use this rich description of St. Peter's, whose ministry effectively addresses these needs but lacks an intentional bridging process, to illustrate this need. It will provide a theologically grounded approach and explore ways to fill this gap in congregational ministry.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMANITY’S CREATIONAL NEED TO BELONG

Created for Belonging in Community

In the beginning, God created the world and saw that it was good. He created Adam, the crown of his creation. Adam was created in God’s image and lived in the good world. Yet, God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).¹ So he created Eve. God knew that Adam needed a helper fit for him. Nelson Searcy remarked that “God formed us for relationships with the words, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”² After creating both Adam and Eve, God said of his creation, “it was very good.”³ So from the beginning, being created in freedom, “the human creature was and is formed by the hands of God to exist in relationship with God himself and neighbor.”⁴ Human creatures require relationships with God and relationships with those around them, living in community.

Belonging in Community with God

Genesis 1 says on the sixth day, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’”⁵ And so, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁶ Martin Luther saw these verses as the foundation for his

¹ Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

² Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 128.

³ Gen. 1:31

⁴ Joel Caleb Oesch, “More Than a Pretty Face: Using Embodied Lutheran Theology to Evaluate Community-Building in Online Social Networks” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2015), 103.

⁵ Gen. 1:26

⁶ Gen. 1:27

understanding of God’s form for human life.⁷ To Luther the creation story shows “that we have been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and that it was not good for Adam to be alone (Gen. 2:18). The human creature was fashioned to live in community and to serve God as the instrument by which he reflects His love, care, and concern for the rest of creation throughout all areas of creation.”⁸

In his attempts to imagine the peace and greatness of life in the Garden, Bonhoeffer said it is hopeless to imagine that lost reality without viewing it through Christ.⁹ While living in the Garden of Eden in the time between creation and the fall, Adam and Eve had no fear of interactions with God. There was nothing hidden between God and Adam and Eve. They were in community both in a creator/creation relationship and with a physical/visible interaction. God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, as is seen in the story of the fall.¹⁰ Able to speak face to face with God as they interacted with the “good” creation God had completed, there was nothing to hide in their holy and trusting friendship. As will be discussed below, with his original design of creation, God established the pattern of humankind’s need to belong in community with others.

Belonging in Community with Others

Adam dwelt with the animals he had named, but that was not enough for him. He needed

⁷ This is highlighted by Luther in his Table of Duties, at the end of the Small Catechism. He does so by listing Bible verses that describe how Christians are to live in various vocations. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 365–67.

⁸ Robert Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism* (Hutchinson, MN: Crown, 1992), chap. 8.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 37.

¹⁰ Gen. 3:8–9

community. God created Adam and Eve individually. Unlike the rest of creation, in which he made multiple creatures each day, God made just one man. Furthermore, he brought life into Adam through the divine breath of life.¹¹ Eve was then created when it was clear that Adam could find no counterpart among the other creatures. They were all missing what made Adam special: the divine breath of God.¹² Eve was “specially and carefully made by God’s hands, created from the very material of man... (as) the resolution to the aloneness which was ‘not good.’”¹³

Some scholars teach that Gen. 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,’” simply proves God “wants to create a being analogous to himself, to whom he can speak, who will listen and speak to him.”¹⁴ This infers that humans are to be in community or relationship with God. However, other scholars take it further. By noting the plural nouns, they teach that being made in God’s likeness means humans were created to be in community like God is in community with the Trinity.¹⁵ Part of God’s “‘divine nature’ is the plurality of God and his own craving for community. God’s created testimony makes it plain that people need each other. Believers understand that everyone hungers for community, first, because of who God is, and further, because we bear God’s communal image.”¹⁶ God is both three persons and one God and so exists in relationship for eternity. Likewise, humans were made to be in relationships. It is

¹¹ Joy Elasky Fleming, *Man and Woman in Biblical Unity: Theology from Genesis 2–3* (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 1993), 5.

¹² Fleming, *Man and Woman*, 7.

¹³ Fleming, *Man and Woman*, 7.

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 10.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis”, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1, *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 55–57.

¹⁶ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 25.

clear that humans are made to be in relationships with God and with others.

In the Garden of Eden, living in community, Adam and Eve had work to do. Adam was “God’s estate manager.”¹⁷ They were to work and protect the land and animals in the Garden.¹⁸ In their relationship with one another, they felt no shame nor recognized their nakedness. Before the fall they had nothing to hide from one another or from God. According to Atkinson, “there was between them an openness and a unity, not masked by guilt, not disordered by lust, not hampered by shame.”¹⁹ The original, ideal community is illustrated briefly in Genesis 2 and then by contrast in Genesis 3 when God uncovers what they lost by their first act of disobedience. Before the fall, community was a beautiful, trusting thing. Adam and Eve worked side by side and belonged to one another. Humans were created to be in healthy community, belonging to one another openly, and feeling safe to be fully open with God by showing him love. They had nothing to hide from him, their Creator. The beauty of this is highlighted by the brokenness of community that existed between God and humans after the fall.

Studies of Human Behavior Reflect the ‘Need to Belong’ Taught in Scripture

It is evident in Scripture that people need other people. Is this reflected in the study of created life? Scientific studies of human behavior, like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Maslow’s Model of Human Scale Development which are shown here, illustrate that people need to be in community and feel a sense of belonging to one another.²⁰

¹⁷ David Atkinson, ed., *The Message of Genesis 1–11* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 60.

¹⁸ Gen. 2:15

¹⁹ Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 79.

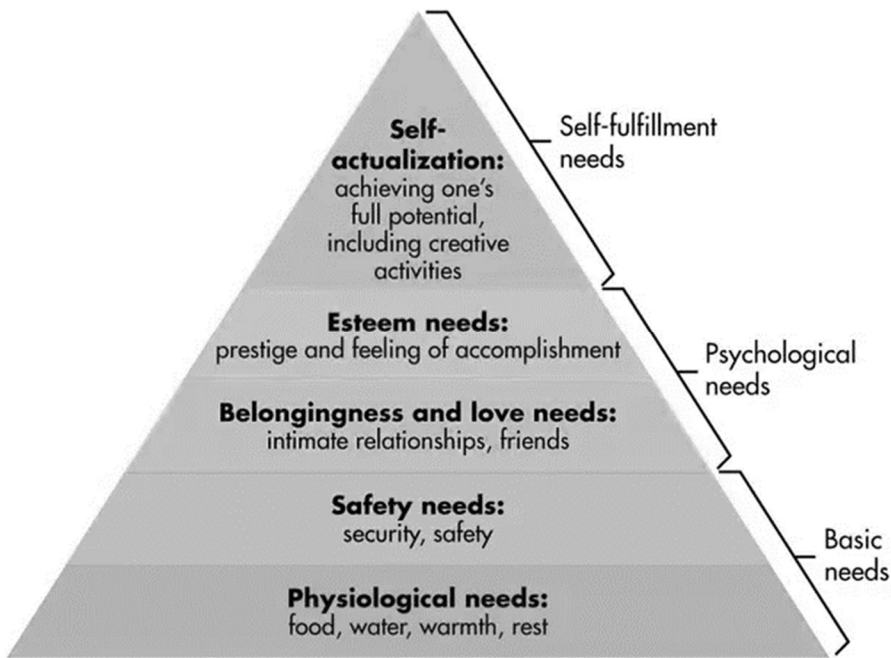
²⁰ Further discussion on how these charts highlight humanity’s need for community will be described.

Figure 1. Max-Neef's Matrix of Needs and Satisfiers

Needs according to existential categories Needs according to axiological categories	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Subsistence	1/ Physical health, mental health, equilibrium, sense of humour, adaptability	2/ Food, shelter, work	3/ Feed, procreate, rest, work	4/ Living environment, social setting
Protection	5/ Care, adaptability, autonomy, equilibrium, solidarity	6/ Insurance systems, savings, social security, health systems, rights, family, work	7/ Cooperate, prevent, plan, take care of, cure, help	8/ Living space, social environment, dwelling
Affection	9/ Self-esteem, solidarity, respect, tolerance, generosity, receptiveness, passion, determination, sensuality, sense of humour	10/ Friendships, family, partnerships, relationships with nature	11/ Make love, caress, express emotions, share, take care of, cultivate, appreciate	12/ Privacy, intimacy, home, spaces of togetherness
Understanding	13/ Critical conscience, receptiveness, curiosity, astonishment, discipline, intuition, rationality	14/ Literature, teachers, method, educational policies, communication policies	15/ Investigate, study, experiment, educate, analyse, meditate	16/ Settings of formative interaction, schools, universities, academies, groups, communities, family
Participation	17/ Adaptability, receptiveness, solidarity, willingness, determination, respect, passion, sense of humour	18/ Rights, responsibilities, duties, privileges, work	19/ Become affiliated, cooperate, propose, share, dissent, obey, interact, agree on, express opinions	20/ Settings of participative interaction, parties, associations, churches, communities, neighbourhoods, family
Idleness	21/ Curiosity, receptiveness, imagination, recklessness, sense of humour, tranquility, sensuality	22/ Games, spectacles, clubs, parties, peace of mind	23/ Day-dream, brood, dream, recall old times, give way to fantasies, remember, relax, have fun, play	24/ Privacy, intimacy, spaces of closeness, free time, surroundings, landscapes
Creation	25/ Passion, determination, intuition, imagination, boldness, rationality, autonomy, inventiveness, curiosity	26/ Abilities, skills, method, work	27/ Work, invent, build, design, compose, interpret	28/ Productive and feedback settings, workshops, cultural groups, audiences, spaces for expression, temporal freedom
Identity	29/ Sense of belonging, consistency, differentiation, self-esteem, assertiveness	30/ Symbols, language, religion, habits, customs, reference groups, sexuality, values, norms, historical memory, work	31/ Commit oneself, integrate oneself, confront, decide on, get to know oneself, recognize oneself, actualize oneself, grow	32/ Social rhythms, everyday settings, settings which one belongs to, maturation stages
Freedom	33/ Autonomy, self-esteem, determination, passion, assertiveness, open-mindedness, boldness, rebelliousness, tolerance	34/ Equal rights	35/ Dissent, choose, be different from, run risks, develop awareness, commit oneself, disobey	36/ Temporal/spatial plasticity

Source: Manfred Max-Neef, et al, "Human Scale Development," *Development Dialogue*, no. 1989:1 (1989): 33, accessed December 10, 2019, http://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/1989/05/89_1.pdf.

Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Saul A. McLeod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." *Simple Psychology*, last modified May 21, 2018, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

Max-Neef's studies of human behavior reveal nine Fundamental Human Needs.²¹ They are subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom.²² These are the needs that, in some combination, all human ventures are seeking to satisfy. Therefore, it is important that people gather together to learn and grow in community to meet these needs. Communities require a place that supports those who are struggling to meet the basic needs of subsistence and protection, as well as the higher human needs. The needs for affection, understanding, participation and identity all take place in community. Therefore, Max-Neef's model of human development and his list of human needs agree with Scripture that

²¹ Consult figure 1 on page 21 for a chart describing Max-Neef's model.

²² Manfred Max-Neef, et al, "Human Scale Development," *Development Dialogue*, no. 1989:1 (1989): 33, accessed December 10, 2019, http://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/1989/05/89_1.pdf.

human creatures need to be in community with one another. In the next chapter, it will be explored as to how congregations as communities of believers can satisfy many of these needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs state that once a person achieves one need, they work to achieve the next.²³ Maslow's hierarchy ranks needs in importance from physiological (food, shelter, clothing), to safety (employment, security, health), to love and belonging (friendship, intimacy, family, a sense of connection), to esteem (respect, status, recognition, freedom), and finally, to self-actualization (a desire to become the most that one can be).²⁴ The need to belong is in the center of this list. However, it is the first of the psychological needs. Prior to it, Maslow's hierarchy states that physiological and safety needs must be met. Then, the need to feel a sense of belonging will surface. This research supports the idea that people need to be in communities where such needs are being met. The next chapter will demonstrate how a Christian congregation can be such a place.

By proving a necessity for humans to have a sense of belonging, these sciences support what Scripture teaches about the created 'need to belong' as an essential aspect of being human. Such studies, however, cannot make a theological diagnosis of what is wrong with created life and why the need to belong, among many others, often fail to be met. For that subject, one must again go to Scripture. In this case, the place to start is the fall into sin as recorded in Genesis 3.

The Fall into Sin Corrupted Healthy Belonging in Community

When the first disobedience against God's single command occurred, life on earth forever changed. The relationship between God and humans changed. When God walked through the

²³ Consult figure 2 on page 22 to reference the pyramid of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

²⁴ Saul A. McLeod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Simple Psychology*, last modified May 21, 2018, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

Garden, Adam and Eve no longer communicated like before. Neither did they show reverence for or trust in their Creator. Instead, they hid. In hiding and admitting that they recognized their nakedness and shame, it was clear that they no longer lived in perfect communion with God. Sin had its grip on them, and they no longer found their security in the Lord of creation.

In the doling out of punishments, the relationship between man and woman would become less peaceful.²⁵ The increase of human community, through birth, would now be a painful event.²⁶ The work that humans must do would now be difficult.²⁷ Humans would no longer live forever, but would return to the ground as dust when they die.²⁸ Specifically relevant to the creational need for community, the relationship between the woman and her husband was now negatively impacted. This altered relationship is seen in Gen. 3:16, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” Once sin entered the world with the first act of disobedience, relationships would never be the same. Humans could no longer, on their own, live in perfect fellowship with God. Instead, they would look to themselves and not God. In addition, community between human beings would now be selfish, difficult, and corrupted by sin rather than being characterized by trust, belonging, and safety with one another.

The separation from God grew very quickly. In just the next generation, loving community and belonging to one another with trust was significantly missing. This gap is seen initially when Cain killed his brother Abel. He did so out of selfishness and jealousy because of Abel’s relationship with God.²⁹ Community was lost with the first death of human life. After that,

²⁵ Gen. 3:16

²⁶ Gen. 3:16

²⁷ Gen. 3:17–19

²⁸ Gen. 3:19

²⁹ Gen. 4:8

healthy belonging continued to disintegrate. Adam and Eve also lost Cain and his wife from their community as God sent Cain out into the wilderness.³⁰ He and his wife no longer were able to belong to the community for support. They were alone, to work the ground with great toil and to create a new community on their own. The acts of sin continued to grow as Cain's son Enoch killed another man for simply wounding him.

The sinfulness grew until finally the thoughts of humans were "only evil continually"³¹ and God regretted that he had made man and was grieved. Humans no longer had a loving community with one another as God had intended. This sinfulness and corruption of community led to God's decision to send a flood to wipe out the evil.

The flood was God's tool for creating a fresh start and cleansing his creation. Noah, however, found favor in God's eyes. God saved Noah's family from the destruction of the earth.³² After the flood, humanity had a new opportunity to start over with a safe community. Thus, a fresh opportunity arose to live in relationships of healthy belonging to one another. Yet, it did not last long. As men desired to build the tower of Babel in unbelief and selfish desire for recognition, God again pronounced his judgment on sinful humanity. He confused their language. Because of the language barrier, they would no longer be free to accomplish everything they set their minds to do. Division of community was thus created through the variation of languages. As people could not understand one another, communities were splintered. Humanity, which once shared a sense of belonging, was no longer able to interact in the same way. Based on the language they spoke, the people were dispersed across the face of

³⁰ Gen.4:12-16

³¹ Gen. 6:5

³² Gen. 6:8, 13

the earth.³³

So, the human need to belong to one another continued to dissolve throughout the early generations of humankind. Even with the flood offering a fresh start, sin and pride led to the confusion of languages and thus the division of peoples. Like in these opening chapters of Genesis, it is evident time and time again in Scripture that humanity is no longer capable of the whole, healthy belonging to one another for which humans were created.³⁴ The world splintered from the healthy community that Adam and Eve enjoyed when they lived as people who belonged openly and peacefully to one another and to God.

When community and healthy belonging dissolved so quickly, a remedy was needed. God did not wait to see how bad things would get. In the Garden, as soon as paradise was destroyed, God gave a promise to his fallen creatures. Adam must live in a fallen world. However, he does not live without the Word of God.³⁵ Sin's curse separated humans from God and put an end to healthy, complete community. Yet, his plan for Jesus and the resurrection from the dead would be the rescue from that curse.

Being Redeemed by Christ Restores Healthy Belonging

When the fall occurred, the community between Creator and creation was forever altered. Being helpless in sin, humanity failed to manifest the love-filled belonging with one another for

³³ This continues to be a great factor in the difficulties of building community. Today, language variations continue to play a large role in the division of neighborhoods, racism, and the historic inability to share ideas for the purpose of mutual understanding and advancement.

³⁴ In addition to the references listed, community is shown to be lacking elsewhere in Genesis and the Old Testament. Such as when Jacob deceived his father and took his brother Esau's blessing, in Gen. 27:1–40. Jacob's sons lacked love and a sense of belonging to their brother Joseph and sold him into slavery, in Gen. 37:12–36. The Israelites in the wilderness repeatedly lacked a sense of belonging to God and made false idols despite seeing God's love and mercy in their rescue from Egypt, in Exod. 32.

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 83.

which it was intended. However, God did not leave his creation without hope. Instead, he gave a promise for a plan to set things right and make all things whole again. St. Paul writes about Jesus' saving and reconciling work: "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."³⁶ God made a promise of salvation along with the curse of death and return to dust.³⁷ This promise was fulfilled in the life, and death, of his Son, Jesus.

Jesus' ministry and saving work impacts believers today. His undeserved death on the cross to pay for all of the sins of humanity is the undeserved grace that the faithful live in each day. Christians see the promise in the Garden, as recorded in Genesis, as a moment looking forward to when Jesus would make everything right. Again, St. Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."³⁸ This verse highlights the hope Christians live in today. Although one cannot live a perfect life in community with others, trusting in Jesus' payment means that God's curse is not the final word. Because of his resurrection from the dead believers are no longer enslaved in fear by the curse to return to dust at death. Instead, those who are in Christ are freed to live in the community of his church in a spirit of hope and love. Jesus' life and death urge Christians to look forward to the time that is to come when all Christians will live in perfect, holy community and belong to one another in a redeemed creation, the new heaven and the new earth.³⁹

³⁶ Rom. 5:10–11

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 86.

³⁸ Rom. 5:1–2

³⁹ 2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1

When people live in relationship with Jesus, they become his disciples. As they grow as disciples, in wisdom, sanctification, and faith, they have one task: to follow Jesus. The twelve disciples left behind everything to follow Jesus. Christians, today likewise, are to be disciples and follow Jesus for the sake of his mission:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁴⁰

Christians now live as redeemed children of God. They grow in faith and sanctification, in the ability to manifest healthy belonging to others, including with fellow Christians in congregations. John writes, “This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”⁴¹ Bonhoeffer argued that when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, called the disciples “salt,” he was not giving them a choice but informing them of their identity. The identity as salt gives a purpose to the disciples, as salt has the purpose of preservation. Christians must preserve Jesus’ words and live out his commands. Therefore, the identity as salt was a task given, not a choice.⁴²

God’s plan for his people is to fulfill his mission by living in community and oneness. When living in love with fellow Christians, the believer is manifesting the need to belong in communal life as God intended. In John 17:11, Jesus prayed for the church, that it be one as he

⁴⁰ Matt. 28:18–20

⁴¹ 1 John 4:10–12

⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 111–12.

and the Father are one. This verse shows Jesus' call to belong to one another within the church. It is the prayer that the church manifest what Christ redeemed it to be—a holy community.

Within this community, Christian service occurs by being a witness to one another and to the new life that comes by sharing the Word of God.⁴³ This community, the church, is where the Gospel is preached and sacraments are given in community. But, “the church also ought to be a place where our idols are called into question.”⁴⁴ A church in which sins are lovingly called out can only exist when Christians are living in community with people that they trust to talk with about life. There must be trust to hear, in a loving manner from fellow Christians, when the Scriptures condemn them with the Law. There also must be trust to hear a fellow Christian bring them back to a healthy relationship with God and creation through the Gospel. God calls Christians to speak and admonish in love.⁴⁵ Without a trusted community thriving inside the congregation, sinful humans would struggle to trust one another with their difficulties. They would not hear with open ears the Law shared lovingly with them nor be open to the Gospel for the sake of the health of their faith.

For the building up of the church God raises up church leaders. These leaders prepare people for serving and keep them from being misled by false theology and temptations.⁴⁶ With the guidance of leadership and the loving actions of vocation in service to one another, the congregation is a strong home in which Christians belong. The ability to belong to the household of faith and be in physical community with fellow believers is a blessing, a gift of grace. This gift is a blessing that can be given, but not all Christians receive it. A challenge of living the

⁴³ Robert Kolb, *Make Disciples, Baptizing: God's Gifts of New Life and Christian Witness* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1997), 105.

⁴⁴ Mark D. Tranvik, *Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 142.

⁴⁵ Kolb, *Teaching God's Children His Teaching*, chap. 8.

⁴⁶ Kolb, *Teaching God's Children His Teaching*, chap. 8.

Christian life in America today includes the struggle to rejoice in the gift of community with fellow believers. Christians of all times, including today, hunger for this community in which they speak God's Word to one another for the growth of faith and the expansion of God's Kingdom.⁴⁷ We now turn to the work of the Holy Spirit who helps Christians to manifest Christ's love in community.

The Holy Spirit Makes Us One in the Church, Enabling Us to Manifest Healthy Belonging in Community

Christians belong to one another through the church. In baptism, the Holy Spirit enters the Christian. This indwelling of the Spirit inspires Christians to follow God's Law and live out his mission. Christians will never reach the holy and perfect example set by Jesus. However, they can grow in faith and in sanctification as God teaches through the Scriptures. Unable to do this alone, Christians are gathered together by the Holy Spirit and supported by the Christians with whom they live. Therefore, for Christians the community of the church is vital for their growth in sanctification.

The Christian's Needs for Community

In order to manifest oneness with fellow Christians in the church, believers can look to four things.⁴⁸ They need a place to grow, as seen in the new believers in Paul's day who dedicated themselves to growing in the apostles' teachings (Acts 2:42). They need healthy relationships, as "two are better than one... for if they fall, one will lift up his fellow" (Eccles. 4:9–10). They need a place to use their gifts, like Timothy instructed his listeners to do (1 Tim. 4:14). Lastly,

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper One, 1954), 19, 22.

⁴⁸ Searcy, *Fusion*, 189.

they need to belong to something bigger than themselves, as is depicted in the “body” image of the church, made up of many members (Rom. 12:4–5). When people live in the body of Christ, they accomplish what Christ and the Scriptures call them to do. Many activities and responsibilities that Christians are called to do require community and could not be accomplished by sole individuals.

The Need to Belong and Grow Together

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

—Acts 2:42

Like the disciples at the birth of Christianity, believers have a need to gather together. With their faith in common, the early Christians supported one another and belonged to one another. They each shared their possessions for the sake of the other. “All who believed were together and had all things in common.”⁴⁹ While they were gathered, they learned from each other and from the apostles about Christ and the Scriptures. The letters that they received from the apostles would then be passed on to other Christians for them to learn from, too. This form of fellowship and belonging to one another—the sharing of the Word of God—is an intimate connection. It creates and sustains the community of faith.

The Need to be in Healthy Relationships

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

—Eccles. 4:9–10

⁴⁹ This verse is descriptive of the Christians recorded in Acts. However, the underlying reality of the verse still holds today—we are to share our money and possessions, time and talents, presence and physical support with each other. Acts 2:44.

Sinful, imperfect humans need one another to speak the Law when they stray from God's Word. They especially need to hear the Gospel when they repent of sins. Scripture says "if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."⁵⁰ Holding others accountable is not something that can be done in isolation. Part of living in Christ means living in community to manifest belonging with one another. Jesus lived with twelve sinful friends that he called disciples. Like Jesus, who had patience for his friends and showed them love, Christians too need to be living in community and showing patience, peace, and love to each other. Furthermore, the kind of guidance that Christians are to give one another cannot be done by someone that they do not trust. Therefore, Christians need to be intentional about forming strong, trusting relationships with one another. Only inside of healthy, Christ-filled relationships can one truly listen to the other. In a healthy relationship of belonging, one can hear, in humility, the Law convicting of sin. One can also hear, with greater faith, the Gospel message of being forgiven and reconciled with Christ; and reconciliation with Christ results in fellowship with the entire body of Christ, the church.

The Need to Realize a Sense of Belonging in the Use of Our Gifts

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

—1 Tim. 4:14

Every person has special talents and gifts that they can use for the benefit of others. The Creator who gave these gifts calls his people to use them to serve others in various vocations. These vocations are not merely ways people serve God. In reality, God does not need deeds

⁵⁰ Gal. 6:1-2

accomplished by sinful humans. Rather, each vocation is a way to serve creation and fellow human creatures inside communities of healthy belonging. In this way, one also serves God. In addition to people's occupations, they also have vocations toward children, spouses, siblings, parents, church members, friends, and fellow citizens. Vocations provide opportunities to fulfill the need to belong to one another in using gifts and talents to support each other in acts of love.

Even inside of the community of a congregation, exemplifying Christ's love is the root of how this community differs from a secular group. In congregations, people grow in sanctification so that they work together in faith. Luther teaches in the Large Catechism that "the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ."⁵¹ Congregations are a God-given blessing for the purpose of assisting in this life of sanctification.

God-given gifts can help Christians realize their need to belong in the community of a congregation. "God has given the baptized special gifts to serve those whom he has joined together (1 Cor. 12:12–31)."⁵² As Christians observe how others can support them and how their gifts can support others, they recognize the need for one another and the shared need for community. By using gifts and vocations for the church, Christians manifest their belonging in the community of the church. God "has so designed the congregation of his people that they may take care of one another's need in an extension of the principle which he laid down at creation, that his human creature was not designed to be alone (Gen. 2:18). The use of the gifts of various

⁵¹ Large Catechism (LC) II.37 in Kolb and Wengert, 435–36.

⁵² Kolb, *Make Disciples, Baptizing*, 103.

talents and abilities for one another is (God's task for) bringing his people together in Baptism, Paul explicitly stated."⁵³

As each person's gifts and vocations vary, the church is in need of each person's participation. Just as all Christians need to manifest belonging in the body, the body requires the differing gifts of each individual Christian. The different gifts complement one another so that they can serve one another's needs.⁵⁴ The church, therefore, fulfills the created, human need to belong, not only through sharing together in faith but also in vocations for the mutual care of one another.

The Need to Belong to the Communion of Saints

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

—Rom. 12:4–5

All Christians have binding doctrines, common life and actions which make it a community on many levels. Despite language, sociological or geographical differences, all Christians have community with one another through the core beliefs that unite them. The church as a community can be seen in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Being joined together in the Lord's Supper not only unites the members of the congregation, but it brings together the whole Christian church as "a communion of communions."⁵⁵

Within each individual congregation, the vocations lived out by members in loving care manifest their unity and their belonging to one another. "The church can be a crucial place for

⁵³ Kolb, *Make Disciples, Baptizing*, 103.

⁵⁴ Kolb, *Make Disciples, Baptizing*, 103.

⁵⁵ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 293.

learning about the needs of those around (the congregation) and throughout the world” which is vital since vocation is for serving creation and fellow human creatures.⁵⁶ A strategic culture of community,⁵⁷ like is highlighted in Acts 2:46–47, helps Christians to grow closer together and work towards their Christ-given mission, the Great Commission. Thereby, Christ’s disciples work together to share his love and forgiveness with others in anticipation of Christ’s glorious return and his ushering in the new heaven and new earth. United in the sacraments of baptism and communion, Christians manifest their belonging to the church in a powerful way through the fulfilling of the Great Commission.

Conclusion

Christians need one another to manifest belonging while living out their gifts and vocations for one another. Churches then, recognizing this creational need for people to belong in community, require structures to be in place to help their people manifest a loving spirit of belonging with one another. As sinful humans it is not our first thought to seek healthy belonging. Rather, the first desire is to be selfish and care for ourselves. In order to combat this inward turn, congregations can provide transitions to develop strong community ties among their members. They can facilitate connections for members to get to know one another and put their gifts and vocations into action. In the next chapter I will describe some congregational programs that help fulfill the need for a sense of belonging.

⁵⁶ Tranvik, *Luther and the Called Life*, 141.

⁵⁷ Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 33.

CHAPTER THREE

INCORPORATING PEOPLE INTO THE BODY OF THE CONGREGATION

Introduction

As human creatures, all people have an innate desire to be in community. This need is demonstrated in the biblical narrative. It is corroborated by studies of human behavior. It is seen in congregations, like St. Peter's Lutheran Church, that provide helpful programs and activities to support this need for community.

Biblical Evidence for Meeting the Need to Belong

Scripture explains the human need to be in community and to manifest belonging with one another. Being created in the image of God, humankind was created for community. The fall into sin, however, severely disrupted the human community. To restore and reconcile his creation, God promised a savior. Jesus' saving work brought forgiveness to sinners, freeing people to live lives of love and support for one another in his church. The gifts of Christ also provide peace with God and one another through the Holy Spirit. He enables Jesus' disciples to acknowledge their need and to manifest 'belonging' in community.

Scientific Evidence for Meeting the Need to Belong

Scientific evidence corroborates the biblical claim that people need other people. The human behavioral studies of Maslow and Max-Neef support the creational narrative's claim for the need to belong. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Max-Neef's Model of Human Scale Development describe this need based on the study of human development.¹

¹ Maslow Hierarchy of Needs can be found on page 22 and Max-Neef's Matrix of Needs and Satisfiers from his Model of Human Scale Development can be found on page 21.

In this chapter, it will be demonstrated that the human need to belong can be met by the community that occurs in a congregation.

St. Peter's Lutheran Church Programs Meeting the Need to Belong

In the opening chapter, the need for community was demonstrated in a description of congregational life at St. Peter's Lutheran Church. The variety of programs offered displays the congregation's intentionality in meeting various needs of members. All people have different gifts and talents that can be put to use in their various vocations. St. Peter's responds to this diversity of gifts with the variety of programs that their ministry offers. Whether people can work well with children, mentor teenagers, or fix cars, there is a way to use their skills in these programs. These ministries give both the people serving and the people being served a sense of belonging at the church.

The Need for Congregations to Provide Programs to Meet the Need to Belong

In many congregations there are numerous types of activities in which people can serve. It is vital that programs for service meet the need for community of those who participate. Like occurs at St. Peter's, it is also important that churches have various ways for building community.

This chapter will discuss the need to incorporate people into community-strengthening programs. It will also highlight programs that are well suited for meeting the need to belong. Before turning to congregational programming for meeting the need to belong, it is important to first consider factors that help to guide program development and implementation. These include external and internal factors.

Factors for Congregational Programming for Belonging

External Factor for Congregational Programming for Belonging – American Cultural Changes

The way that people seek belonging in the church has changed in America over the last century. At the beginning of the nation, the church was seen as the town center. Communities were built around the faith that was shared between immigrants and homesteaders.² Remnants of this attitude are still seen today, even as plainly as the names of many American locations named after saints or locations in the Bible.³ However, in the last century American culture has changed dramatically. Whereas in the past it was expected that people would attend their local church, today that is not the case. Rather, it is more often observed that people challenge the church's teaching. They do not attend services. Instead of spending time at church, they dedicate their energy to working more hours and seeking more entertainment. Religion and Christianity are not taken as seriously by most people. The local church is no longer the hub of society.

It is no longer assumed that Christian congregations are places 'to belong' in American culture. Church life does not constitute a supportive community for most Americans. Involvement in a church community is but one option among many. The move to finding community outside of the church has resulted in a change in the manner in which one engages in a congregational community. To find a sense of belonging in a church today, a different approach is often used.

Many people join American churches today using a different route than in the past. Traditionally, people desired to first agree with the beliefs of the church they were looking to

² Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

³ Places such as Bethel, Bethesda, Philadelphia, Goshen, Salem, or Tyre, as well as many others, are names derived from the Bible and occur in multiple states across America.

join. They then learned the practices and behaviors of the church's members. Lastly, they found a sense of belonging with those who were now their fellow church members. This 'believe, behave, belong' model has been flipped in recent decades.⁴ Instead, our culture has shaped people into desiring a sense of belonging first. Once people find a sense of belonging in a congregation, they begin to engage in the community's practices and behaviors. After behaving like those in the church, according to this model, they grow in understanding of the faith shared by those around them, which may lead to believing the same faith.

Internal Factors for Congregational Programming in Service to Belonging

Timeliness Factor

According to Searcy and Thomas, "if God has sent a first-time or second-time guest to your church, He is working in his or her life and has invited you to be a part of what He wants to do in this person."⁵ Their statement is a large claim, but it gets at the true immediacy of caring for those who enter the walls of a church—whether they are first time visitors or long time members. The incorporation of both new and current members is essential in every congregation that desires to have members who have a sense of belonging and are active in the life of the congregation. Incorporation occurs when a person is brought in and added to the whole body of the church.⁶ When done well, timely incorporation can decrease the amount of backdoor loss (or

⁴ Matt Miller, "Send Me St. Louis and Assimilation" (lecture, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, June 2018).

⁵ Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 178.

⁶ A comment on the word usage of assimilation and incorporation, in response to the dangers/misuse of the word 'assimilation' presented at the spring 2019 Concordia Seminary, St. Louis Symposium:

As the word assimilation is translated literally as 'to make the same' this word can have a dangerous implication when taken to the extreme—that those who join a church must be made the same as the congregation. Thereby, this may be seen as stripping the new member of their personal identity or heritage. When this means, for example, that a person must adapt to the German heritage of the The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS),

untracked loss in active membership).⁷

The amount of time available for churches to engage new people has changed over recent decades. The odds are now much lower that a visitor will return to a congregation for even a second visit.⁸ When a person does decide to get involved in a congregation, the first ninety days are vital. As will be discussed, the largest factor at play in these first ninety days is the number of friendships a person is able to make within the congregation.

Friendships Factor

According to Searcy, “the more friends people have by the ninety-day mark, the more likely they are to stay.”⁹ According to a study by Flavil Yeakley, the number of friends that new members make has a significant bearing on their sense of belonging in the congregation and their level of activity in the church. He interviewed fifty people that remained active after six months of membership and were incorporated into the life of the church. He also interviewed fifty people that became members but dropped out. The results of the study can be seen below, in figure 3.

we can be causing a loss of personality and joy by not welcoming the person’s own heritage and folding it into the congregation. Therefore, the word ‘incorporation’ will be used in this thesis.

In an effort to best describe what is being sought, the word incorporation was chosen as it means ‘to take in something as part of the whole; to include.’ This is preferred over both ‘integration’ (‘to combine with another to make a whole’) and ‘assimilation’ (defined above). Incorporation includes an underlying understanding that the church is already a whole body of the church (as described in 1 Cor. 12:12–27). Therefore, when a person is incorporated into a church, they are being added as a functional member to the existing body of faith.

The word assimilation will be used in the following chapters only when left in quotes where it is used by resources, as this thesis takes place inside the academic world of research on ‘assimilation techniques.’ It is to be understood, however, that when the word assimilation is quoted it will be used as meaning ‘to bring someone into the life of the church and make them part of the body, and the same only in regard to their identity as a Christian and church member.’

⁷ J. D. Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 10.

⁸ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 17.

⁹ Searcy, *Fusion*, 127.

He found that “ninety percent of the actives had six or more friends in the congregation (average: 7.3), while ninety-eight percent of the dropouts had fewer than six friends (average 1.9).”¹⁰ This study supports the claim that it is vital for new members to make friends early on in their time at a new congregation.¹¹

Figure 3. Yeakley’s Study of Friendships and Active Membership

No. of friends	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9+
Actives	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12
Dropouts	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0

Source: J. D. Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 24

Congregation Size Factor

The natural relationships that form when a smaller group of people are around one another each week do not occur as easily once a congregation gets larger. When a congregation grows beyond thirty-five to fifty people, it needs a glue to maintain a sense of community and of bonding between the members.¹² According to Heck, churches need to be more intentional in creating a sense of belonging once their average attendance hits approximately eighty people. At that point, incorporation ceases to be spontaneous.¹³ Regardless of the exact number, intentionality toward some type of adhesive between the church and the attendees is needed.

¹⁰ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 24.

¹¹ Searcy, for example, did not have evidence of a measurable study. However, in *Fusion* he claims he tracked trends at his church and found that the number of friends made in the first ninety days was key for their future involvement. Searcy, *Fusion*, 127.

¹² Lyle E. Schaller, *Assimilating New Members* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 22.

¹³ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 10.

Awareness of Space Factor

Another factor in developing congregational programming that gives members a sense of belonging involves being aware of the Space Factor. According to Myers, the four spaces in which people seek to belong are: public, social, personal, and intimate. Each type of space offers a different sense of belonging to people. Each one can meet different needs, and all spaces and connections are significant. According to Myers, “we need to validate what people themselves count as valid. When we validate *the space* where they are, we greatly increase our ability to bring help to their lives.”¹⁴

Since every person has different needs and different comfortability levels in each space, we need to be prepared to minister to people in all four types of spaces. “Public belonging occurs when people connect through an outside influence.”¹⁵ Connecting in the public space happens when people can share common experiences, practice social conformity or are able to participate in specific ways. “Social belonging occurs when we share ‘snapshots’ of who we are.”¹⁶ Connecting in the social space happens when people can discern when others are being their authentic self, formulate a congruent self with whom they are, are comfortable with spontaneous and short interactions, and can keep pleasant visual contact with others. “Personal belonging occurs when we share private (but not ‘naked’) experiences, feelings, and thoughts.”¹⁷ Connecting in the personal space happens when people can keep confidences, develop an interest in another’s private information, can share private information without sharing too much, can

¹⁴ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 60. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 64.

¹⁶ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 65.

¹⁷ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 67.

maintain eye contact for extended periods of time without becoming uncomfortable for either party, and have the skills to begin, grow, and maintain a one-on-one relationship. “Intimate belonging occurs when we share ‘naked’ information and are not ashamed.”¹⁸ Connecting in the intimate space happens when people can share who they are against what it is that they do, but do not share their naked selves (or private thoughts or issues) indiscriminately.

Knowing the different spaces in which people’s needs can be met is helpful for planning by the leaders of a congregation. They can review their programs to ensure that they have a variety of opportunities for people to interact in each space. The spaces in which a person will interact may look very different for each new person and their circumstances. One example would be of a person who has an intellectual need to learn but is exhausted from participating in various social environments in his daily life. A small group would not be a helpful fit. However, a classroom-style Bible study may be what he needs in order to learn while not being emotionally or socially drained. Another example may be a person who wants to volunteer but desires a position that allows her to get personal with those being helped. While childcare or a planning committee would be helpful, a youth group volunteer or a position co-leading an addiction support group would better meet the need she has to be in a personal setting with others while volunteering.

Intentionally Planning Factor

When incorporating people into the body of the church, an intentional plan should be in place to help people build friendships and become actively involved. The Intentional Planning Factor occurs because everything in the church must fit together to move people toward spiritual

¹⁸ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 67.

growth.¹⁹ That kind of synchronization does not happen by chance. According to Heck, the four needs for creating an incorporation process are to have: clear goals, clear assumptions, a clear incorporation strategy, and a practical plan.²⁰ Congregations should first have clear goals for the people and clear assumptions about how certain things are understood by the laity. Recognizing these may help to flush out gaps where the leadership is not fully communicating to the congregation. The gaps can include different definitions for a common term or different goals. The gap can also be the result of the laity not seeing the pastor's goal as attainable. Laying out an incorporation strategy and a practical plan verbally or visually helps to ensure that staff and volunteers are on the same page. Intentional incorporation is served well by these four components.

While Heck views the necessary steps as efforts that go on behind the scenes to ensure a solid plan, Lawless views effective incorporation as measurable by a different set of four components. For effective incorporation, Lawless has identified as necessary: membership expectations, relationships, convictional preaching, and ministry involvement.²¹ Clearly described membership expectations call on people to be involved. Convictional preaching gives people a place to learn. These components agree with Heck's need for congregations to have clear goals and assumptions. Relationships, commitment, and involvement are all after-effects of the process that Heck described. This comparison reveals that in order to have a strong plan for incorporating people into the church, clarity and intentionality must be a priority in the planning. That way the daily and monthly operational decisions will be consistent in serving the needs of

¹⁹ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 23.

²⁰ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 71–72.

²¹ Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 49.

the entire body.²²

To manage congregational programming to help build community, the intentionality factor should be prominently applied to existing programs. Longstanding programs that take place in congregations are part of the lifeblood of the members. One example of this at St. Peter's Lutheran in Columbus, Indiana, was illustrated by their Angels of Love event at Christmas. Another example is at Trinity Lutheran in Grangeville, Idaho, whose 'walking tacos' food stand has made an appearance at the town's fourth of July celebrations year in and year out. These examples of groups that already exist could be opportunities for building community among members. It is important that the groups that exist meet the need 'to belong' for new or prospective members. In addition to the goals of the various programs, leaders should ensure that they are always focused on this, especially for new members. The end result must always be about people.²³

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the external and internal factors to be aware of when developing programs in service to belonging in a congregation. The external factor to be considered is that the church is no longer looked to as the town center in America. The congregational programming should be developed to reach people who need a place to belong but who do not turn to the church to find this. Internal factors are also very important. They included timeliness, friendships, congregation size, space awareness, and intentional planning. These factors all point to the importance of leadership taking seriously the needs of their laity to manifest belonging in the church.

²² Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 128.

²³ Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 26.

In Acts 20:28, Paul says “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” The charge he is giving to pastors is a big task that puts extensive responsibility on them. Therefore, church leadership needs to assess the activities in their church by what they provide for the people who attend. By meeting people at each need they have, congregations can help the likelihood that people will find a place that comfortably meets their need to belong in the congregation.

In the following section of this chapter, I will discuss programs that seek to meet the need to belong. I will include programming that provides welcome events focused specifically on social inclusion. I will describe a sponsorship program that offers someone to guide new members and hold their hands to help them feel safe as they seek to connect. I will also include a description of small groups and Bible studies for people to grow in faith and in volunteerism. All of these are offered to help congregations help people find their purpose and gain a sense of belonging in the church community.

Major Incorporating Programs for the Purpose of Manifesting a Sense of Belonging

Churches commonly use several ways to help new members get acquainted with the church and become incorporated into the life of the congregation. The most common ones include sponsorship programs, new member classes, and social incorporation programs. Below I will discuss what these programs offer, how they help incorporate new members, what the needs of new members are that they can meet, and what it takes for these programs to be successful.

Sponsorship Programs

Schaller stated the sad truth that “in many congregations it is easier to become a member

than it is to be accepted and made to feel so.”²⁴ Having a sponsorship program can help to eliminate this problem. Many churches have these programs to help potential members connect with active members. Most often this is connected to the new member class in which the visitor/potential member is enrolled. The friendships created with sponsoring members can then help the new member feel more included in the social life of the church. Further, it gives them a person who can direct them to appropriate paths of engagement.

The sponsor can suggest an appropriate program for the new person. This relationship helps ensure that the person is joining a program that is right for his or her needs, not just the program that is the easiest to join. The sponsor can help to smoothly transition the new member from the public space to social and personal spaces with others in the congregation. By having a segue into closer relationships, new people can more quickly begin to feel a sense of belonging in the congregation.

Sponsorship programs require strong active members that are willing to make significant effort to take new members ‘under their wing.’ These sponsors build a relationship and take the time to help the new person get acquainted with the church. Such efforts can have a large impact on the sense of belonging felt by new members. However, the large amount of input required from each sponsor can be a challenge in the successful operation of the program at a congregation.

The difficulty is finding people who both have the social skills and are willing to take the time to get to know new people. It can be challenging to have people willing to attend the training as well. Many people, while having great intentions, will need some training to help

²⁴ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 74.

them get comfortable, as well as to provide the information they need. The training should include strategies to help them get to know the new person.²⁵ Some people are naturals at building friendships and getting to know people. However, many people are not so socially adept and can struggle to feel comfortable signing up for this role. A good example of the type of training for the interpersonal work needed with the new people is the relational training used for Stephen Ministers.²⁶ Support through training as well as providing materials to share with new members are all helpful and important.

At one church described by Heck, an ‘undershepherding’ program holds the volunteers responsible for many incoming members. The new members go through eight weeks of a new member orientation program. Meanwhile, each ‘undershepherd’ is to meet the needs of approximately eight families. Halfway through the orientation program, the new members meet at a luncheon so they can be introduced to the ‘undershepherd’ volunteer that will be responsible to help incorporate them. The volunteers help by making calls on each family, visiting their home, and introducing them to the congregation when the family officially joins the church. This program puts much responsibility on the current members that want to help new people quickly feel like they belong.²⁷

New Member Classes

For those who have decided they want to know more about a congregation, the new member class is a good place to start. Various approaches are utilized for these classes. While

²⁵ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 42.

²⁶ Using training for Stephen Ministers or publications by Stephen Ministry can be helpful for preparing sponsors because they teach tools for being good listeners and prepare people for being active, guiding mentors. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Christian Caregiving: A Way of Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

²⁷ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 62.

some congregations intend that only people who are new to the congregation need to attend, other congregations intentionally tailor their material to attract current, active members who want to freshen their knowledge about their congregation. Part of the reason for this difference comes down to what is taught in the class and how much time a class spends together. Below, I will discuss these and other factors that vary between congregations and the benefits that each have.

The Value of Membership

First, note the necessity of putting a high value on membership in the congregation. Having a high view of membership happens when a congregation values the benefits and privileges that come along with being a member who belongs to the body of the church. A low view of membership occurs when a congregation does not ask attendees to differentiate between being a frequent attender and a full-fledged member. Word usage and common phrases help to signify if a church has a low or high view of membership. Congregations with a low view of membership often call attendees “those who consider St. Luke’s their church home.” On the other hand, congregations with a high view of membership take advantage of opportunities to speak of the members as one body and frequently call on visitors to seek membership with the church. They may use phrases such as “we at St. Luke’s are glad to have you visiting and hope you will join our family and attend our upcoming new member class.”²⁸

When there is a low view of membership, longtime members and visitors alike will feel less of a sense of belonging and responsibility to the congregation. The fallout is large. Skilled and gifted members will not feel inclined to use their talents, finances, and other gifts to support

²⁸ Searcy, *Fusion*, 143–52.

the work of the church. They also do not see themselves as being needed and as important members of the body of the congregation. The low view of membership decreases the sense of belonging that people feel among those in the pews around them, with their pastors, and with church leadership.

On the other hand, when a congregation has a high view of membership it becomes more evident that there are blessings and joys that come from being part of the congregation. It then is obvious to attendees that there cannot be a church body without each member being a part of it. As it says of Christians in 1 Cor. 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Scripture repeatedly sets high expectations of what it means to be part of the church.²⁹ Acts 2:41 describes how many souls were added to the Christian faith on the day of Peter’s sermon. If the Bible records how many people joined, we should not fear keeping track of membership and encouraging people to formerly join the faith. Encouragement to be part of the church is found throughout Scripture. Hebrews 10:25 calls Christians to meet with one another and encourage each other. Likewise, Matt. 18:15–17 described the church as a formal gathering of members. It makes clear that Christians act different than outsiders. Furthermore, it makes clear that Christians are not to involve outsiders in internal struggles, when matters can be handled between one another as Christians. Therefore, there is no middle ground for people to stand on who are ‘on the fence’ about living as a Christian.

Surprisingly, when a new member class first becomes a required step, the congregation has remarkably little opposition.³⁰ When the culture of the congregation is being taught the

²⁹ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 74.

³⁰ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 22–23.

importance of membership to the community, the obvious next step is to have clear goals, clear assumptions, a clear incorporation strategy, and a practical plan.³¹

The Material Covered

What is taught in a new member class can vary greatly. Some congregations have classes that teach only Luther's Small Catechism's chief parts of Christian doctrine.³² Others also cover other information such as: some history of the congregation, practices and culture of the congregation, programs the congregation offers, how to tithe, their mission and vision statements, mission work the church supports, or information on the upcoming membership induction ceremony. Lawless describes using a thorough outline for guiding new members into full participation in the life of the church. In his program all future members take a series of classes after the new member class to drive home the commitments to membership, maturity in Christ, ministry, and missions.³³ Some congregations, like St. Peter's Lutheran Church that is described in chapter one, also spend significant time on other information. St. Peter's new member class, or 'Bible Investigation Class', also covers the history of the congregation itself and the current values that promote their intentional, mission-focused culture.

The Teacher

In addition to information sharing in new member classes, people receive a relational benefit from this class.³⁴ By taking the class as an opportunity to build relationships with the new

³¹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 71.

³² To say they "only" teach this is not to diminish the chief part of Christian doctrine in Luther's Small Catechism. This is an essential document and instruction manual for Lutherans. The focus of this paper, however, is to emphasize other important material that assists new members in meeting their needs to belong in their congregation.

³³ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 67.

³⁴ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 22–23.

members, staff (especially the head pastor) can build trust among the new members. This also leads to a cooperative spirit and willingness to work together in the church's mission. Therefore, the new member class naturally becomes an opportunity for the head pastor to inform the incoming members about his vision for the church and call them to action. Furthermore, by sharing the expectations for members in this initial class, the pastor can more successfully impart the church's vision, so it can become the shared vision of the new members.³⁵

The Duration of the Class

When new member classes meet for more than merely a couple sessions, they give attendees increased opportunities to get to know one another. Lawless found that “relationships that began in the membership classes often remained strong for laypeople.”³⁶ That relational factor is important because those relationships can be the friendships that help make new members feel like they are part of the congregation from early on. Some churches have very little requirements for new people, such as one that asks them only to meet for a session on Saturday night and then a Sunday morning session before being welcomed into membership.³⁷ But other churches do much more. One church has new members meet for eight weeks,³⁸ and still others, such as St. Peter's “Bible Investigation Class,” have new members meet for three to four months. As the duration of classes increases, the ability for new members to get to know one another does as well. The duration also effects both the amount of input and effort that is required from the potential members and the amount of information that is able to be taught and sufficiently

³⁵ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 32.

³⁶ Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 56.

³⁷ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 66.

³⁸ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 63.

discussed. Each class needs to be intentionally planned so that the time can be well spent. An intentional, well-planned series of classes excites the new members about the congregation they are joining and encourages their involvement in the body.

Post-Class Expectations

Classes that lay out what to do following new member classes (attend another class, join a small group, etc.) help to get people involved in a program or volunteer opportunity. When there are no expectations for people beyond attending the new member recognition ceremony during a worship service, they cannot be expected to follow through with active membership participation. New members need continued instruction and personal encouragement to remain active. Having a continued path to guide new members into the life of the church also creates a sense of belonging in the congregation which is such a vital human need. It is beneficial to have a bridge ready to carry new members to their next connection in the church.³⁹

Membership Welcome Dinner/Social Incorporation Activities

A common method of social incorporation of new members is having a fellowship meal. This gathering centers around a meal with the opportunity for new members to get to know one another. Churches may provide this around the time new members are being officially joined to the membership roster. Some churches host this event in anticipation of the official welcome into membership while others use it as a celebration at that time. Some invite only the new members. Having a new members only dinner makes it easy for the new members to get to know one another, as well as the staff in attendance. Other churches invite some current members as well, so the new people can get to know them. The intentionality displayed by the staff hosting these

³⁹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 17.

events indicates that incorporation into membership is an important activity for their welcoming church.

Small Group Programs Develop a Sense of Belonging

Small group programs have grown in popularity in American congregations in recent decades. They serve congregations by connecting people to one another in the church. Schaller calls small groups “one of the healthiest and most productive organizing principles” on his list of items to incorporate members into their congregation.⁴⁰ The smaller units of community help people connect to fellow worshipers in ways that cannot be done in large worship services or Bible classes.

Small groups are a great way to build a healthy sense of belonging so people can get to know a smaller set of people very well. By being able to enter a social or personal space, participants can fulfill the need to belong with one another. Small groups often encompass various social, economic, and age categories. Groups can occasionally become a rare place where intimate space occurs between members. Prayer for one another can often move groups from a social space to a personal or intimate space.

The Value of Small Groups

Small groups are beneficial for incorporating members. It has been shown that people in these programs are less likely to become inactive.⁴¹ Oftentimes, when people are involved in a group, “deep, life-changing situations happen [in their personal lives and, when they do,] leaders

⁴⁰ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 29.

⁴¹ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 76.

can help (them) regain their stability.”⁴² In facing all kinds of struggles that can occur in a Christian’s life, having a small group of fellow believers who share a sense of belonging is a safe space and can be a great source of prayer and support.

A healthy, growing church that has a small group ministry is one that has multiple groups, with many that are open to new people joining.⁴³ The suggested ratio that indicates a growing church is six to seven groups per one hundred people.⁴⁴ In *Building a Church of Small Groups*, the authors claim that members have a need to care for one another and that each member must see themselves as members of one body in the church. Their organizational evidence points out that small groups are the best way for a congregation to build community.⁴⁵ The success and popularity of small group programs across America seem to support this as well. It creates an atmosphere in which people can reside in any of the four spaces (public, social, personal and intimate). Christians in these groups mature in faith and support of one another in Christian love by learning Scripture, growing in faith, and praying together.

Main Types of Small Groups

A congregation can design a variety of small group programs. Five major types of small groups include disciple making (developing spiritual disciplines), community groups, service groups, seeker groups (discipling new Christians), and support groups (aiding people through difficult times).⁴⁶ Many churches have one or more of these types of groups.

⁴² Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 204.

⁴³ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 94.

⁴⁴ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 94.

⁴⁵ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church*, 45.

⁴⁶ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church*, 183.

Developing a small group ministry requires intentional effort. A common misconception about developing a strong program is that merely adding more small groups will create a culture where many members thrive in small groups. If a congregation wants to develop a more pervasive approach to small group ministry, it can work to become “a church *of* small groups.” Rather than having small groups available alongside other ministry programs (which is what occurs at churches *with* small groups), churches *of* small groups are congregations where, besides weekly worship, all other activity occurs through the platform of the small group system. Having a church *of* small groups increases the ability to promote, grow, and support small group ministry.

Intentional planning can help the congregation select the type or types of groups that are most needed to help the body of the congregation nurture relationships and encourage a sense of belonging in the members. No ‘one-size fits all’ type of group exists for congregations to utilize across the board. Rather, small group ministry needs to be flexible for the sake of meeting the needs of those in the congregation. In that way, they can live and grow in sanctification and share a sense of belonging with one another in community.

Preparing and Training for Small Groups

Having gifted and equipped leaders for small groups is essential. It is important that they “allow casual friendships to develop without feeling a need to force intimacy.”⁴⁷ For some people, leading a small group in a comfortable environment is second nature. Others need guidance as they learn how to lead a group. Effective group leaders are those who can define

⁴⁷ Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 24.

gifts and roles for others with a desire to continue to grow themselves.⁴⁸ It is advantageous for leaders to be selected because they are qualified (having natural skills or the ability to learn them) and have a passion for groups and other people.⁴⁹ By having leaders train up apprentices from their group, congregations can grow the skills of individuals while also preparing to have more small groups created for a place of community and belonging.⁵⁰

Organizing Small Group Ministry

Congregations may be tempted to focus on forming groups and inadvertently take too much control of a process that needs to develop naturally. They need to guide the process to allow for both staff formed groups and naturally formed groups. By doing so they can create and allow for a healthy climate for the growth of groups, but not be programmers that control all of the details.⁵¹ However, congregational leadership should attend to the things that need to occur when organizing a small group program so that the groups serve ministry needs and become places that grow a member's sense of belonging. One such example is that, when designing the small group program, the leadership has to decide if the groups will be open to non-members as well as current members.

Small groups need to have start and end dates.⁵² However, the length and seasons of small groups can vary depending on the congregation's culture and the local community calendar. It is especially helpful to promote the groups as a social space to make friends, grow, and have fun. Congregations do not want groups seen only as personal and intimate spaces as that may

⁴⁸ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church*, 188.

⁴⁹ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 25.

⁵⁰ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 60.

⁵¹ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 70.

⁵² Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 26.

intimidate some people. By having an end date, groups can be intentional in belonging with one another for the assigned time and then decide if a different group or topic would better fit their needs in the future.

When existing groups grow too large, it is unwise to force groups to split. The leadership should work with the group and its leader to address the situation. Also, some groups are tight-knit and closed, not open to adding participants.⁵³ Closed groups too should be allowed to develop naturally and addressed as needed in a cooperative manner. The high sense of belonging to one another that occurs in such groups can even be celebrated.

Various recommendations about how big or small a ‘small group’ should be have been suggested. According to Kelley, a safe number to gauge a group’s health is about twelve to fifteen people.⁵⁴ However, as long as the group is small enough for consistent and confidential personal interaction and large enough to have shared discussion and a variety of input, it can be a strong community for growth that gives a sense of belonging to one another.

Summary

In response to the need to belong, which is supported by both Scripture and the sciences, the programs described above are some of the most common ways for congregations to build a sense of belonging among members. These programs help churches to meet the physical and sociological needs of people through the sense of community that is developed. Such programs need to respond to the external factors of American culture and the various factors that should be accounted for internally. In applying any program to a congregation, the goal should always be

⁵³ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 111.

⁵⁴ Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 7.

to get people to return, to build relationships, and to feel a sense of belonging and responsibility to the congregation.⁵⁵ Therefore, the programs that are applied to a church need to be chosen intentionally to appropriately consider the factors at play.

When a congregation determines the needs of their members and designs programs to meet those needs, the next step is getting people into the programs. Just because these programs exist does not mean that all visitors or new members will be able to connect to them. Instead, they may join a program that is easier to access rather than one that would more fully meet their needs. How much advertising and promotion is needed and what barriers prevent people from engaging in a helpful program are questions that need to be addressed. For those whose needs can be met at a congregation, it is important they are connected both easily and intentionally. People need to be invited to feel welcome.⁵⁶ By having intentional paths to programs, congregations will more naturally have a welcoming atmosphere that moves people along to where their needs can be met. In the next chapter I will describe methods congregations can use to ensure their members are in a program that meets their need to belong in the congregation.

⁵⁵ Searcy, *Fusion*, 141.

⁵⁶ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 52.

CHAPTER FOUR

BRIDGING THE GAP TO COMMUNITY

God's human creatures were made with a need to belong to one another in community. Christians receive many benefits by gathering regularly in congregations. The use of vocations and gifts for service to one another highlights a Christian's ability to live out community according to God's design. Healthy belonging thrives in communities that put aside selfish tendencies, cling to the hope that is shared in Christ's grace and mercy, and grow in sanctification by the aid of the Holy Spirit. In order to meet the need to belong, Christian congregations provide programs that offer opportunities to grow together and support one another. Programs like those discussed in the last chapter can be keys to the relational health of a congregation and help meet the creational need to belong by members.

In order to make these programs successful for the purpose of growing relationships and meeting members' needs, they should be intentionally chosen and designed. When pastors and staff take the time to ensure they are spending their energy on running the correct programs for their people, it will be easier for their people to find a sense of belonging within the congregation. The emphasis that the pastors and staff place on community trickles down to members of the congregation. The laity can see the value of the programs that build people's sense of community.

Meeting the need for community begins with having an expectation in the culture of the congregation that members will serve one another. In turn, it means that people will be given opportunities to use their vocations to serve others and to see themselves as needed members of

the body.¹ To have enough roles to keep all members of the body working together, according to Heck, there should be about sixty tasks per one hundred active congregants.² In an environment of healthy belonging, leaders or staff can see a need to be filled in the congregation and turn it into a job to be filled. This furthers the mentality that the whole body works together for the mission. In this way, the whole congregation cares for one another. Such an intentional effort guards against letting many jobs simply fall to the paid staff or a small set of core volunteers.

There are also programs that intentionally build relational community. These were highlighted in the previous chapter. They include small groups, new member classes, sponsorship programs and new member dinners. These programs serve specifically to nurture a sense of belonging among members within the congregation.

In these programs, growth of faith also happens. The sweet spot of progressing in spiritual maturity “occurs when healthy leaders give truth to a disciple who is in a vulnerable posture.”³ In other words, when congregation members have a healthy sense of belonging with others in the congregation, they are better able to speak the truth in love. When that happens, both love-filled law and joy-filled gospel can be more safely shared and openly received.

There are a plethora of programs and activities that churches use to help people meet the basic creational need to belong in community. Besides the ones already listed, one could add many others. Some examples include: men-specific and women-specific Bible study groups, a group that provides hot meals to the homeless, ‘mommy and me’ groups, a mission society,⁴ or other types of support groups or service groups. These provide task-oriented and spiritual

¹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 68.

² Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 29.

³ Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 62.

⁴ In The LCMS, such groups include the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) or the Lutheran Laymen’s League (LLL).

growth-oriented opportunities as well as a point of connection to the congregation. However, even though the need to belong can be met by participating in congregational life, activities, and programs, many people do not readily connect to them. If such connections are not made people can quickly drift away after they begin attending. Sadly, many become inactive members or do not seek membership.

It is common for churches to promote programs in a variety of ways in order to inspire new and inactive members to get involved. The first step is to intentionally connect these members to existing ministry programs.

The Missing Piece

Many programs offer great ways for people to develop a healthy sense of belonging to their congregation. Yet, many people do not get involved in those programs. The reason may be that they do not understand how a church program can meet their needs. Or, they have not figured out how to join a different program that would better meet their needs. Regardless of the reasoning, there is often a gap that needs to be filled. That gap can be filled by an intentional bridge to a place of congregational incorporation.

A common misconception is that new members will take the initiative to get involved. However, information that is obvious to the church leadership and long-time members often has insider vocabulary. This kind of information can be such short-hand language as to not make sense without extensive knowledge of the congregation's traditions. Scattered and distracting advertisements that try to vie for attention can also make it difficult for people to easily pick out the pieces of information they need to get involved. Visitors, new members, and inactive members can really struggle with this confusing mix of information.

Unintentional Exclusivity

“Your (congregation) is perfectly designed to produce the results you are getting.”⁵ If a congregation is seeing a low rate of visitor return or does not see many people moving from inactive to active membership, this is a call to action. Those congregations need to intentionally address this problem. To not do so makes the congregation invisible to those who need it. As Bonhoeffer writes, “any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him.”⁶ Unfortunately, there are many ways that congregations can unintentionally become invisible and exclusive. In order to counteract this tendency, leaders should address the need to connect new members and to move inactive members into active membership.

One can view a congregation as a series of circles enclosed within one another. People who are on the outside of the circles are those who are not engaged; perhaps because they were unintentionally excluded or perhaps for other reasons. The ease or effort it would take for a non-active member to get into the center, where they could find a sense of belonging, highlights how open that community is to connecting with outsiders. A congregation concerned about the level of ease or difficulty would want to make some intentional inquiries to find out why their culture is so. Often, the people on the outside are members who become inactive or fail to engage but do not transfer out of the congregation. Rather, these unengaged attendees gradually fall away from attending services and participating in congregational life. They typically fall out of the circles and off the radar of the congregation’s awareness.⁷

⁵ Patrick Morley, David Delk, and Brett Clemmer, *No Man Left Behind: How to Build and Sustain a Thriving Disciple-Making Ministry for Every Man in Your Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 19.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 113.

⁷ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 80.

While there are a multitude of reasons why a person can fail to be engaged in the life of a congregation,⁸ the engagement gap that is the focus of this paper lies in the area of unintentional exclusivity. These are members, often new to a congregation, who would receive little more than a surface level welcome. Church leaders would say they do not intentionally exclude anyone. They do not realize they may be unintentionally doing so. For example, by taking a tour of the facilities or observing how a worship service is conducted and trying to see these through the eyes of someone who is not yet engaged, it can become evident that the congregation is not meeting new people's needs to belong in their community. One example may be a visitor in a wheelchair who realizes there is no safe route to the sanctuary or accessible place from which to hear the sermon. Another example may be a visitor that is deaf and finds that the church does not provide a sign-language interpreter during the service or does not offer a printed copy of the sermon. These are obvious physical barriers to engagement.

Other barriers are less obvious. People who are not physically excluded from the church may still feel excluded from gaining a deeper sense of belonging to the congregation. While they may attend irregularly, the congregation's current pattern of disseminating information may leave them uninformed as to how to get involved in community-strengthening programs. For example, a congregation that only announces upcoming social events on the first Sunday of the month may miss helping those who attend only once or twice a month to get involved. Their odds of hearing about programs they can get involved in are relatively low. Another example would be an older adult that does not have an email or a Facebook account and so does not get to see the announcements and upcoming events that are shared through these means. Therefore, by

⁸ People may become unengaged because someone caused them offense but never shared the situation with someone at the church. Or, they may have heard teaching with which they do not agree. Or, there were factors in their personal life that led them to not engage in the church such as illness, job, transportation, etc.

looking at the congregation through the eyes of an outsider, pastors, elders, and staff can find ways to become more inclusive and help more attendees find a sense of belonging in the congregation.

For churches to become more welcoming and engaging, there are helpful steps to take. They can first intentionally define who is being sought, next identify their needs, and then determine how the congregation can meet those needs.⁹ When the congregation makes alterations to better meet those needs, the members of the congregation should first be prepared for these changes and their ramifications to occur. While the changes may make it easier for new people to join, it may result in a change in the demographics that begin to visit or seek membership in the congregation. The changes can result in the atmosphere of the congregation feeling less like what the long-time members are accustomed to. So, it is important they are prepared to adapt with the changes.

One tradeoff of reaching the gospel to a wider population of people is the potential for losing the ethnic base and tradition of the congregation.¹⁰ For example, if a congregation begins an intentional outreach to a minority population of Hispanics in the town, the culture of the congregation would need to adjust as it makes room for the customs of the new group. Making some changes in the culture is necessary so that the new members feel at home and will gain a sense of belonging. Making these accommodations would strengthen the sense of belonging between longtime members and new members. However, it would make the transition into the congregation a bit more challenging for new members that transfer in from other congregations that do not have a Hispanic ministry.

⁹ Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 125.

¹⁰ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 10.

Adapting to a changing environment is always an adjustment. The struggle of adapting to change can also occur when a congregation changes to be more welcoming for any type of different culture. For example, a congregation could change to be more welcoming for those with different struggles, such as: addictions, blindness, being wheelchair bound, or being mute. When a congregation knows who they want to welcome into their community, they can tailor their programs and communication style accordingly. They can work for a community in which people desire to find a sense of belonging. But they need to realize that change is a challenge for everyone.

While change must be faced by all involved, the need to belong for new members should be given special attention. It should not be easier to join the official membership than to join the fellowship circles and groups that manifest belonging. This requires recognizing that faith, joining a congregation, and acceptance into a congregation are three separate things. Yet, when they all occur a new member will truly find a sense of belonging in the congregation.

Many individual programs that are intended to meet the needs of members can unintentionally become exclusive, especially if the promotion of these activities is not focused on the new members. Being aware of the programs offered, and who can be ministered to by them is helpful in avoiding excluding people, even unintentionally. Paying attention to who is invited, who the programs are (intentionally or subtly) marketed toward, and how easily people can become aware of a program can help to raise awareness of what changes need to be made to make programs more inclusive.

Common Connections to Community

Two ways that congregations often depend on to get people involved in ministries are ‘word-of-mouth’ and enrollments for activities and groups. These approaches can well serve the

current active members but can unintentionally exclude those not yet connected.

The first method, spreading information through word-of-mouth, occurs in nearly all congregations. Congregations of all sizes often rely on active members to ‘talk up’ the program that benefits them so that others will desire to join. Many positive results come from this. People enjoy the opportunity to be relational and talk face-to-face with those they desire to join the program. People looking to join a program appreciate hearing personal reasons why others enjoy a program which may sway them toward the well-suited program to join. However, spreading news through word-of-mouth can quickly become exclusive.

One problem with the ‘word-of-mouth’ method is when someone realizes they were not personally invited like others were. People can feel excluded when they realize they did not hear the information that was shared with others, even if it was a simple oversight. The second problem happens, and does so more commonly, when those who do not attend regularly are not around often enough to be given the information. Therefore, the randomness of the ‘word-of-mouth’ approach does not help to grow the community or a new person’s sense of belonging. Sharing information through ‘word-of-mouth’ alone also does not help people to find out about the program that may better meet their current needs and fully incorporate them into the body of the congregation.

The second of the common methods to be discussed here is enrollment initiatives for activities, programs, or groups. For example, asking people to sign-up for an upcoming round of small groups or a new Bible study series can help to put a sense of urgency in people so they will take action and not put off participating. Signups are a helpful way for the leadership to get information to those who are desiring to grow in knowledge and community through a small group. It helps congregations to get information on the people with which they can further

connect and follow-up.¹¹ However, an initial challenge is often to get new people interested in joining the program. When seeking people to get involved for the first time, the sign-up process becomes unproductive in many ways. These difficulties can occur when the forms ask for too much information and people do not feel they have time to fill out a long, complicated inventory. Another struggle can be created when potential participants have to crowd around a small table to find the sign-up sheets. These are examples of unintended barriers that can prevent people from growing in their sense of belonging in a congregation.

Therefore, intentionally making it easier for people to sign up will provide a greater chance that people will get involved. For example, congregations can provide a basic form on the church attendance card for people that are interested in signing up for activities or groups. They can also have a simple sign-up form linked at the top of their website so anyone can access it from home. In the narthex it is important to have an easy to find and well-marked sign-up table available for good accessibility. Further, the table should be staffed with someone to answer any questions. Finally, the sign-up form should ask for only basic information such as name, phone or email, and what group the person wants to join.

These two common methods for connecting members to community at the church are helpful but not always successful. They also do not solve all the problems that occur when programs are unintentionally exclusive. Therefore, rather than missing people who are not aware of the insider knowledge of many groups, congregations need to pay attention to the ways that they are helping or hindering people's involvement in their community building programs.

¹¹ Searcy and Thomas, *Activate*, 178.

Incorporating People into Congregations and Community Building Programs

There are many ways that congregations work to get people in their programs, such as different advertising methods and the methods of connecting people to community that were discussed above. However, many of these (such as only making announcements through email or once a week or before the service when parents may be getting their children settled) are ‘cookie cutter’ systems that do not ensure each person is informed of the programs that can best serve them. For this reason, congregations should be intentional in how they work to connect everyone, but especially new people, to ministries.

Being Intentional in Connecting People to Community Building Programs

Congregations should be aware of how much effort it takes for a person to move from outside the circle of community, into the outside rung of membership, then into the innermost circle of manifesting belonging in relationships within the congregation. For some congregations, this ‘barrier’ between layers of circles of belonging is more like a line painted on the floor for people to step over as they become members and then are smoothly transitioned into an appropriate program. For others, getting into the inside circle feels blocked by a ten-foot brick wall barrier, as it takes insider knowledge and a bit of social luck to learn the route into a sense of belonging in the congregational community.¹²

A good place to begin addressing this need is to develop an incorporation team. This team can be a group of active members that assess the congregation and its activities. The team would consider the purpose of each program and who may be unintentionally excluded. They would review the programs for the needs they serve. They also would determine if any programs are unnecessary or are lacking. They would then work to find the paths for getting people

¹² Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, 80.

incorporated into the community-strengthening programs. This team could also create an assessment to discern how well they are incorporating people.¹³

The senior pastor needs to be active with this team. The pastor sets an example for the congregation. His participation demonstrates that everyone is to be invested in the effort.¹⁴ The good news about starting with an incorporation team to assess the efforts of the congregation is that it both raises awareness and increases excitement for finding a solution.¹⁵ This team can ensure that initiatives of the congregation, regardless of their other functions, also serve the purpose of creating community.¹⁶ When this is the case, incorporation methods can become ubiquitous so that they continually serve the inclusion needs of visitors, new members, and inactive members, as well as those who are simply looking for further engagement.¹⁷

By ensuring that there are easily accessible paths to various programs, incorporation into the congregation and gaining a sense of belonging will become simplified for members and attendees. This includes both those entering the church via the traditional model of believe-behave-belong and those connecting through the more recent model of belong-behave-believe.¹⁸ The overall goal for this team is to build relationships within the congregation and engage people in congregational life. They carry this responsibility for the body of the congregation.¹⁹

¹³ A checklist for discovering if there is a problem with current incorporation methods can be found in Heck's *New Member Assimilation* on page 18. A checklist for deciding if members (or how many members) are fully incorporated can be found in the same text on page 54.

¹⁴ Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans: Strategies to Increase Your Church's Membership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 94.

¹⁵ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 10.

¹⁶ Morley, Delk, and Clemmer, *No Man Left Behind*, 67.

¹⁷ Searcy, *Fusion*, 112.

¹⁸ Miller, "Send Me St. Louis."

¹⁹ Searcy, *Fusion*, 141.

Providing a Welcoming Environment

When a visitor enters the church, the congregation has seven minutes to make their first impression.²⁰ Most often, some of those seven minutes in a congregation include deciphering acronyms like LSB (*Lutheran Service Book*) and LWML (Lutheran Women's Missionary League).²¹ However, when people reach out with care to visitors and new members and share information in a way sensitive to their level of familiarity, new attendees will meet caring people in a close community. Searcy suggests having volunteers prepared in the entryways of the sanctuary so that each visitor is greeted, directed (to restrooms, childcare, etc.), treated (with coffee or a donut that demonstrates the people who attend are cared for on even a basic level), and then seated (so that people do not feel awkward trying to decipher where to sit in the worship space.)²² Church entryways, atriums, or narthexes can act as the 'front porch' of the church.²³ As the 'front porch,' it is a friendly space that invites people to seek to interact with the church's members in a more personal environment. However, it does not force them into the church or the community. It does not force them to go deeper into the congregation, but it offers an opportunity to be welcomed and have a comfortable space to get to know others. Inside this welcoming space, efforts can be made to help people connect with friendships and find a path to community.

Creating a Solution for Connection to Community

A variety of functional methods are available for congregations to assess how well they are

²⁰ Searcy, *Fusion*, 50.

²¹ In The LCMS these acronyms refer to a popular hymnal and a mission's organization. Every congregation and denomination have their own insider information that should be defined for those coming in from the outside.

²² Searcy, *Fusion*, 55–67.

²³ Myers, *Search to Belong*, 131.

incorporating their members and visitors. Congregations can also ensure that a desire for community engagement is seen. This happens through the care for people that occurs in the entryway. It is evident in sermons, prayers, and in language that is sensitive to a new attendee's level of familiarity with the community. It also occurs in the visible diversity that is apparent in the various needs that the congregation's programs meet.

Yet, congregations need to get people to a sense of belonging beyond that of a friendly entryway. It requires additional effort beyond simply having smiling greeters. How does a congregation bridge the gap between 'outside' and 'inside,' between unfamiliarity and belonging? They design an intentional path to community that will work for the needs of those not yet engaged in their congregation. In the remaining sections, I will discuss different bridges that congregations can use to provide intentional efforts of incorporation.

Building Bridges for Ministry

A clear system is needed to transition people into the programs that can best serve them and help them to serve others. Programs such as small groups, social events, service teams, and newcomer receptions help to strengthen the glue between members and the congregation.²⁴ These programs build community. They do so with different methods and in different spaces (as in, they occur across the public, social, personal, and intimate spaces that were described in the previous chapter). They do not need to be complicated but can function effectively in simple ways. As Rainer and Geiger point out, "simple churches are growing and vibrant. Churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom. Church leaders who have designed a simple biblical process to make disciples are effectively advancing the

²⁴ Searcy, *Fusion*, 128–36.

movement of the gospel. Simple churches are making a big impact.”²⁵ It does not have to be crowded, look busy, or feel like the secular, business world to have the right number of programs to fit everyone’s needs.

A single congregation cannot meet every person’s needs. People’s needs and interests can vary widely. Therefore, it is important that congregations are intentional about choosing the needs and interests their church will serve that they believe will meet peoples’ need to belong. They then can focus on having the correct programs and paths to those programs to help people become incorporated. Especially in large congregations there can be a maze of program options. The result is that groups compete for advertising and participants.²⁶ This competition does not help people end up in the right group to meet their needs. Instead, it creates confusion and discourages people from getting involved in programs. Further, being active in too many programs does not necessarily strengthen a person’s sense of belonging. It can make them busy but does not readily connect them on a deeper level to fellow members. Therefore, below I will describe specific methods that can be used to successfully communicate the programs that the congregation has strategically chosen to use so that people can find a sense of belonging in the right programs for building community.

Potential Bridges to Apply in Congregations

Monitoring Membership Activity and a Database of Needs and Gifts

It can be difficult for many churches to keep tabs on all of their current members. The larger they are, the more challenging this is. However, keeping current records on the activities

²⁵ Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 14.

²⁶ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 83.

in which people are engaging can serve incorporation needs. By being aware of a decrease in activity, congregations can reach out before members fully become inactive.²⁷ By recognizing trends, for example, if someone has begun to consistently miss services, a church leader can send a loving communication to encourage them. This note can say, “You are missed” and increase their sense of belonging to the congregation. It makes it significantly easier for the congregation to reach out in a timely manner, and with relevant information for their needs.²⁸

A church interviewed by Heck suggested tracking information on members such as background information, interests, gifts, and some key areas of discipleship, for example: tithing, serving, or learning (Bible study attendance).²⁹ These factors are tracked, and trends are reported. Heck says these people are contacted after three consecutive weekends of missing church. Also, members that are not active are intentionally invited to volunteer in a position that fits their interests and gifts when a new need occurs in the congregation.

When a full record of active programs that the church provides is listed, it can be used to compare to each file of inactive members to assess what program would best encourage them to get involved. This method could easily be managed by volunteers, such as an incorporation team, in small to medium sized churches. However, when the size of church membership is too large for a volunteer to manage, professional staff would be needed to keep the database up to date.

Attendance Cards

Attendance cards can also be a tool for helping visitors and members alike build a bridge to community. A culture where every person in attendance fills out a card makes it more likely that

²⁷ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 80.

²⁸ Searcy, *Fusion*, 90.

²⁹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 87.

guests too will share their information. These cards can have a space to respond to the sermon and mark what their next step is for their faith growth (such as by marking that they plan to reread their sermon notes during the week or will memorize the sermon's theme verse in the upcoming week), as is suggested by Searcy. In that way, attendance cards can become a tool for people to tell the congregation how they want to become part of the body in new ways.

Therefore, a simple card can be a tool to help people get involved and envision how they want to grow in their faith and vocations.³⁰ The cards, which can simply be dropped in the offering plate or handed to an usher, can include a place for people to list the small group or service group they want to join. It therefore can be a simple way to respond to an announcement about an upcoming event or a new program. In that way, attendance cards can act as a simple way for people to sign-up without going to a sign-up table. The information from these cards can then easily be distributed to program coordinators that are seeking the feedback or tracking the sign-ups.

Member Incorporation Team

Creating an incorporation team that will track programs and how people can get involved in them, as was discussed earlier, can also help reach out to new members or those who have disconnected from the congregation. By doing so, the incorporation team can help a church grow a sense of belonging between its members. The presence of this kind of team builds awareness of the importance of making members feel connected to the congregation. Having such a group can in itself help to shape the culture of the church as a place to belong.³¹ Without a team of dedicated volunteers, the work of incorporating new members falls from a shared endeavor to a concern of only the pastor. People cannot all be effectively incorporated if it is up to just one

³⁰ Searcy, *Fusion*, 76.

³¹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 10.

person. The congregation needs to feel responsible for the incorporation of members in real, tangible ways. By doing so, they share in the responsibility that all members are becoming incorporated. Sharing the responsibility with the congregation can happen by having the members involved in the creation of the incorporation team, so they have a sense of ownership in the process. This kind of responsibility would not be shared by the members if the creation of the incorporation team were left up to the council or staff. This team would best be composed of a committed leader, an effective and renewed group of participants, and have the support of the senior pastor.³² All three of these are needed to show the congregation that incorporating and including people is a high priority. In this way, it is a useful tool for building a sense of belonging to the congregation, its programs, and its people.

The incorporation team could do a number of tasks to benefit the incorporation of members.³³ Their efforts begin with assessing what programs exist and which needs they serve. The team would then be able to ensure that information gets shared in a helpful way with the congregation and new members. They also can monitor programs and new member classes to learn how well people are getting connected or how many people are not continuing active membership. Furthermore, an incorporation team can be responsible for tracking the membership activity database and helping connect people to small groups or service groups that would fit their needs. They also can meet personally with new members.

Interviewing Members

Interviews can be a helpful way for getting information and intentionally guiding people to

³² Morley, Delk, and Clemmer, *No Man Left Behind*, 82.

³³ Some larger churches choose to instead hire an incorporation-focused staff member. That person would be able to compare the member tracking information with the list of groups that aid in incorporation. They could connect disengaged people with groups or tasks that would benefit from their skills or passions.

a sense of belonging in a place in the congregation. Ideally, every pastor would get to know members in order to personally minister to them. One way to make this possible in larger churches is by having the incorporation team carry out the interviews. Another strategy is to only do interviews with new members and/or with those who request an interview to assist them in getting connected. The team could collect information, such as: brief histories, vocations, gifts, passions for service, needs, and interests.³⁴ It could also keep an updated list of programs and activities available in the church to then easily cross-reference the information from the interview with the list of programs. This process, therefore, can be a simple way for the interviewer to select a place in the congregation to suggest the person get involved in to find a sense of belonging and community.

Post-New Member Class Courses

So often when a new member class ends and the new people have been officially welcomed into the church, they are then left on their own to make friends and find their own ways to get involved. When there is an intentional follow-up plan for classes or programs best suited for new members, the guesswork is reduced. This plan requires several components. A congregation first must decide how they are going to organize their classes. This may be by level of familiarity with Scripture, by topics of interest, or by some other organizing approach. After that, the congregation can decide which of these divisions are appropriate to suggest for new members. This intentionality in categorizing each group makes it easy to highlight what each group teaches and how each can help grow participant's faith and sense of belonging.³⁵ A list of these programs that are more appropriate for new people can be an easy way to hand the new

³⁴ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 62.

³⁵ Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 114–16.

members a guide to getting involved. As additional classes are created, they can be added to the menu of classes so that there are always specific, next-step class offerings for new members.

Having a class specifically designed to help new members learn more about the faith and give insight into who they are as children of God can be one of these helpful classes. Such a class can also help people to grow their sense of belonging by giving them additional time to build friendships in a class immediately after the new member class. This lineage of suggested classes can be a segue into learning enough about the church to be able to choose where to get connected next. Such classes could include a skills development course in which people learn things like how to pray with others or how to care for people through visitation. They could include a class that specifically teaches how to do hospital visits. Another option also could be a course to assist people in sharing their faith with people outside the church.³⁶ Thus, these classes can help a person grow in Christian faith and skills while also giving a sense of belonging through relationships and sharing in the common mission of their new church family.

Gifts Assessments and Courses

Another way for the congregation to get people acquainted with possible programs for them to join is by helping them determine their personal gifts and abilities. One church interviewed by Heck describes a class that first helped people discover their gifts and then worked on deploying them.³⁷ Through a quiz on potential gifts, people learned more about themselves and how the church saw their talents and vocations. However, a deployment step was also necessary for the class to be useful for moving people toward a sense of belonging. The leader of the class could enumerate the places that a new members' gifts could be used and what

³⁶ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 77–79.

³⁷ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 84.

would be most enjoyable for them by assessing the passions each class member had and cross-referencing those with the list of programs available in the church. In the end, this information would be passed along to the leaders of the various programs so they could help welcome those people into their program. Sharing that information was necessary to help make a smooth transition for the member to where they could begin building a sense of belonging with other members.

At St. Peter's, as was briefly described in chapter one, the SHAPE class includes many helpful tools for this purpose. The class name stands for spiritual gifts, heart/passion, abilities, personality, and experience. The SHAPE class highlights the value that the congregation places on aiding each new member to grow at St. Peter's. It also teaches that the whole being (the passion, skills, heart and talents) of a Christian goes into a learning or service program. This highlights the fact that people should not learn or serve just because they are told to. Rather, they should be ready to fully commit to what they are getting involved with.

This program also offers opportunities to learn by utilizing tools like the DISC personality assessment, spiritual gifts assessments, and specifically designed new member Bible studies. The Bible studies cover topics such as how Christians are to use their gifts, their time, and their passions for the church. This significant investment in teaching also helps to highlight that the congregation desires for members to be continually learning and that its staff and members care for them and will invest in helping them grow.

Accessible Information

Active members can often connect with people that are disconnected when they have

places to meet and simple ways to communicate.³⁸ These involve taking advantage of the time after worship when people are still lingering around, having a singular location for announcements and program information, and having an organized list of programs available for new and current members. These simple, intentional efforts take away barriers and give people the ability to easily find needed information about programs.

After worship services can be a great time to catch up with fellow members. By taking advantage of the few minutes after church services when people meander out of the sanctuary, leaders and volunteers can intentionally focus on seeking out people who look like they are not connected. They can strike up a conversation and help them feel welcome. Leaders of Bible studies and small groups can take turns being available in the entryway to provide resources for those desiring to get involved. Furthermore, having a consistent, clear location for a program sign-up table and for an information desk can help people have easy access to finding the right groups to meet their needs.

Taking advantage of a singular, communal information spot could also be done by creating an information posting board. The board would be a location where any program can post advertisements, descriptions, or invitations for their group. The communal location shows members what the congregation wants them to learn about that is going on in the church and can help them to not feel left out.

This information could also be shared in a helpful way by presenting it in a letter or booklet that describes each program. For new members, a booklet of all programs that focuses on new members could help them to get further involved after they officially join the congregation. Such a booklet can be organized by the times that groups meet during the week, the needs they serve,

³⁸ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 178.

whether they are a learning-focused or serving-focused group, and for whom the group is intending to serve.³⁹ When there are many programs to be listed, an index can make the booklet easier to navigate. Providing adequate information about groups, especially in a congregation with a wide range of programs, can be helped by having succinct information and easy access to descriptions and meeting times. The booklet can be helpful for either those who are looking to connect for the first time, or those who are merely looking for a change in involvement.

Awareness of How People Can Get Lost or Find a Path to Belonging

The success or failure of helping to connect people to congregational activities and programs in which they can build a sense of belonging hinges on the value placed on intentional, personalized care. This step helps people who live in a complicated, over-busy, fast-paced, technological society by providing the safety of community with God and a sense of belonging to one another. It is inside of that separation from the culture that people can manifest healthy belonging in a congregation, where the law is pronounced honestly and the gospel is proclaimed joyfully. Congregations need to look at their community through the eyes of an outsider. On a mission to share the love of Jesus with others, churches cannot be closed off and appear unconcerned about others' needs. They cannot ignore the needs of the new people that come inside the congregation's doors. Instead, churches must be ready to help get them connected to community.

³⁹ This is done well by Community Church of Columbus in Columbus, Indiana. The packet of groups that members can join is divided into two sections: Bible study or service group. Each section lists the groups by who the groups are open to and then lists them all again in order of meeting day and time.

Conclusion

Intentionally Making Bridges to Programs that Meet the Laity's Specific Needs

Some of the ideas for bridging to community listed above could be applied on their own. These options include a booklet of programs to join, a simple sign-up process for small groups, and simple attendance cards. A task an incorporation team could enact would be to create a specific team to conduct interviews with new members to help them get connected. Whatever a congregation uses to help guide people to programs that give them a sense of belonging, it will not be successful without intentionality and a loving desire for the growth of those helped by creating that bridge.

The best programs, the most-loving community, and the strongest small group leaders are great tools. However, there needs to be an intentional process to successfully move people from merely seeking membership to desiring active engagement and feeling a sense of belonging among fellow Christians in the congregation. If a church leadership assumes that everyone who walks through the doors of the church will understand the terminology and will know how to get involved, people can get easily lost and frustrated and it will result in a lack of engagement. It could even cause backdoor losses of people who cease to be part of the church. Sinful humans will find excuses to not become actively involved in the church, especially when becoming uninvolved is easy to do. However, when an intentionally thought-out pathway to involvement in the programs and communal life of the congregation exists, it helps fulfill people's need to belong, which is a need that all humans experience as God's creatures. An intentional pathway or bridge to community-strengthening programs also thwarts the sinful, broken, and isolating plots of sinful people. Humans are creatures that need to belong to one another and to God. The activities, programs, and communal life that congregations provide to share the love of Jesus with one another are offered with the goal of helping people grow in their sense of belonging to

others and to God.

Reflecting on Past Experience

Having the opportunity to work and learn at St. Peter's, I saw many wonderful opportunities for building community among members and the church's neighbors. The sense of belonging between people that attended this church, and furthermore, attended the same event or same service time, showed the joy that people have in being able to connect with fellow Christians. The various worship services in themselves encouraged a sense of belonging. Repeatedly, when I would meet someone they would tell me what service they normally attended and ask what service I attended. Whenever I said I attended the same service they immediately acted as if we shared a connection. This connection happened regardless of whether we had spoken before. It was evident that they loved getting to belong to fellow Christians that are sharing the same worship experience and learning from the same sermons.

The variety of small groups, Bible study classes, and service programs at St. Peter's offer many ways for people to find an appropriate place to develop a sense of belonging. However, even though there were efforts to connect new people, many programs were not always utilized by new members. Often a gap of engagement needed to be bridged. Those who shared with me that they did not get connected to the life of the church had been looking for someone to reach out and bridge the connection for them. One of the most common hurdles for churches in getting people connected is the need to realize how intentional the church has to be in reaching out to new people. Especially in a larger church, the variety of programs and the competition for advertising space does not make it simple for people to find the right place to join. If this was true at St. Peter's, which did make a strong effort, it would be generally true in any church. In any sized church, the congregation needs to take the responsibility for engagement and not have

that burden shouldered by the new person.

Many of the ideas for bridging to community discussed in this chapter could be applied at St. Peter's. The bridge that needs to be built for the sake of those joining a congregation is an intentional way to help people get connected. Rather than assuming that the constant broadcasting of information will entice people to do the work of getting involved, coming alongside people and personally helping them is required. Some small ways that the congregation could bridge people to programs that will help them grow their sense of belonging and community would include: altering the methods of sharing information and directions to classes so visitors could more easily find their way around the building, intentionally not using terminology that makes it hard for visitors to understand the information being shared (such as using acronyms or insider language), and intentionally reviewing what needs each program meets and what gifts and passions are needed for a person to be involved. Another possibility could be to share information on programs in a packet for people to peruse. This packet would be a simple way for people to find a program that they identify with and would enjoy joining. This would be especially useful at St. Peter's to distribute in the new member and SHAPE classes. Lastly, a key way to serve St. Peter's, or any congregation, would be to have an incorporation team. As described above, it would evaluate the programs and endeavors of the congregation for ways to better grow the sense of belonging and to oversee efforts to incorporate members into the life of the congregation.

Closing Summary

Recognizing the wide variety of personal needs that can be seen in the attendees and members of any congregation, this thesis set out to aid congregations in helping their people find a sense of belonging within the body of the church. I considered St. Peter's Lutheran Church for

the context of this thesis, as it is a congregation in which a sense of belonging and a strong community is both desired and promoted. However, at St. Peter's, like many churches, there was still a gap between those desiring involvement and the programs that could give them a sense of belonging. Despite the unintentional incorporation that occurs naturally there and in any church, there is still a gap that requires an intentional bridge to community strengthening programs.

As I considered the theological importance of this topic, this thesis described the theological need to belong in a healthy community. As creatures, humans were formed to be in community with God and with fellow humans. Therefore, this need to feel a sense of belonging with other humans was shown to be found in Scripture as well as modern psychological and sociological studies of human nature. Christ's life exemplified true love in healthy community and he called his disciples to continue to grow in community with one another. As Christians today, who live in community with God and the Holy Spirit in their hearts, this need to belong can be met by a congregation through relationships with fellow Christians and intentional congregational programs.

As I considered the programs that congregations can use to meet that need to belong, this thesis described common programs that congregations use to incorporate members. Factors, both internal and external, were considered as to how they play a role in the success of various programs. Each program a congregation may utilize meets different specific needs of attendees, while also meeting their creational need to belong. However, not every program in a church is easy to find or join by either new or long-time members who could benefit from them. Therefore, this thesis focused on the importance that congregations be intentional in their programming and in how they connect people to those programs.

As I considered how congregations can successfully connect people to their programs, this

thesis described multiple methods that can be applied as a bridge to community. The possible approaches for addressing this need to intentionally connect people to community strengthening programs offered a variety of solutions that may be applicable for various congregations. This thesis sought to address the human need to belong and the common congregational struggle to get people fully incorporated. By applying the programs and bridges discussed in this thesis, so that there is both community strengthening programs and multiple bridges to those programs available for all, the new and long-time members alike will be supported by the church in meeting their need for a sense of belonging to the body of the church.

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