

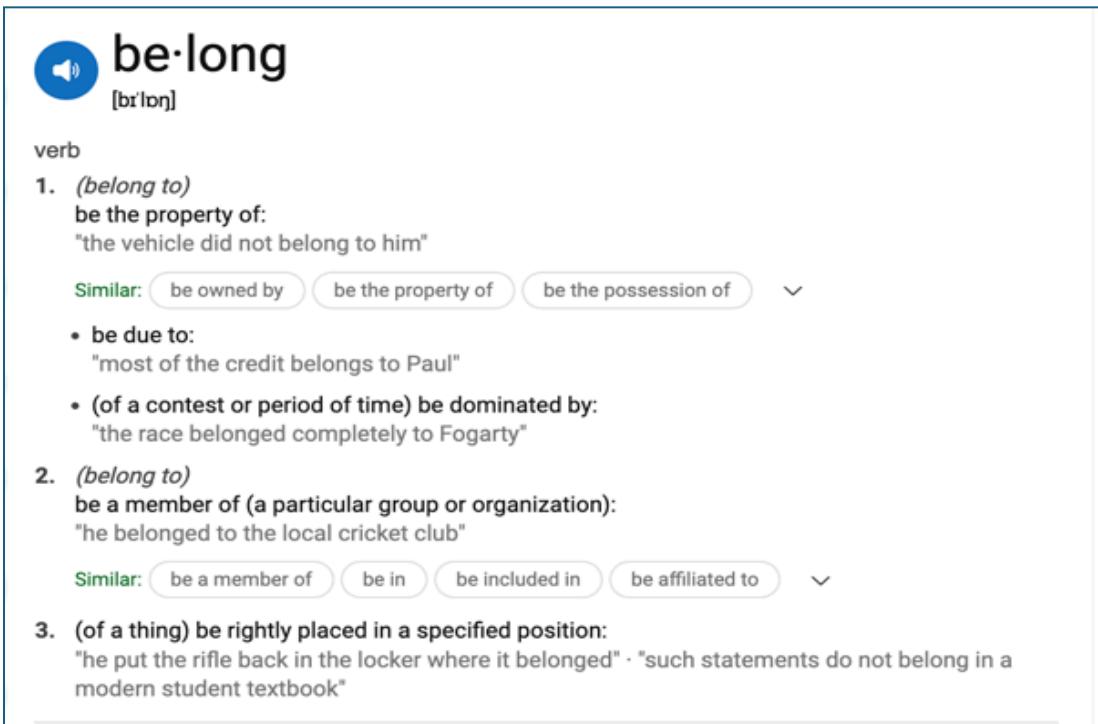
Chapter 2

The Reality of Belonging

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Rom 12: 4-5)¹

To belong to a community, a family, a place where your presence is felt and your absence noticed, where love is given not for what you are but for who you are. This is what [they] yearned for, a sanctuary of belonging amidst a world of fleeting memories and haunting pasts.²

Let us begin this section by examining the concept of belonging in greater detail. Dictionary meanings of belonging typically refer to ownership, membership in a group, and belonging within a particular context. The focus of this book is primarily on individuals' integration into a group. All the same, it is closely linked with other shades of meaning. Belonging well is not merely about being a member of a group; one must be properly situated within it. In some sense, the person owns the group and says, 'my group,' and that community has some right of ownership over that person.



The image shows a dictionary entry for the word 'belong'. The word is written in a large, bold, black font. Below it, the phonetic transcription '[bɪlɒŋ]' is shown. The word is categorized as a 'verb'. The entry is divided into three numbered sections, each with a sub-definition and an example sentence. Section 1: '(belong to) be the property of: "the vehicle did not belong to him"'. Section 2: 'be due to: "most of the credit belongs to Paul"'. Section 3: '(of a contest or period of time) be dominated by: "the race belonged completely to Fogarty"'. Section 4: 'be a member of (a particular group or organization): "he belonged to the local cricket club"'. Section 5: '(of a thing) be rightly placed in a specified position: "he put the rifle back in the locker where it belonged"'. Below each section, there is a 'Similar:' link followed by a list of related phrases: 'be owned by', 'be the property of', 'be the possession of', 'be a member of', 'be in', 'be included in', 'be affiliated to'. Each of these links has a small downward arrow indicating they lead to more information.

Later in this book, we will explore how to help young people attain greater belonging. First, let's take a deep dive into what belonging really means.

¹All biblical citations are taken from the Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic Edition.

²Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1987).

*Image taken from Google search of 'Belong'

1. Belonging and belongingness

We often use 'belonging' and 'belongingness' somewhat interchangeably, but the two terms have distinct meanings.

Belonging is the objective fact of being part of a group, but belongingness, or a sense of belonging, refers to a person's subjective experience of that participation.

To discuss where Freddy is from, we will say, "Freddy belongs to the northern part of the city." He also belongs to a cycling group that he created to foster a sense of belonging. On weekends, they go for long bike trips, and all wear the same T-shirt. Wearing the same T-shirt is symbolic and fosters a sense of belonging. Thus, belongingness refers to being part of a group, community, or society, characterized by a sense of connection and acceptance among its members. Belongingness is the experience of being accepted, valued, and respected by others. It refers to this sense of identity and affiliation with a particular group or community.

Belonging may seem straightforward, but it presents numerous challenges. The most common could be that we find ourselves part of a group without a real sense of belonging: *belonging without belongingness*. It is akin to living in a neighborhood without any strong social connections.

This is the greatest challenge to belonging today: we are part of a community but do not experience a sense of belonging.

A further challenge would be a growing sense of self-sufficiency. You may have heard people boasting, "I don't need anyone. I have everything I need." But they don't realize how dependent they are on others. When you wake up in the morning, you are bombarded by the signs of a community all around you. If you live with your family, they are around you, looking after your needs, and you, too, are contributing your share. Living on a college campus or with colleagues, you connect with them in different ways. To take the reflection one step further, everything you see around your bed, including your clothes, decor in your room, the water you drink, and the book or paper you hold, has a long chain of human collaboration. Everything around us results from the collaborative work of a wider community. We often overlook it, but in an unseen way, we are embedded in the broader network of people who mutually help and support one another. The late Holy Father, Pope Francis, emphasized this understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence numerous times during the COVID-19 pandemic - "No creatures are self-sufficient; they exist only in dependence on each other, complementing one another and in the service of one another."³

This marvelous discovery that thousands of invisible hands make it possible for us to live well every moment of our lives convinces us of our deep indebtedness to the broader community around us.

No one can claim they don't need community while remaining passive beneficiaries of it.

The goal is to deepen our conviction of interconnectedness, to experience a meaningful sense of belonging to our communities, and to participate actively in them.

³ Pope Francis, "General Audience - Catechesis: Healing the World - 5. Solidarity and the Virtue of Faith." (Libreria Editrice Vaticana., September 2020).

2. Isolation and loneliness

In the previous chapter, we examined the rapidly spreading menace of isolation and loneliness, especially among young people. The former Surgeon General made a strong case for the solution of social connection.⁴ Let us examine how belonging is the best solution to this problem.

Isolation is to belonging what loneliness is to belongingness.

Isolation refers to a social condition: objectively, having fewer relationships.⁵ We often refer to social isolation as a condition in which a person is separated from others. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, a widespread health advisory was issued for social isolation, either voluntary or mandatory, to slow the spread of the disease. The word isolation also brings to our mind solitary confinement, often used as a very rigorous form of punishment. In this practice, individuals are isolated in closed cells for up to 24 hours per day for days at a time, virtually free of human contact.⁶

Isolation has been studied in different disciplines. One notable illustration is the Russian author Anton Chekhov's close examination of the effects of isolation in the story *The Bet*. A banker and a young lawyer discuss whether the death penalty or life imprisonment is more difficult to endure. The banker wagers with the lawyer that the latter cannot stay in solitary confinement for 15 years. The lawyer agrees and is confined to a small lodge on the banker's property. Years pass by as isolation takes its severe toll on

the body as well as the psyche of the prisoner. The story has a dramatic ending as the shattered man breaks his solitary life just five hours before the term completes and forfeits the large wager.⁷ The story highlights the harsh reality of isolation and the profound impact of loneliness on human life and psyche, underscoring the dire need for social connection.

While isolation primarily refers to the state of social separation, loneliness denotes a person's subjective experience of social isolation and its distressing effects.⁸ In isolation, loneliness makes it unbearable.

ISOLATION | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/.../english/isolation> ▾

isolation

uk/ˌaɪ.səlˈeɪ.ʃən/ us/ˌaɪ.səlˈeɪ.ʃən/

NOUN [U]

1. the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy
2. the fact that something is separate and not connected to other things

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⁴ U.S. Public Health Service and Office of the Surgeon General, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community” (Washington D.C., May 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. Public Health Service and Office of the Surgeon General, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” 2023.

⁶ Solitary Watch, “Solitary Confinement in the United States: The Facts,” <https://solitarywatch.org/facts/faq/>

⁷ Anton Chekhov, *The Bet and Other Stories*, trans. Sidney Monas (New York: Signet Classics, 1986).

⁸ U.S. Public Health Service and Office of the Surgeon General, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.”

Psychologists define loneliness as a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that the quantity is not meeting one's social needs or, especially, the quality of one's social relationships.⁹

Imprisonment and solitary confinement are used as severe punitive measures because loneliness is extremely painful.

While isolation is external and readily observable, loneliness resists quantification. Since loneliness is a personal experience, its severity is influenced by various factors, both individual and external. People respond to similar states of isolation in different ways. However, this does not mean that some individuals are happy being lonely. No one is happy being alone. A key distinction must be drawn between loneliness and solitude.

3. Solitude

In this regard, it is worth briefly noting *solitude*, a voluntary form of isolation. As indicated above, loneliness is always distressing and harmful. Given the chance, people seek relief from loneliness in one way or another. However, social isolation does not always result in loneliness. Sometimes individuals voluntarily choose social isolation or solitude, not out of necessity but in pursuit of a higher purpose or communion. Unlike other forms of isolation, solitude has many positive effects. The famous writer Thoreau undertook an experiment in solitude. Desiring to live in simple, natural surroundings, he built a cabin near Walden Pond in Massachusetts and lived there for two years, two months, and two days alone. This, in turn, afforded him profound spiritual insights, and his reflections were captured in the famous book *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.

Thoreau is not an isolated case of people withdrawing from society for a higher purpose. In every age and in most cultures, specific individuals have chosen voluntary social isolation, some for shorter periods, such as a few days, and others for considerably more extended periods. Monks in the Western tradition, Reusi in the Far East, or Rishis in India, would enter deep isolation to meditate and pray. They did not suffer loneliness but had exalted spiritual experiences. We also know that many scholars, researchers, and those involved in intense exploration enter seclusion for focused search and reflection. Their social isolation often yields valuable contributions to society, such as more profound scientific discoveries or innovative ideas.

Therefore, it is essential to recognize that social isolation and loneliness are closely related but distinct concepts. Human beings are highly creative in their responses to every circumstance; the same is true of their approach to isolation. This is crucial to our efforts to help individuals overcome social isolation and loneliness by establishing social connections and deepening their sense of belonging.

4. Community and group

Group and community are often used interchangeably, but they differ subtly. First, let us look at a 'group'. When we talk of a group, it is more than just a collection of individuals. Many people are doing different things in a shopping mall; in its real sense, they are not a group. A random crowd at a railroad station would be described as a crowd. A group has greater cohesion and purpose. We will look at a definition of a group that the Australian legal philosopher John Mitchell

⁹Louis C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 40, no 2 (winter, 2010): 218.
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3874845/>

Finnis proposed: “a group, ... whether team, club, society, enterprise, corporation, or community, is to be said to exist wherever there is, over an appreciable span of time, a coordination of activity by several persons, in the form of interactions, and with a view to a shared objective.”¹⁰

According to Finnis, what are the elements of a group? He speaks of i) Some persons, ii) joint activity, iii) interactions among people, and iv) shared objectives. Therefore, a group with these characteristics is more than merely a gathering of people, as such clustering would constitute only a crowd. Certain common activities and interactions, along with a shared goal, would transform a crowd of people into a group. We can note examples of this galvanizing of a crowd into a goal-oriented group in different situations. Most socio-political movements evolve in this manner.

While a group is more developed than a crowd, a community is greater still. (The term ‘community,’ like ‘group,’ is used with a broad spectrum of meanings. In our ensuing discussions in this book, these terms will be used with a clear focus and in the context of promoting belonging.) According to McMillan and Chavis, a 'community' is shorthand for a group whose members also enjoy 'a sense of community'. What then is a sense of community?

 **com·mu·nity**
[kə'mju:niti]

noun

1. **a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common:**
"Montreal's Italian community" - "the gay community in London" - "the scientific community"
Similar: [group](#) [section](#) [body](#) [company](#) [set](#) [circle](#) ▾

• **a group of people living together and practising common ownership:**
"a community of nuns"
Similar: [brotherhood](#) [sisterhood](#) [fraternity](#) [confraternity](#) ▾

• **a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants:**
"a rural community" - "local communities"
Similar: [district](#) [region](#) [zone](#) [area](#) [locality](#) [locale](#) ▾

2. **the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common:**
"the sense of community that organized religion can provide"

3. **ecology**
a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together in natural conditions or occupying a specified habitat:
"communities of insectivorous birds"

¹⁰John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed, Clarendon Law Series (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153.

*Image taken from a Google search of Community

"Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."

Four elements build a sense of community and belongingness: (i) membership, (ii) influence, (iii) fulfillment of needs, and (iv) shared emotional connection.¹¹

i. Membership & Belongingness

When we say that a person is a community member, that is the most unambiguous indication of that person's belongingness. For some groups, membership may be a relational and informal matter. However, in most organizations and more formalized groups, membership is a streamlined process. There are several steps to becoming a member of such groups, including a formal application, payment of a fee, an orientation session, and an induction ceremony. The advantage of formal membership is that it provides the member with clarity about their belonging to the group and signals to leadership and other members that this person is now part of the group. In many cases, this is also a clear indication to outsiders of the person's affiliation.

Membership also provides boundaries that define who is part of a group and who is not. Joining a scout group is a good example. When a young person joins the Scouts, they receive a clear orientation and a uniform to indicate their membership. As a result, the person is confident in their membership, and others will have related expectations of this member. Numerous rights, privileges, and specific duties often accompany membership. A scout member can participate in various activities and training, but they also have responsibilities, such as attending specific meetings and fulfilling other obligations.

To better understand the dynamics of membership, consider Aria's experience with the Harmony Ensemble, a renowned local orchestra. From an early age, Aria showed great promise as a violinist, and as she entered college, she was eager to join this distinguished group—not only to hone her craft but also to shape her future career. Determined and focused, she meticulously prepared her application, which included her musical credentials, an interview, and a recorded performance, all of which were reviewed by seasoned experts. Her acceptance into the ensemble marked a significant milestone, and she was overjoyed to become a member.

Membership brought with it more than just a role in the orchestra—it got her into a vibrant community of celebrated musicians, many of whom were nationally recognized. She formed close bonds with her peers, who welcomed her with genuine enthusiasm and encouragement. The highlight of her debut performance in the city's grand concert hall was donning the ensemble's elegant black uniform, a symbol of belonging and shared artistry. In that moment, Aria didn't just feel accepted—she was transformed.

Aria's experience depicts that "membership has five attributes: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. These

¹¹David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14., no. 1 (winter 1986), 9.

attributes work together and contribute to a sense of who is part of the community and who is not.”¹²

ii. Influence & Belongingness

When you become part of a community, its impact is bidirectional. A community member exerts a unique influence within the group and on others in the group. The influence and contributions of some members may be very prominent. Others easily notice such leadership. However, even the quietest member has a distinct influence on the group. The reverse direction of influence refers to the impact of an individual member on the community. Every group has a unique life and culture that changes each member in some way. To this end, the community demands conformity from every member. These two influences work together to bond a member and the community. The more one contributes, the deeper one’s sense of belonging. The more one receives from it, the happier one is to be a part of it.

Aria’s prowess as a trained violinist was a significant addition to the Harmony Ensemble. Moreover, her eagerness to connect with other artists and her graceful stage presence added depth to the performances. The influence of the new community to which she belonged was also pronounced. Her self-esteem was positively increased. She became more confident and joyful. She became increasingly enthusiastic about practicing the violin and preparing for her performances.

iii. Fulfillment of needs & Belongingness

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, every person enters a community with a desire to meet some of their needs. They will continue their journey with the community if those needs are well met. Some significant needs one seeks are status, success in life or society, competence, and skills one finds in other group members. The group’s shared values serve the members’ higher needs. A good community operates in such a way that people meet each other’s needs as they fulfill their own.

The Harmony Ensemble’s training sessions and stage performances were well known, and many talented and aspiring young people aspired to join the group. Aria’s aspirations to become a music professional and her desire for celebrity status led her to the group. She felt amply rewarded when she went on stage for her first public performance with the orchestra. The orchestra’s conductor and other senior artists greatly appreciated her, and she, in turn, benefited greatly from the tips and techniques those maestros shared with her.

iv. Shared emotional connection & Belongingness

Members of a group journey together and have a shared history. What about the new entrants into a group? The members identify with the group’s past even when they have not participated in it. The degree of intimate participation determines a community’s strengths and weaknesses. Participation in a community’s achievements, crises, or humiliations fosters a deep sense of bonding. Yet another aspect of this shared emotional connection within a community is the underlying spiritual bond among its members. Religious groups and cults, in particular, have a deep spiritual connection that binds the members and unites the community. This community spirit, or ‘volkgeist’ (folk spirit), becomes the veritable soul of a community.

The first stage performance that Aria participated in was Harmony Ensemble’s twenty-ninth major stage show. The group had existed for 12 years, and some of the senior members proudly recounted their early struggles to assemble artists and make a mark in the highly competitive world of music

¹²McMillan and Chavis, “Sense of Community,” 11.

performance. Even before she became a member, Aria had heard of many historic details about the group. Now, she was proud to be part of that glorious heritage.

In the foregoing section, we examined key concepts to prepare for the study of the dynamics of belonging among young people. We also discussed in some detail how a collection of individuals becomes a group, which evolves into a community with a clear sense of belonging. The journey progresses from a Crowd to a Group to a Community. We have also listed the essential elements that contribute to this journey of belonging.

The following pages progress step by step towards offering support and guidance to young people as they enter meaningful relationships and establish themselves in their communities. Some of the terms and concepts we discussed should prove useful as we proceed with the theoretical and practical aspects of building belonging.