



The Program for the Future Church

# EXPLORATORY READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: BELONGING

Belonging is a topic that crosses boundaries and impacts each of our lives and communities. We all long to belong, but sometimes we struggle to know what that actually means for us in our daily lives.

In response to the needs of our communities and through discussions in our research hub on belonging, the PFFC put together a reading guide that walks through three books and poses questions to help the reader explore the texts and the idea of belonging more deeply.

Looking at belonging through the lens of Christian community with Bonhoeffer, diving into the science-based research on belonging with Cohen, and striving to cultivate belonging in our organizations with Birmingham and Simard, we gain a richer understanding of what belonging is and what it can look like in our lives, churches, organizations, and communities.



# Life Together

BY DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* emerged from his academic reflections on the nature of community and his attempts to nurture the conditions where people of faith could flourish. Amid the mounting ecclesial crisis in Nazi Germany, which

Bonhoeffer describes as the "church struggle," Bonhoeffer writes as a pastor-theologian for communities facing immense uncertainty. The life together Bonhoeffer envisions is organized around two central realities: (1) the absolute dependence of Christian community on God's gracious self-revelation, and (2) Christians' connection to one another.

Community emerges through belonging in Christ and by belonging to each other. The community Bonhoeffer imagines remains fragile; however, when sustained by God's grace and patterned after scripture, a life lived together may transform individuals and communities through new structures of belonging.

## CHAPTER 1: COMMUNITY

1. Bonhoeffer asserts that the formation of Christian community depends upon "God's grace" and is "a gift." What difference does it make to start our discussion and understanding of community as a gift of God's grace?

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2. On page 9, Bonhoeffer writes, "First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual [pneumatisch] and not an emotional [psychisch] reality." What does he mean by this? How does this impact how we understand community and belonging?

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## CHAPTER 2: THE DAY TOGETHER

1. Bonhoeffer goes to great lengths to describe ordinary and everyday practices, such as how people read aloud and the barriers to congregational singing. What is the connection between these practices and belonging? How does his description invite you to think about the practices that organize your day-to-day life?

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2. For you and your community (or small group) what provides unity for your time together?

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### CHAPTER 3: THE DAY ALONE

1. Bonhoeffer gives a strong caution about the dangers of those who cannot be silent or be alone. How is solitude related to the need for belonging? What allows people in your community to find and create space for solitude?

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2. How do you experience belonging in times when you are alone?

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### CHAPTER 4: SERVICE

1. The belonging Bonhoeffer envisions involves a way of life that is ordered by being "for one another." When we offer our lives in service, how does it foster belonging? Alternatively, what forms of service might actually inhibit the belonging individuals in our communities need?

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2. Bonhoeffer says that "God joins together in breaking, creates community in division, confers grace through judgment" (p. 84). In times of division or darkness, how has God joined you together with others?

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## CHAPTER 5: CONFESSION AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

1. Even though belonging provides a structure of community, we do not always offer or experience the level of belonging that allows individuals and communities to flourish. How can confession provide a new invitation to belonging? Where do you still lack the belonging that is essential for your wellbeing?

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2. When conflicts threaten to divide your community, how do you pursue reconciliation? Where do you find hope to maintain connection even when being in a community grows difficult?

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### BELONGING-PRACTICE-ACTION

Much like the practice of *lectio divina*, a contemplative and meditative way to read Scripture that invites us to notice the presence of God at work in our lives, we want to make space for us to pay attention to the ways we are encountering God through this text, our conversation, and our own thoughts and prayers.

**BELONGING:** Where do you sense God inviting you into and/or affirming your own belonging?

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**PRACTICE:** What practices might help you live into that invitation of belonging and/or invite others into belonging?

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**ACTION:** What specific actions have you discerned God calling you to make as you think about cultivating belonging for yourself and for others?

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# Belonging: The Science of Creating Connections and Bridging Divides

BY GEOFFREY COHEN

Belonging comes in all shapes and sizes. After the pandemic, everyone was forced to rethink their belonging.

Geoffrey Cohen unpacks how belonging can either grow or diminish during a time of so much division. His sociological approach offers a unique perspective to the issues dominating our day. By getting at the roots of our need to belong, he offers the reader new ways to harvest and cultivate what blooms. Because belonging is shaped by our past and present contexts, belonging must be able to adapt. Cohen bridges contexts that are often seen as unrelatable and shows how redefining belonging inevitably expands the circles of those included.

## CHAPTER 1: THE POTENTIAL OF THE SITUATION

1. What did C.P.'s story teach us about the different aspects of belonging?

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2. How can we identify the 5 factors (time, participatory process, reference groups, self-affirmations, new roles) in our stories of belonging?

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## CHAPTER 2: BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

1. Research suggests that the need to belong should be at the base of Maslow's pyramid. Why is belonging so central to who we are as humans?

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2. It can be hard to change someone's social situation that informs their belonging, but we can change their lens. What lens are we peering our situations through and how can it be changed?

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2. When trying to put ourselves in another's shoes, how can humility, empathy, and communication help us to do so?

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### CHAPTER 9: BELONGING IN SCHOOL

1. How are belonging and nurturing in school crucial to a child's development?

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2. If research suggests that teacher-student relationships are the most formative for early years, what classroom programs can we create or support in order to strengthen belonging?

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### CHAPTER 10: BELONGING AT WORK

1. Cohen states that companies that foster belonging in the workplace have higher employee engagement and retention. If your workplace is lacking belonging, what do you perceive as the root causes? How might you address them?

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2. Color Blindness in the workplace does not foster belonging. How can we begin to honor diversity in the workplace while finding unity under the same organization?

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**CHAPTER 11: BELONGING AND HEALTH**

1. Doad said, "It's impossible to rescue the body without reducing the psyche." What new possibilities for belonging emerge when we address the mental and physical?

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2. Feeling disconnected from people is a health liability. How can we form relationships with others who are different from us?

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**CHAPTER 12: BELONGING IN POLICING AND THE COMMUNITY**

1. Policing works best when it is in partnership with the community it is serving. When this partnership is lacking, how is the community usually affected?

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2. If distrust seems like second nature, how can we begin to build trust between communities and authorities?

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## CHAPTER 13: BELONGING AND OUR POLITICS

1. During a time of great political division, do you have a relationship with someone of a different political party or differing political views? How does this affect your perspective on Us vs. Them?

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2. Looking at Hank's story, how did proximity breed empathy?

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# Creating Cultures of Belonging: Cultivating Organizations Where Men and Women Thrive

BETH BIRMINGHAM | EEVA SALLINEN SIMARD

Beth Birmingham and Eeva Sallinen Simard explore women in leadership and the need for belonging among faith based organizations. Due to a lack of women in leadership roles, the blueprint for women in leadership needs to be rewritten. To create a more gender-equal work environment, we must explore communities of belonging that elevate and encourage women in leadership roles. Centering a culture of belonging based on the *imago Dei*, Birmingham and Simard explore what it takes to make people feel like they belong.

## CHAPTER 1: THE MISSIONAL ORGANIZATION HAS A PROBLEM WITH WOMEN

1. How does "family life" hold back or restrain the model for women in leadership? Do you have any personal examples?

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2. How does leadership and gender stereotyping play a role in the gravitation towards male leadership?

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## CHAPTER 2: A CULTURE OF BELONGING

1. If you are in a leadership role, which levers can you move to improve diversity and equality in your context?

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2. A new, inclusive leadership model will come at a cost, say Birmingham and Simard on page 63. What might this cost look like for you?

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**CHAPTER 5: A RECLAIMED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

1. The #MeToo movement has had some negative effects on the work life of women, like exclusion of opportunities. Have you experienced or witnessed this in your organization? In what ways?

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2. "The most powerful weapon against harmful workplace behaviors is awareness." (p. 73) What could increasing awareness actually look like for you in your organization?

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**CHAPTER 6: HUMAN RESOURCES FOR A CULTURE OF BELONGING 1.**

"Human resources is culture work." (p. 84) What does this mean to you?

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2. "People who are missional are not limited to one profile." (p. 101) How have you seen missional people impact your organizations? What qualities do you see in missional people?

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## CHAPTER 7: DEVELOPING PEOPLE FOR CULTURES OF BELONGING

1. Birmingham and Simard propose that the idea of a “complete leader” is a myth, and yet we continue to look for this type of leader. What does leadership look like in your organization? How could collaborative leadership be more utilized and engaged?

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2. Birmingham and Simard offer suggestions for types of training we all need, as well as an outline of what women need in the workplace. Is there anything that you feel needs to be added? Where is your organization doing well? Where does it fall short?

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## CHAPTER 8: THE LEADERSHIP WILL TO MAKE A CHANGE

1. Fighting discrimination can cause discomfort for individuals and organizations. In what ways has the fight for equality impacted you or your co-workers? What areas might God be calling you to die to your own agenda or privilege?

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2. Pages 126-127 describe several ways to be an ally. Which of these are you making an effort to engage in? Which of these do you need to step into with courage? What might that look like?

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## CHAPTER 9: WOMEN AND MEN BEYOND THE WORKPLACE

1. We have come to believe that “free work” is “women’s work.” How is unpaid work or care showing up in your organization? How can we recognize this work?

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2. What does valuing Sabbath look like in your organization? How is your organization focusing on excellence over expansion and encouraging structures that trust employees to do good work in “third space” environments?

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The Program for the Future Church is a research, resource, and relationship hub that provides tailored resources for pastors, congregations, faith leaders, and local communities right where they are.

For an online copy of this resource as well as others, please visit:  
[www.baylor.edu/truett/futurechurch](http://www.baylor.edu/truett/futurechurch)