

Chapter 8

The Path to Belonging

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men, and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

We began this book by examining the paradox of loneliness within community, the experience of feeling alone even while surrounded by others. This reality is especially prevalent among many young people today. Earlier chapters highlighted the importance of the journey toward self-acceptance in fostering a genuine and lasting sense of belonging among young people. Building on this foundation, and in light of the barriers to belonging we have identified, we now turn our attention to concrete ways of accompanying young people and actively supporting them as they seek to find their place within a community.

Ethan's story

Meet Ethan, a 22-year-old who joined a local recreational soccer league. He attended every practice and game but never truly connected with his teammates. Ethan would arrive, perform his part, and leave without engaging in conversation. Though his teammates made efforts to include him, he responded with polite smiles and quiet nods, never fully participating. He didn't know what to do next after those initial conversations. Ethan was naturally a quiet guy without a big personality. He didn't know what to do next after those initial conversations so he would leave. As a result, Ethan remained on the margins, never forming meaningful relationships or a sense of belonging. He experienced loneliness despite being physically included. He was a familiar face but not fully integrated into the team's social fabric.

Many young people today can relate to Ethan's experience: showing up and being part of a group yet not experiencing a sense of belonging. Think of university students who attend lectures but never speak to a classmate or professor, or young people who go to Sunday Mass without exchanging a single word with anyone there. Without a sense of belonging, would they be compelled to return?

This kind of disconnection can be harrowing for those already struggling to find their place. In smaller groups, such as Ethan's soccer team, one person's sense of belonging can subtly affect the overall dynamics. When belonging is absent, it weakens the potential for growth and harmony, not only for the individual but also for the entire group.

How can we help a person like Ethan, and what makes us experience belonging in a group?

In her book "On Belonging-Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation," author, activist, and educator Kim Samuel describes four dimensions of belonging: people, place, power, and purpose.

These dimensions can help us understand how *to* support young people experience a sense of belonging.¹

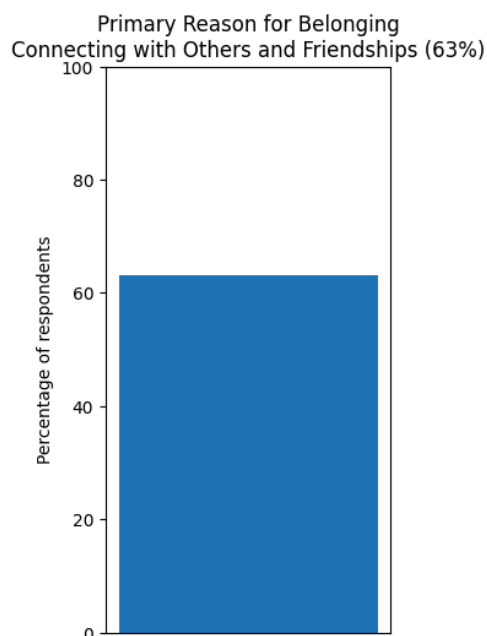
1. Cultivating friendships to find belonging.

(Friendship) is not about what someone can do for you, it's who and what the two of you become in each other's presence. – *Ronald Sharp*²

All it takes for a young person to experience a sense of belonging is one genuine friendship.

Time and again, when young people attend summer camps or retreats, what stands out most to them are the friends they make and keep in touch with.³ These friendships and meaningful relationships significantly enhance their camp experience. Friendships and relationships are how people find a sense of belonging.

In our survey conducted by Amoris Christi, 63% of young people reported that connecting with others and forming friendships are the most important reasons for belonging to a group.



Building social connections, nurturing friendships, and creating meaningful relationships are vital to helping young people experience a sense of belonging. This is hardly a new insight. As we've noted before, the need for belonging and relationships is deeply rooted in our human nature; it's part of who we are. This is affirmed throughout history, from Ancient Greece to Thomas Aquinas to the Second Vatican Council, all of whom emphasized the inherently social nature of the human person.

It is clear: friendships are essential for belonging. However, for a person like Ethan, is there anything we can do to help foster friendships? There is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing friendships. However, we emphasize that in every group or community, there must be an intentional effort to build relationships and prioritize friendships. For someone like Ethan, that could mean extending multiple invitations, reaching out consistently, and showing genuine

interest in who he is. For others, all it might take is a single conversation. The approach must be individualized and prioritized, because for young people to truly experience belonging in a group, there must be a clear focus on meaningful relationships, particularly friendships.

¹ Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (Abrams Press, 2022).

² Kate Murphy, "Opinion | Do Your Friends Actually Like You?," Opinion, *The New York Times*, August 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/opinion/sunday/do-your-friends-actually-like-you.html>.

³ "The Value of Camp," American Camp Association, May 19, 2015, <https://www.acacamps.org/parents-families/benefits-camp/value-camp>.

In his effort to combat the epidemic of loneliness, particularly among young people, former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy launched the “5-for-5 Connection Challenge.”⁴ During 2023–2024, Dr. Murthy traveled across U.S. college campuses on the “We Are Made to Connect Tour,” encouraging young people to take five simple actions over five days to connect with others. These actions could be as simple as expressing gratitude, offering support, or asking for help.

There is no secret formula for building relationships. Instead, we must encourage young people to put themselves out there, to take the initiative to connect, foster, and develop friendships. It’s common for this effort to be accompanied by fear of judgment or fear of failure, but that kind of anxiety is natural in any new situation, regardless of age. Our role in accompanying young people is to encourage them to reach out and connect with others, even if those efforts don’t lead to immediate or lasting relationships with everyone.

In our support for young people in cultivating meaningful friendships, the safety and security we provide can help them overcome fears of judgment and failure.

Acceptance and Challenge

Our initial work, conducted by *the Institute for Excellence at Amoris Christi*, involved studying “[Aretaic Friendships](#),” or virtue friendships. After examining friendships, we identified two key principles that are essential for a virtuous friendship: acceptance and challenge.^{5,6}

A true friendship is one where, first and foremost, there is deep, interpersonal acceptance. Even when hardships come, true friendship grows deeper and becomes all the stronger. So long as the persons have not fundamentally changed in their character, the variety of life experiences and personal events, both positive and negative, are occasions for greater acceptance of the other. This mutual commitment to acceptance is only possible through genuine love and affection.⁷

And

True acceptance always leads to the meaningful challenging of each other because aretaic friends accept each other according to the full potential of their being. Such friends are not afraid to hold each other accountable for their potential because they want each other’s betterment and flourishing more than their own gratification. Together, they work to discover and articulate core values and goals; they mature into a purposeful partnership rather than a stagnant codependency. Ultimately, they bring out the absolute best in each other, precisely because they completely accept each other for who they are.⁸

⁴ Office of the Surgeon General and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Social Connection — 5-For-5 Connection Challenge,” <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/connection/challenge/index.html>.

⁵ Amoris Christi, “Aretaic Friendships,” September 2022, https://mcusercontent.com/33c2b6a447000246e353c0f1a/files/ebcb9091-3007-37e7-4ad5-7a71909fe5a2/Aretaic_Friendships_5_1_.pdf.

⁶ Edward Edezhath et al., “Aretaic Friendship: A Multidisciplinary Enquiry,” *Integratus* 2, no. 3 (2024): 218–32, <https://doi.org/10.1521/intg.2024.2.3.218>.

⁷ Amoris Christi, “Aretaic Friendships.”

⁸ Amoris Christi, “Aretaic Friendships.”

In our efforts to help young people experience belonging through relationships and friendships, acceptance and challenge can serve as two key markers of meaningful relationships. These relationships truly foster a sense of belonging.

Encouraging friendships that foster acceptance and belonging becomes essential for young people to experience a sense of belonging.

2. Spaces of Belonging and the Sacredness of ‘Wasting Time’

Clare and Joshua are a young couple with three small children living in suburban Milwaukee. Joshua works full-time, sometimes commuting to the city, while Clare works once a week and also homeschools their children. Both are faithful Catholics, actively involved in their church.

In 2023, Clare and Joshua were inspired to start an initiative called “Community Night.” They began this because they sensed that, over time, gatherings with young people and friends were often driven by an agenda, like planning the next youth retreat, pilgrimage, or outing. These gatherings always had a purpose, and although there was usually some fellowship afterward, it typically took place within the context of the meeting. Over time, they realized they were becoming distant from the very community of young people they were walking with and noticed that there wasn’t a space for new people to join. Every gathering for newcomers was treated as an event, so there was no simple space for new folks to come and belong. This realization inspired Clare and Joshua to create Community Night. When asked what inspired them to start this initiative, Clare said, “We wanted just to socialize and get to know our community,” a goal that is often overlooked in the effort to get things done. Community Night is a weekly event held on Clare and Joshua’s back porch, where families and young people from the local church community and beyond are invited to enjoy a BBQ dinner. What makes this event particularly special, among many reasons, is that there is no agenda for Community Night. The event, hosted on the back porch of Clare and Joshua’s home, involves a barbecue dinner prepared together with attendees. The invites were initially sent to members of the church community and the youth group. However, those invited were welcome to bring a guest, provided the person bringing the guest was consistent in their attendance. In a way, Community Night created an intentional space for what Pope Francis would call “wasting time” with one another.⁹ (The concept of wasting time, which involves spending time with another person without an agenda, to be with them, can be a fruitful dynamic in any space, helping our young people experience a sense of belonging.)

⁹ The Holy Father speaks of wasting time in the context of parents with children, grandparents with grandchildren. “The Pope: Parents, ‘Don’t Give up Wasting Time with Your Kids’ - La Stampa,” accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2018/05/06/news/the-pope-parents-don-t-give-up-wasting-time-with-your-kids-1.34014100/>; “‘Waste’ Time at the Tabernacle, Pope Urges,” Aleteia — Catholic Spirituality, Lifestyle, World News, and Culture, October 19, 2023, <https://aleteia.org/2023/10/19/waste-time-at-the-tabernacle-pope-urges/>; “Here’s the Question Pope Francis Asks Parents of Young Children in Confession,” Aleteia — Catholic Spirituality, Lifestyle, World News, and Culture, May 10, 2018, <https://aleteia.org/2018/05/10/heres-the-question-pope-francis-asks-parents-of-young-children-in-confession/>.

According to a report on the benefits of public parks and recreation spaces by the CDC, parks and recreational areas serve as places where neighbors can meet, thereby enhancing community connections and improving mental health.¹⁰ One key point highlighted by the Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC) in Louisiana is that parks are among the quickest and most effective means of building a sense of community and improving quality of life.¹¹ They emphasize that parks provide places for people to connect and interact in a shared environment.¹² Essentially, this simple initiative by Clare and Joshua brings the same benefits as public parks. They are creating a space for people to gather and spend time together in a casual atmosphere, thereby fostering a sense of community and belonging. There can be different expressions of this Community Night by Clare and Joshua, but it is a practical and straightforward way to help people encounter a sense of belonging. It is worth noting that spaces for belonging and “wasting time” do not arise on their own. Clare and Joshua were intentional about creating this space. When asked about the planning of these community nights, Clare said, “We know we have a family with young children. Therefore, we knew we couldn’t plan something extravagant every week. So, we were intentional about keeping it simple but being consistent -every week, the same place, the same time.” Clare and Joshua usually have burgers and hot dogs ready to grill at these events, but they don’t do any elaborate planning. The group of regular attendees often brings food to grill on their own initiative, without being asked. Although initially there was some difficulty in having an event without a set agenda, Joshua mentioned that this was a benefit: “Young people found it relieving that there was no agenda. They could just be there, and this allowed for deeper conversations.” Joshua also notes, “It was the young people who then started to bring their parents because of the joy they experienced during this time. “

Ethen’s story continued.

After another regular soccer practice, the team captain, Alex, approached Ethan. "Hey, Ethan, we're having a team potluck dinner this weekend. I would appreciate your being there. Would you like to come?" Ethan hesitated, unsure if he was ready to leap. But Alex's heartfelt invitation and smile put him at ease. Ethan decided to attend the potluck, bringing a dish to share. As he walked into Alex's backyard, he was greeted by the sound of laughter and lively chatter. Although intimidating at first, Ethan was put at ease by his captain, Alex, who immediately approached him, thanked him for coming, and made sure he was comfortable (The miracle of hospitality).

Alex then ensured that Ethan joined him for a broader conversation with a few other teammates and friends. Before you knew it, Ethan was lively—sharing jokes, laughing, and adding his ideas and insights. People were also genuinely interested in Ethan—they wanted to get to know him. They valued him for being there. For the first time, Ethan experienced a spark of connection. During dinner, he found himself engaging in more in-depth conversations with his teammates. He discovered shared interests with others, bonded over a love of soccer with some, and even planned

¹⁰ CDC, “What’s Your Role? Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 16, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/activepeoplehealthnation/everyone-can-be-involved/parks-recreation-and-green-spaces.html>.

¹¹ “How Cities Use Parks for Community Engagement,” American Planning Association, accessed April 30, 2024, https://www.brec.org/assets/General_Info/Why_R_Parks_Important/Papers/Parks-for-Community-Engagement.pdf.

¹² American Planning Association, “How Cities Use Parks for Community Engagement.”

to go out for a movie with a few the following week. As the evening progressed, Ethan realized he was having more fun than he had in months. The team's camaraderie was infectious, and he felt himself becoming a part of it. Over the next few weeks, Ethan continued to attend team events and participate in conversations. Slowly but surely, he began to experience a sense of belonging, as if he were part of the group. One evening, as they were leaving the soccer field, Alex turned to Ethan and said, "Hey, man, we're glad you're part of the team. You're one of us now." Ethan smiled, feeling a deep sense of pride and connection. For the first time in a long time, he knew he belonged.

Alex's potluck, as well as Clare and Joshua's Community Night, is a beautiful illustration of an intentional and simple way for us to create a space for young people to belong. In our efforts to help young people experience a sense of belonging, initiatives such as backyard community nights and potlucks serve as inspiring models for creating spaces for connection.

By creating spaces of belonging, friendships flourish, genuine conversations happen, ideas are exchanged, and even dreams are shared. All of these can serve as profound means for the young person to experience a sense of belonging.

3. Belonging Through Service: How Volunteering Shapes Connection

Throughout our years of supporting young people, we have witnessed the transformative impact of volunteering, whether it's with a group, through activities that benefit society, or as part of a team organizing a community event. Repeatedly, we have seen that volunteering offers young people a deep sense of fulfillment, identity, and happiness.

In one study involving 750 postgraduate and undergraduate students, researchers found a positive link between volunteering and social connectedness.¹³

Another study, focusing on young people who had recently migrated to Europe, revealed that volunteering was associated with a greater sense of belonging to their new country.¹⁴ Similarly, research conducted in rural Australia found that volunteering was linked to building community bonds, developing social identity, and fostering a sense of belonging.¹⁵

Why Does Volunteering Matter?

What makes volunteering so powerful? Why does it have such a profound impact, especially on the hearts and minds of young people? Part of the answer lies in the nature of the act itself. The act of

¹³ Fatimah Hamdi Alganami and Mageda El Sayed El Keshky, "Does Volunteering Benefit Students' Happiness, Social Connectedness, and Self-Efficacy? An Interaction with Gender," *BMC Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2025): 553, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02886-8>.

¹⁴ Andrea Carlà et al., "Volunteering as a Means of Fostering Integration and Intercultural Relations. Evidence from Six European Contexts," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 12, no. 1 (2023): 49–63, <https://doi.org/10.54667/ceemr.2023.07>.

¹⁵ Tara Williams et al., "'Keeps Me Young at Heart': Exploring the Influence of Volunteering on Social Connection, Health and Well-Being in Rural Australia," *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 33, no. 1 (2025): e13202, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.13202>.

volunteering can have an impact on us. Volunteering isn't always rooted in personal relationships. In fact, most of the time, we're helping strangers, people we've never met. And yet, it still creates a profound sense of connection. For example, in a soup kitchen, volunteers likely don't know the people who walk through the door, but by the end of the day, they often leave with a feeling that surprises them:

"I belong here; I want to come back again."

Volunteering can generate a sense of connection—even among people who have never met—because it taps into something essential: the human desire to be part of something good and greater than oneself.

Vivek Murthy, the former U.S. Surgeon General, highlights this dynamic when he writes:

"Kindness, appreciation, and generosity are as essential in brief interactions with strangers as they are in closer friendships."

Volunteering, random acts of kindness, and participation in a team with a shared purpose all awaken in young people the realization that they can make a difference, that their presence, their effort, and their lives matter. And from this realization comes a powerful sense of identity and belonging.

Purpose and Identity Through a Life of Self-Gift

At its core, volunteering allows young people to understand how they can make their life a self-gift. The Second Vatican Council articulated this beautifully:

***"Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."*¹⁶**

Through service, young people are invited to give themselves sincerely. Whether through their time, talents, or simple presence, they discover a sense of purpose. This purpose grounds them, it helps them belong: to themselves, to the group, and even to the wider world. This truth is also echoed in the work of Viktor Frankl, who developed *Logotherapy*, a psychological approach rooted in the search for meaning. Frankl writes:

***"The human being is not one in pursuit of happiness but rather in search of a reason to be happy."*¹⁷**

For Frankl, through his research and practice, giving a person a reason or meaning is one of the greatest gifts one can give. Frankl, based on his experience in Nazi concentration camps, noticed that even in the face of the harshest suffering and hardships, those who found meaning were better off emotionally and spiritually. In many ways, a life of self-gift, whether through volunteering or other forms of service, helps not only a young person discover meaning but also experience it more fully.

¹⁶ 2nd Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium Et Spes*," Libreria Editrice Vaticana., December 7, 1965, para. 24, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

¹⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press, 2006), 138.

An experience is a more effective way for a young person to discover a life of self-gift than mere understanding.

For us, in accompanying and working with young people, our task is to provide opportunities for volunteering and service so that young people may discover their inner purpose, thereby anchoring them in a community.

Purpose and meaning give rise to identity, and this identity serves as the basis for belonging.

A Shared Purpose and Shared Belief

Volunteering within a group, such as at a soup kitchen, brings young people into a community united by a shared purpose. Even if they enter as strangers, working side by side in service creates a bond. (Volunteering also creates a natural ‘wasting time’ environment which helps relationships to flourish.) One young person may be responsible for chopping vegetables, another for setting tables, and another for welcoming guests, but each is contributing to the same mission. That shared purpose gives meaning to their actions and offers a sense of collective identity. This shared purpose creates belonging. More than personal fulfillment, it fosters a sense of mutual responsibility: *“We are in this together.”*

In our own survey (*Amoris Christi* $n=192$), 10% of young people cited shared belief as the primary reason for belonging to a group. Although it may seem small, it offers important insight.

Shared belief, whether moral, spiritual, or cultural, can be a form of a young person’s sense of belonging and inclusion.

Conversely, when a group’s mission or values clash with a young person’s core beliefs, that individual may struggle to experience a sense of belonging. This is why volunteering opportunities must align not only with communal goals but also with personal convictions. When shared purpose and shared belief are aligned, the experience becomes much more than service—it becomes a space of genuine belonging.

Inviting Young People into a Life of Purpose and Self-Gift

If we genuinely want to help young people experience a sense of belonging, we must intentionally create spaces and offer opportunities that allow them to contribute to the broader community. These don’t have to be grand or complicated initiatives. Even small, consistent invitations, such as helping at an event, joining a service team, or preparing a meal, can provide young people with opportunities to participate in meaningful activities. When young people are invited to contribute to a shared purpose and belief, they begin to recognize their capacity to effect change. They start to see themselves not as passive observers, but as valued participants. They realize: *“I belong to this group. I matter in this community.”* Even simple involvement, such as volunteering at a parish fundraiser, helping organize a school drive, or cooking for a community night, can be a tangible and powerful way for a young person to experience a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

For those of us who accompany young people, our task is both simple and deeply demanding: to cultivate genuine friendships, to create intentional spaces where belonging can take root, and to offer concrete opportunities for a life of self-gift. These are not abstract ideals or aspirational language. They are practical and transformative pathways through which young people come to experience what it truly means to belong.

As we have seen throughout this book, belonging is not merely about inclusion or participation. It is about being seen, received, and loved in one's particularity. For a young person like Ethan, the presence of accompaniment and community made it possible to move from isolation to belonging, from loneliness to meaning, and from survival to hope.

This final chapter does not close the conversation. Rather, it lays the foundation for transformation, not only in the lives of individual young people but also within the communities that shape them. When we take seriously the call to foster belonging, we participate in the quiet but powerful work of renewal.

Our efforts matter. Helping a young person belong can be the difference between a life marked by disengagement and one lived with joy, purpose, and direction. It can be the reason a young person discovers the courage to become the fullness of who they are meant to be. The task now is ours, to remain present, to choose accompaniment, and to help young people find a place where they are known, needed, and at home - to help them find belonging.