

Fostering Belonging Through Shared Identity

MS 3P1580, CC/PS

Spring 2026, McMaster Divinity College

Instructor: Paul W. Lucas, DPT.

Course Description

Church leadership often desires to provide a place of belonging. In a church's vision and goals, it is likely that the term belonging will be used in some manner. It is a common occurrence for someone to describe a church community, both positively and negatively, in terms of whether they felt they belonged. However, the actions which are taken in order to practice being a community of belonging can often be vague and intangible. Individuals may also feel a sense of being outsiders and may not feel they fully identify as belonging to a group. Furthermore, practices which foster belonging for those within a community can simultaneously create barriers to entry for newcomers. This course will look at these complex issues and engage students in critical reflection on the practice of fostering belonging.

Delivery Format

There will be three Zoom class meetings which will feature a synchronous lecture and course discussion. The primary goal of these meetings will be to engage with meaningful discussion regarding course content together. In addition, there will be a class presentation which will be scheduled at the first Zoom meeting. The remainder of the course lectures will be recorded videos which will be posted weekly.

Learning Goals

Knowing

- Understand key principles for fostering belonging within communities.
- Identify challenges and complexities of cultivating belonging in congregations.
- Articulate a clear definition of belonging in relation to the Christian church.
- Recognize and apply basic social psychology theories as they pertain to belonging in church contexts.

Being

- Cultivate self-awareness in relation to community and belonging.
- Embody a reflexive and critical posture toward ecclesial traditions that both foster and hinder belonging.
- Nurture spiritual discernment in relation to congregational identity.

Doing

- Critically engage Christian practices and ecclesiology, assessing how they shape belonging.
- Develop skills for practically evaluating congregational identity.
- Begin formulating and implementing practical strategies to nurture belonging.

Specialization

Church and Culture (CC)

This course equips students to critically examine how belonging functions within Christian communities in relation to broader cultural dynamics. Students will gain tools to analyze cultural narratives, social

identities, and practices that shape community life. This will produce engagement with the complex dimensions of belonging in diverse ministry and cultural contexts.

Pastoral Studies (PS)

This course equips pastoral leaders with theological, biblical, and practical tools to foster belonging in congregations. It enables ministry leaders to engage congregations in a profound understanding of their church's story. Students will learn to identify barriers, cultivate self-awareness, and lead communities that nurture genuine connection and shared identity.

Required Texts

Day, Abby. *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Lane, Erin. *Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015.

Assignments

Discussion Posts – 15%

There will be a weekly discussion question for 5 weeks of the course including an initial introduction discussion. In these discussions, post a 300-word response to the discussion question that reflects thoughtful engagement with the course material by midnight on Wednesday. In addition, reply to at least two discussion posts each respective week with constructive critical engagement by midnight on Friday evening. These discussion posts allow critical engagement in issues arising from the readings and course and provide an avenue to engage peer questions.

Discussion posts will be graded based on engagement with course content, critical thinking, and level of participation.

Personal Reflection Paper - Experiences of Belonging – 20%

Compose a reflective essay of approximately 2000 words that delves into your personal experiences of belonging. The essay should encompass instances where you have felt a sense of belonging and those where you have experienced a sense of alienation while linking these experiences to concepts and theories discussed in the course. While references to church communities are welcome, they are not mandatory.

Practical Reflection on Christian Group

Paper Component – 20%

Compose a reflective essay of approximately 2500 words that examines a Christian group, organization, church, or tradition that is distinct from one's own cultural or religious background. Through the lens of fostering a sense of belonging, the essay should delve into various aspects such as inclusion, exclusion, identity formation, barriers to entry, and seclusion. The essay should provide a balanced overview of the group's historical development, defining characteristics, and significant impact, with the majority of the content dedicated to reflective analysis. Questions which can be explored within this framework include:

- What was the relationship of this group to those within and outside its community?
- What did members of this group have in common?
- How did the group react to those leaving its community?

- How did the group identity change over time?
- What aspects of the group do you find appealing/unappealing?

Presentation Component – 10%

Prepare a 15-minute presentation for the class based on your paper on a Christian group. Be prepared to answer 2-3 questions. Presentation schedule will be made at the first Zoom meeting of class.

Final Paper – 35%

The purpose of this paper is to present and defend your own theology of belonging. You will draw on theological, biblical, and interdisciplinary perspectives to explain how belonging is fostered in Christian communities and how this is expressed in your own practice, experience, or ministry context. This paper will:

- Critically interact with at least 10 academic resources, including course material, additional theological works, and interdisciplinary sources (e.g., sociology, psychology, leadership studies).
- Interpret and apply relevant biblical passages that shape your theology of belonging.
- Engage with both positive and negative examples of fostering belonging in Christian communities (historical, contemporary, and personal).
- Show awareness of challenges, complexities, and barriers to belonging.
- Describe how belonging can be fostered in concrete, practical ways within Christian ministry or community life.
- Reflect on your own role, exploring how you can engage in these issues and what steps you (and, if relevant, your church community)
 - For those who are currently serving in a ministry role, please reflect on that role and the organization you are in. However, you can also reflect on past experiences as well. For those who are not currently in a ministry role, please reflect on the community of faith you are currently a part of, or a community of faith you have been part of in the past.

Instructor Availability

I will respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays (48 hours on weekends). I will hold office hours via zoom; the date and time for these office hours will be finalized in our first meeting. If you would like to schedule a meeting, I am happy to meet on Zoom or on campus to assist in any way.

Course Outline

Week	Topic	Reading	Assignments
Week 1	Zoom Session – Introductions, Introductory Lecture	Day, p. 3-46 Greenfield & Marks Article	
Week 2	Recorded Lecture – Belonging and Psychology	Day, p. 47-73 Lane, p. 1-20	Discussion Post #1
Week 3	Recorded Lecture – Belonging and the Historical Church	Day, p. 74-97 Lane, p. 21-48, Zhang, H., et. al. Article	Discussion Post #2 Personal Reflection Paper Due

Week 4	Zoom Session – Inclusion, Exclusion, and Barriers to Entry	Day, p. 98-114 Lane, p. 46-78,	Discussion Post #3
Week 5	Recorded Lecture – Belonging for the Vulnerable	Day, p. 115-128 Lane, p. 79 – 112,	Discussion Post #4
Week 6	Presentations – Zoom	Day, p. 129-154 Lane, p. 113 – 140,	Presentation Due
Week 7	Recorded Lecture – Shared Identity and Belonging	Day, p. 155-173 Lane, p. 141 – 168,	Discussion Post #5
Week 8	Recorded Lecture – Abuse, Neglect, and the Church	Day, p. 174-207 Lane, p. 169 – 195,	Practical Reflection Paper Due
Week 12	Final Paper Due		

Additional Resources

For further reading, I recommend the following resources. I am also pleased to talk with you to provide tailored recommendations based on your specific context and interests.

Anderson, Herbert, and Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Baker, Coleman A. *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011.

———. “Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012) 129–38.

Barentsen, Jack. “Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective.” In *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, edited by Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher, 59–73. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

———. “Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context.” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15 (2015) 49–80.

Baumeister, Roy F., and Mark R. Leary. “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation.” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995) 497– 529.

Clark, Chap, and Steven Argue. *Adoptive Church: Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.

Clarke, Brian, and Stuart Macdonald. *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017.

Conradie, E. M. *Christian Identity: An Introduction*. Stellenbosch: SUN, 2005.

Crites, Stephen. “The Narrative Quality of Experience.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291–311.

Estes, Thomas W. “A Seminarian’s Word: The Power of a Name: Ingroups, Outgroups, and Canonical Imagination.” *Review and Expositor* 114 (2017) 18–22.

Gill, Robin. *Changing Worlds: Can the Church Respond?* London: Bloomsbury, 2002.

———. “The Cultural Paradigm: Declines in Belonging and Then Believing.” In *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*, edited by Daniel V.A. Olson and Detlef Pollack, 183–95. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Hopewell, James F. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.

Lane, Erin. *Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015.

McMillan, David W., and David M. Chavis. “Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory.” *Journal of Community Psychology* 14 (1986) 6–23.

Lucas, Paul. *Identity Tug of War: Narrating Leadership Awareness of Congregational Identity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025.

Myers, Joseph R., et al. *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy Community and Small Groups*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003

Nebreda, Sergio Rosell. *Christ Identity: A Social-Scientific Reading of Philippians 2–11*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011.

O’Neil, Michael D. “The Role of Baptism in Christian Identity Formation” *Religions* 15 (2024) 458–80.

Pogue, Alan Lewis. “Communicating Identity: Communication Processes in the Development of Group Identity through Congregational Worship Rituals.” PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2002.

Sewell, David K., et al. “Exemplifying ‘Us’: Integrating Social Identity Theory of Leadership with Cognitive Models of Categorization.” *The Leadership Quarterly* 33 (2022) 101517.

Singfiel, Jeff. “When Servant Leaders Appear Laissez-Faire: The Effect of Social Identity Prototypes on Christian Leaders.” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 12 (2018) 64–77.

Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior.” *Political Psychology: Key Readings*. New York: Psychology Press, 2004.

Tucker, J. Brian. “Remain in Your Calling”: *Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011.

Tucker, J. Brian, and Coleman A. Baker, eds. *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*. London: T&T Clark, 2016.

Turner, John C. “Social Comparison and Social Identity: Some Prospects for Intergroup Behaviour.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 5 (1975) 1–34.

Turner, John C., et al. *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Tusting, Karin. *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including Generative AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about Generative AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work for you. Using AI to produce content for you and then submitting that content as if you produced it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy. Additionally, although there may be value in using an AI tool to correct mistakes in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI is not to be used for translating from your native language to English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in English language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) (<https://sas.mcmaster.ca/>) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term they are enrolled in. This will generate a notification to course instructors outlining the activated accommodations for the student in their course. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations will be implemented once the faculty member has been notified. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

- **Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries:** sas@mcmaster.ca
- **Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC):** sobotor@mcmaster.ca
- **MDC Registrar:** mdcreg@mcmaster.ca

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and

you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

BOOKSTORE

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

PRESENCE AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Presence and participation in this course are expected. Faculty know from many years of experience that a student's level of presence and participation in the course will impact how well she or he will score in the course. Although there are exceptions to this rule of thumb, low levels of presence and participation tend to translate to low grades; mediocre presence and participation tend to translate to mediocre grades; and high levels of presence and participation tend to translate to higher grades.

A word needs to be said about what constitutes "presence" (attendance) and "participation" in an asynchronous course. Students must establish a record of participation in academically related activities to meet the expected level of attendance and meaningful participation. Be aware that merely logging into the online class is not, by itself, sufficient as a demonstration of attendance and participation by the student. "Academically related activities" certainly includes participation in and completion of the course requirements that are described below. Additionally, just as students are expected to engage with the course content/materials throughout the week outside of the learning management system (A2L), so also students are expected to engage one another in formative dialogue "outside of class." This is an important part of belonging to and maintaining a community of learning and is a staple ingredient in what constitutes "presence."

ONLINE ETIQUETTE

It is critical in any MDC class that students show respect for classmates and the instructor. This is even truer in the online environment because many of the non-verbal cues that we use to interpret what a person is communicating to us are not present online (except, perhaps in video posts). Therefore, it is especially critical that we be mindful of how our words will be interpreted by those who are reading them. As the instructor of the course, it is my responsibility to monitor communications to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views in a respectful manner. Most if not all courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these disagreements must be

discussed and negotiated in a respectful manner. This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and the others enrolled in the course. The instructor will expect that you will give some thought to your postings. Excessive postings are also frowned upon because these amount to dominating the discussion. Please limit your postings to less than 200 words. Instructors reserve the right to ask students to take a step back to allow others discussion time if she or he feels that an individual is dominating the discussion. In your responses, please try to be clear which point your response refers to. Students who violate these guidelines may be dismissed from class.

ABSENCE DUE TO ILLNESS

If you must miss class due to an illness, you must contact me as soon as possible to let me know. Likewise, if I should become ill, I will communicate with you via A2L about how we will make up class sessions. Even if much of the course content will be made available via A2L, it would still be a good idea to have a friend take notes for you, if possible.

INCLEMENT WEATHER

If on a class meeting day MDC closes due to inclement weather, I reserve the right to move the lessons and, where possible, class activities for the week to A2L (asynchronous format). This will help to ensure that we stay on target in the course.