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From what pedagogical practices and principles do we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible study?

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Abstract

From what pedagogical practices and principles do we cultivate a sense of belonging in online
Bible Study
By **Keithlyn Stephen Warner**

        The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the teaching ministry of the Saint Mark AME, Oxon Hill, Maryland, especially bible study. In response, as we progressed into the pandemic, we attempted to migrate to an online presence. Utilizing the Zoom video platform, we tried to conduct online bible study. Initially, the congregation was excited about this; however, after just a few sessions, people began to attend sporadically and eventually stopped altogether. As one of the principal bible study instructors, after conversing with some congregation members, I found they felt like they were not accustomed to this new way of Bible study and did not feel like they were learning anything. Also, they felt distanced as they could not engage each other as they could in an in-person environment. It became evident that I had to reimagine a "new normal" of teaching bible study online. This new normal would have to provide space for connection and interaction in new and innovative ways such that even though we were online, it did not feel like we were online.

        I realized that in a conventional setting, people make connections and foster relationships in an organic sense. Sitting next to someone with whom you felt connected was easy. Also, within the in-person environment, we would be able to observe the interest level of the participants by their nonverbal reactions. With this in mind, I had to develop new and innovative ways of teaching suited for an online Bible study. The sense of belonging experienced within the conventional setting must be cultivated in an online setting, and the way to accomplish this, as this paper proposes, is by identifying from what pedagogical practices and principles we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible study.

From what pedagogical practices and principles do we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible Study?

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Antonia

"Belonging…I know well what that water feels and does not feel like."

Keithlyn Warner

What are the feelings that animate us the most? Many people would say hunger, as it is a powerful and driving human need. However, our need to belong is just as powerful and potentially even more influential. Our sense of belonging impacts our decisions, which have the potential to affect our lives positively or negatively. Why is it that people join cults that eventually strip them of their humanity and, in some cases, their very lives? Why do we become so animated when our team scores a winning touchdown or goal? Odds are that it is because we identify with them, and because we identify with them, we feel a sense of connection. The deeper that connection, the more we identify with them. For many of us, the more we identify with an organization, person, or even an ideology, the more we are willing to devote ourselves.

Additionally, for many of us, the church is where and through which we devote ourselves to learning how to live in harmony with others. Moreover, our church and Sunday school lessons instruct us on developing a relationship with Jesus Christ. Our teaching ministries are online in today's emerging video platforms and digital communication culture. Especially with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, our conventional mode of Bible Study had to be reimagined to function in an online setting. Our pedagogical practices and principles must also be reimagined to cultivate a sense of belonging. In other words, to better our online teaching context and provide opportunities for friendships and relationships to blossom within our congregations,

people must be encouraged to form more personal and social connections through our online teaching ministry. As such, past experiences heavily influence our perceptions of our connections and the quality of those connections we make with others and organizations. The "pieces of the puzzle" of our life experiences and memories nurture our development, mainly— for the scope of this paper—in forming our sense of belonging in an online Bible Study.

Even from my youth and as an adult, my most cherished recollections are of one of the most influential people in my life, Antonia, have sustained me in my life pursuits. As I remember, Antonia would take my sister and me on an adventure window shopping around Christmas. There was an inexplicable joy, anticipation, and excitement as we looked forward to window-shopping through the streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad, intently gazing through the windows filled with decorations of all colors and lights that appeared like flickering stars in the night sky. Dancing in our imaginations, we would imagine which toys we would get. Antonia held our hands as she gave us a bright red apple, which—for us—signaled that Christmas was here. Antonia ensured that we attended church every Sunday. Through Sunday School, amongst many lessons, I learned the basics of catechism, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and what that would mean for my life. Even though her life was sometimes difficult, Antonia had a penchant for discovering joy in otherwise troubling situations. While she did not linger in disappointments, she celebrated all the good that came into her life. Antonia made many sacrifices to provide for us. The memories engendered from such experiences cultivated in our hearts a comforting sense that we belonged, and if nothing else, we belonged in Antonia's caring and watchful hands. Antonia cared for us in extraordinary ways. I felt a sense of belonging in her attention to just giving us that bright red apple. That sense of belonging felt so comforting and reassuring that I could remember the happy feeling whenever Antonia was present. And every

time I remember this, a smile comes to my face as if I am experiencing an inner hug. For me, Antonia embodied what belonging is.

Nurtured by the warmth of these cherished memories, migrating from The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to a new culture, feeling the pull and tug of a sense of "home but not home," I found comfort. As part of an immigrant community, often there is a sense of excitement and wonder in the anticipation of coming to new cultures and migrating into new environments; however, missing home constantly pulls and tugs at the heart. Vamba Sherif delivered a TEDx talk on YouTube, giving voice to our wrestling with being away from "home" with a sense of belonging.[1] Born into a large family in Liberia, Sherif left his home early and traveled to many countries. According to him, he did not experience a sense of belonging as part of a new culture, although he immersed himself in the cultural practices and languages. Sherif admits he found a sense of belonging in reflecting increasingly on an "idealized picture of his past." I identify with Sherif as he migrated to new cultures. Similarly, when I migrated to this country, it was challenging to feel like I belonged here. Fortunately, I lived amongst family and friends, which helped me to adjust.

This struggle sometimes felt like a sense of betrayal to my inner self, like a falling leaf from a tree. I take inspiration from Howard Thurman, one of the great theologians of our time.[2] Like a tree, how do I spread my roots so that I may grow branches and bear fruit? Even though I struggle with questions, I think of how I feel inside. Do I feel validated? Do I feel accepted? Do I

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[1] In his TEDx Groningen monologue, Vamba Sherif contends, "My sense of belonging is not complete without a feeling. Without the conviction that you belong to me." We are all responsible for helping others feel a sense of belonging within our context. *Vamba Sherif, Where Is Home? Where Do You Belong? | Vamba Sherif | TEDxGroningen*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0mVa7d08tg.

[2] In demonstrating the determination to survive, Thurman illustrates the spreading of a tree's roots in its quest for growth to symbolize our spiritual formation and growth Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 2003), 13.

feel wanted? Do I belong, and do I belong here? Indeed, walking into a store and being followed as if I did not belong there makes me feel unwanted and often truly angry. Like Willie James Jennings, associate professor of Systematic Theology and Africana studies at Yale University Divinity School, my well-being is inextricably bound to my racial senses.[3]

Although the church should be where compassion, grace, love, and mercy are demonstrated,[4] we sometimes exhibit practices that contradict the church's calling to be a house where everyone feels like they belong. We experience a sense of belonging in our daily experiences, especially in our churches. Too often, what we see and experience in our places of worship is a commodity-like atmosphere in which people are disconnected from the church's mission. It is as if the church now functions as a local retail store where customers browse the various articles for sale. If a salesperson is kind enough to help that person, that is seen as unusual. As much as we like our retail stores, few claim we are connected to those establishments. Retail stores serve a specific purpose and function: to provide access to clothes, electronics, etc.; the damnable thing is that the modern church progressively resembles the retail industry. The ultimate crux is that the retail establishment's goal is about how much you have and how much money you will spend to satisfy your thirst and hunger for things. Ironically, many of our places of worship have become places where we commodify our Bible Study outreach ministry and even our preaching ministry. Moreover, we assume the role of judge and count the number of people in our sanctuary and the amount of money we collect as barometers for our success. This practice fosters a culture where a sense of mistrust in the ecclesia is cultivated. It is characterized by a bartering mindset that "polka-dots" the church's teaching

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[3] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Theological Education between the Times (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 2.

[4] Johnson claims that religions, like governments, should be measured in practice against their claims, values, objectives, goals, and aspirations. Johnson Sr., Noel, and Williams, 91.

ministry, especially as it concerns online Bible Study. This is magnified via social media and video platforms. With the proliferation of these mediums of expression, as they directly affect our online teaching practices, the pedagogy we structure to deliver and engage people in the biblical text becomes crucial, as within this media, the environment demands a more focused and engaging consideration. As such, our pedagogy and hermeneutics must foster a sense of belonging.

As a church, we are called to provide opportunities and experiences that promote and cultivate a sense of belonging where people can experience spiritual growth as they pursue a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. I have frequently been told that I have a call to teach. My experiences in ministry have given me a unique vantage point when conducting online Bible study. As an ordained minister for about thirty years, I have participated in numerous ministries, serving as both a layperson and a clergy member. While pursuing my MDiv at Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, OH, I also worked as a volunteer lab technician. For about fifteen years, I have ministered to the technological needs of my local church: developing websites for our Christian Education and Church School online registrations, teaching classes in graphic manipulation for photography, and many similar endeavors. I have taught many Bible Studies and Christian education programs. I remember being part of our men's ministry and collecting the names of all the men who attended the Bible Study. Every week, I would call each brother just for a checkup, and I would remind every brother to pray for every other brother. I began to notice after a while that the men became quite adamant as to whether or not their name was on that list. Throughout my tenure within the church, serving in several other ministries, including pre-marital counseling, I have developed an understanding that part of the conversation of how our church should function concerns one of the fundamental needs of people within the

church, which is a desire to belong. People sacrifice much to attain that "sense of belonging." Some people even sacrifice their lives to belong. As the representatives of this incredible ministry, we must be sensitive concerning our pedagogical practices and principles because how, what, why, and who we teach matters significantly—we are called to feed God's sheep!

II.   TOWARDS A THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF BELONGING

II.A.   A Theology of Belonging

Feeding God's sheep must partly blossom out of our seeking to understand how our spiritual formation is affected by realizing a sense of belonging. Humanity was always created to be in intimate proximity to God. Moreover, through our teaching ministry, we are the instruments used to accomplish this extraordinary feat. As such, our lives are enriched by taking steps of faith and seeking meaningful relationships and connections with God and each other. These experiences shape who we are and allow us potentially to grow in ways we never thought possible. Our faith is expressed in how we express those connections in the things we do and in the words we utter. Our primary ministry call is to create an environment that fosters growth in knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ. During his conversation with Peter (John 21:15-17), Jesus urges him to "feed God's sheep" by showing love and selflessly serving others, teaching them about God's love and desire for everyone through Jesus, to enter into a relationship with God. In the same way, Jesus urges us to provide nourishment and support for our fellow believers, and this nourishment comes as we strive to cultivate a sense of belonging amongst God's people.

One of my central beliefs is that as a minister of the gospel of grace and mercy, developing a sense of belonging within my context is pivotal to the spiritual formation and

growth of those seeking the relationship Jesus modeled for us. Cultivating this sense of belonging and giving of oneself can be extremely difficult as often the love and concern we may provide are not reciprocated. Charles Curran, an American moral theologian and Catholic priest who served at Southern Methodist University, offering a theology of human belonging,[5] discusses the theological implications of cultivating a sense of belonging within one's local context by exploring the psychology of offering oneself in service to another from a spiritual and a psychological aspect. According to Curran:

> The religious man, however, gives himself uniquely and for a particular reason. He does so in imitation of God. Saint John, explaining Divine Redemption, described not only the Christian situation but the universal one of how love is possible between God and man. "In this is the love, not as though we had loved God, but God first loved us... beloved, if God has so loved us, we should also love one another (1 Jn. 4:10-11)." This is a fundamental point in the religious man's approach to his fellow human beings. He loves first in imitation of the way God loves him.[6]

From this, we gather that the more we feel connected to someone via a relationship, friendship, or just as an acquaintance, the more we are willing to devote ourselves to that person. In giving ourselves in service to the church, I understand that a significant aspect of its primary mission is cultivating a sense of belonging because this is what engenders people in pursuing a connection—a relationship with Christ and if this is not the case, then what is the purpose of having the church? One of the methods by which this can be accomplished is by addressing its congregations' spiritual and practical needs through preaching, teaching, and other auxiliary programs. This is not to imply that the church should become an extensive social program; however, as an institution, we depend heavily on offerings and tithes from our community, and I believe that as such, the church should, as the opportunity presents, assist in meeting not only the

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[5] Charles A. Curran, "Toward a Theology of Human Belonging," *Journal of Religion and Health* 4, no. 3 (1965): 227–42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27504712.
[6] Curran, 229.

spiritual needs but the temporal needs of its congregation and ultimately the community in which it resides. This facilitates cultivating the proverbial ground on which connections are made and healthy relationships blossom. This mandate is found throughout the Bible, as in his sermon on the mount, which says that before Jesus spoke to the people, they were hungry, and he fed them bread and fish (Matt 14:13-21).

With this consideration, one of the arms through which the church teaches the message of the Bible is through Bible Study. Moreover, online Bible Study has flourished with the advent of the COVID pandemic. In sustaining and maintaining the church's teaching ministry, consideration must be given to the online "world," as replicating and cultivating long-held relationships and connections is new to many of our congregations. Especially within the experience of an online context of Bible Study, it becomes essential that if a sense of belonging is not cultivated in our teaching approach, this will cultivate barriers to the ministry in that, more than likely, people will become disinterested and eventually abandon that ministry. As such, people may perceive our actions and reactions differently in an in-person environment compared to an online one, potentially presenting barriers to our efforts. For example, some of these barriers may reside in our differences in the cultural influence and expression of our language. It has been my experience that the way I speak sometimes can be misinterpreted for an aggressive tone, and often, I have to reassure the listener. Moreover, what we do not say speaks louder than what we do say. As such, perceiving nonverbal communication within an in-person environment may be more straightforward. Congruently, within an online environment, we must be more sensitized in giving voice to our points and counterpoints and be more aware of our facial expressions and even our hand gestures. Within this vein, we consider and applaud our cultural differences, invoking more sensitivity in cultivating a sense of belonging. It becomes incumbent

that further exploring the intricate nuances of belonging and evaluating the effectiveness and sensitivity of our online teaching methods and practices within our local congregations, this research focuses on the question: From what pedagogical principles and practices do we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible Study?

II.B.   **Exploring a Psychology of Belonging**

In attempting to understand further the implications of belonging in meeting our basic needs, Abraham Maslow, a professor of psychology at Brandeis University and one of the leading authorities on human needs, advances a theory of The Hierarchy of Needs.[7] He argued that we are driven by needs, which he saw as being in a dynamic, interdependent relationship. According to Maslow, cultivating a sense of belonging is essential to our sense of wholeness and, as he terms it, self-actualization. According to Maslow's hierarchy, humans possess fundamental needs that must be met. This hierarchy may be adapted to varying disciplines, with the most typical representation being a pyramid (fig.1). Maslow contends that the needs at the pyramid's base take precedence. As such, our physiological needs are primary. Failing to meet these needs, which are the most essential human needs, will cause the human body to fail. Within this hierarchy, our need for safety precedes our need for belonging. We can adapt Maslow's theory to recognize our need for relationships, efforts, efforts, efforts. We can do more harm than good to these efforts if we are not careful. Within the dynamics of relationships and the interdependence of these human needs, Maslow contends that we seek to realize our full potential through life experiences. An adaptation from Maslow is that as it relates to our spiritual

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[7] Alan Cutler, *Leadership Psychology: How the Best Leaders Inspire Their People* (London ; Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2014), 54–55.

formation, our sense of wholeness is realized as we allow the Holy Spirit to help us in "transforming us by renewing our minds (Rom. 12:2)."

In an attempt to further understand these concepts, I consider insights from the following research: Roy F. Baumeister, Case Western Reserve University; Mark R. Leary, Wake Forest University;[8] Kelly-Ann Allen et al., Associate Professor, Monash University, Clayton campus, Melbourne,[9] Australia, and Mariana Bockarova, Ph.D., Harvard University.[10] Two schools of thought emerge concerning cultivating a sense of belonging. According to Allen, Baumeister, and Leary, the fundamental human need for belonging is a significant source of human motivation.[11] As a derivative of this essential human need, we seek connections. Often, these connections validate and nurture our feeling that we belong. Conversely, for Bockarova, the need to meaningfully matter or find meaning within one's life regardless of one's relation to others is a primary motivation for the need to belong. [12]For Bockarova, developing our identity and sense of identity is the fundamental quality, and our sense of belonging arises from our understanding of identity. As a derivative, we gravitate toward people, places, and ideologies with which we identify.

Within the online Bible Study context, it is essential to curate an environment where participants feel they belong, and their opinions and ideas are valued. Finally, in cultivating this sense of belonging, our pedagogical practices and principles must positively affect people's

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[8] Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (May 1995): 497–528, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497.

[9] Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 87–102, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

[10] Mariana Bockarova, "Does One Truly Need to Belong?: A Case for the Need to Meaningfully Exist," Semiotica, 2016, no. 210 (2016): 251–57, https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2016-0026.

[11] Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong."

[12] Bockarova, "Does One Truly Need to Belong?: A Case for the Need to Meaningfully Exist," 251.

understanding of the biblical text's application and consideration of the message of grace and compassion.

The implications are encouraging in that as a community of believers, in a broad sense, we are connected through our faith; through this faith, our sense of belonging is nurtured. In affirming this idea, Paul reminds us that there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and all (Eph 4:4-6). Through faith in the unity of this trinity, as believers, we become united. The community fosters a more significant potential for healthy spiritual formation and physical or online relationships. This idea of community and its potential benefits is born out in Bell Hooks's dialogue at the Othering and Belonging Conference on Belonging through Connection, in which she discusses what it means to be in a community and to be accepted, not just tolerated. Hooks emphasizes that if you have love, you have the community of belonging that comes with it.[13]

Baumeister and Leary, Kelly-Ann Allen et al. posit that a sense of belonging is the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences and is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes.[14] In light of varying perspectives on how belonging should be conceptualized, assessed, and cultivated, Allen proposes an integrative framework (see below) for developing and cultivating a sense of belonging by exploring the intersection of four elements in strategies that increase our individual and collective sense of belonging.[15]

Bell Hooks & John A. Powell: Belonging Through Connection (Othering & Belonging Conference 2015), 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sX7fqIU4gQ.[13] *Bell Hooks & John A. Powell: Belonging Through Connection (Othering & Belonging Conference 2015)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sX7fqIU4gQ See timestamp 4'15".
[14] Allen et al., "Belonging," 87.
[15] Allen et al., 91–94.

1. Competencies are the skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging.
2. Opportunities to belong concern the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging.
3. Motivation to belong is the inner drive or desire to connect with others.
4. Perceptions are a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience.

According to this model, the intersection of these elements facilitates a sense of belonging within a community. Kelly Anne Allen et al. concludes that focusing on competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions can be a helpful framework for developing strategies to increase people's sense of belonging at both the individual and collective levels.[16] As an integrative model in an online context, our competency in relating to others while recognizing and respecting potential social and cultural differences is essential, especially as we attempt to communicate and connect ideas and thoughts within this medium.[17] Moreover, as we traverse the social media landscape, there are many instances of cyberbullying and digital emotional outbursts. This model advocates careful attention to the ability to reduce and regulate emotions, which may reduce the likelihood of social rejection from others. As our social, cultural, and emotional competencies are essential in sustaining a healthy online context, having opportunities to connect in an online context seems like an obvious consideration.

However, as Allen contends, the ability to communicate with others is useless if opportunities to connect are lacking. As demonstrated during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with the advent of social distancing, many people lost their ability to communicate with friends and loved ones simply because they may not have been able to afford the technology that allowed them access. For the marginalized community, this becomes an everyday reality in

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[16] Allen et al., 96.
[17] Allen et al., 92.

which people struggle with paying the cable bill or putting food on the table. Coupled with this struggle is our fundamental need to be accepted, belong, and seek social interactions and connections. Allan refers to this as belonging motivation.[18] Within an online context, we share a sense of belonging as we actively seek similarities and things in common with others. Within our social media world of likes and dislikes, potentially, we can develop a false sense of connection by the number of likes we have and, conversely, by the number of dislikes. This model suggests that we must become diligent in our perception of our online presence so that our online interaction can inform perceptions about our experiences, self-confidence, and desire for connection.

Conversely, As Kelly-Ann Allen, Baumeister, and Leary agree that belonging is a fundamental human need, and the need to form social bonds and relationships arises from this human fundamental need, Bockarova contends that the need to belong does not exist alone; instead, it is an outcome of the basic need to matter meaningfully.[19] As such, one implication is that being socially accepted dramatically impacts our sense of identity. As a functional model, this research supports the idea that as we develop our sense of identity, as a derivative, we are more likely to gravitate to events, people, organizations, ideologies, etc., with which we identify. More significantly, we become part of congregations which has the potential to affect and influence our behaviors and edit our theology. We momentarily become "part" of the event and share in its jubilation. For Bockarova, this desire to be significant encourages most people to develop social bonds, as through these interactions, they can potentially fulfill their need to matter.[20]

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[18] Allen et al., 94.

[19] Bockarova, "Does One Truly Need to Belong?: A Case for the Need to Meaningfully Exist," 251.

[20] Bockarova, 252.

These authors present compelling strategies for understanding a sense of belonging. Taken in parallel, they all admit that a sense of belonging is one of the barometers that can drive our social and spiritual development. The question remains: is there an intersection between the fundamental need to belong and the need for identity? I contend that such an intersection exists in that individuals develop socially and spiritually simultaneously, satisfying their sense of belonging and identity. As a church, we either affirm these fundamental needs or abuse these needs by our hermeneutics and pedagogy. This directly affects how our community perceives our efforts. Moreover, according to Joseph R. Myers, we tend to gravitate to people, relationships, organizations, ideologies, etc., with which we identify simultaneously satisfying our need to belong.[21]

I want to address an issue that needs to be discussed in the previous research: the social stratification in our society and its negative impact on a sense of belonging. This limiting factor may even be systematically designed to prevent classes and races of people from realizing their full potential. Violating these fundamental human needs, according to Baumeister and Leary, results in pathologies that often manifest themselves as depression, isolation, and, in some cases, self-destructive behaviors. I posit that because of the pervasive stratification of our society and, for this paper, our religious system, those who live on the margins constantly have to struggle to make ends meet and may not be afforded the same opportunities and competencies as those of the dominant class. Howard Thurman articulates well that "the masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose

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[21] Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Youth Specialties, 2003), 25.

needs may be greater but what religion offers to meet their needs."[22] the implications for the church in cultivating a sense of belonging in its attempts to provide a safe "space" where the exchange of ideas and creativity are fostered are such that, within the scope of this paper, our pedagogical practices and principles must be sensitized and reimagined in becoming sensitive and effective in this emerging online world.

II.C.   **The Practice of Belonging**

Although the psychological imports of belonging are germane to our social and spiritual makeup, a sense of belonging is realized and etched within our psyche as we engage in everyday practices. According to Kelly Anne Allen et al., belonging is a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of our surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, workplaces, communities, and social and cultural groups. Most people need to feel a sense of belonging characterized as a positive but often fluid and brief connection with other people, places, and experiences.[23] For me, belonging is being loved, cared for, accepted, valued, and given equal opportunities. It is also the freedom to express my voice and creativity amongst peers, family members, and friends. Moreover, our time and presence are two of our most valued assets. Abusing them consistently results in tragedy. As such, one of the most important things we can do for another person is give them the "gift" of our presence and time. In doing so, we acknowledge their presence and, on a deeper level, communicate the importance of our connection with that person.

Belonging, identity, connections, love, joy, peace, and compassion are all human attributes that make for the betterment of us all. Whether belonging flourishes out of a sense of

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[22] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.
[23] Allen et al., "Belonging," 88.

identity or is a fundamental characteristic of human motivation, we pursue connections with people and relationships out of a sense of belonging. For many of us, that sense of belonging emerges in our daily lives as we may share common goals, beliefs, and values. Moreover, our understanding of belonging grows stronger as we become affiliated with churches, organizations, clubs, sports teams, online communities, and even gangs. Considering that belonging is primarily a subjective determination, one feels confident that they are accepted, appreciated, and validated within the boundaries of a relationship; significantly, defining belonging is essential to participating in this great human experiment called life.

II.C.1. *Proximity*

As we interact within our community, places of employment, family, favorite sports events, and other aspects of our daily lives, we identify with these aspects, and in identifying, we experience this sense of belonging. As such, we tend to gravitate toward things, places, and people with whom we feel connected. We can view a sense of connection in terms of dimensions of belonging through the lens of our social and spiritual praxis.

One such social dimension of belonging is the commonly held perception that the closer we are in proximity, the greater the chance of interaction and the formation of relationships. In some circumstances, this may be true; however, personal "space" is a matter of perspective. This concept of "space" is not limited to our geography. Still, considering our sense of interpretation of cultural "space," which is informed by our shared participation in cultural norms, we either become distanced or closer to each other. How we negotiate these cultural inflections contributes to our understanding of a sense of belonging. For Myers, the same real estate can convey a certain distance in one situation yet have an entirely different meaning in another. Further

proximity need not be geographical.[24] In today's digital and electronic culture, this sense or perception of space is reimagined regardless of geography. We can text each other to convey our ideas, likes, and dislikes and conduct digital video programs where we can see each other, talk to each other, and empathize with others. Myers contends that this sense of belonging can be discussed in descriptive patterns.[25] In the sense of belonging, we can be close to someone based on our geography, but in a spiritual sense, we can be close to someone based on our sense and degree of personal connection. Adapting Edward Hall's theory of Proxemics[26] will further illuminate the dynamics of our reciprocal interactions, interpretation, and understanding of the relationship we share and how it is informed and edited by our experience and interpretation of our culture.

In a basic sense, our cultural nurturing heavily influences how we react to people and respond to them. Moreover, our spiritual formation is equally influenced and edited in the context of our spiritual traditions and rituals. As such, the proxemics of spiritual formation include understanding diverse faith practices, traditions, and interpretations. Celebrating the integrity of our personal space engenders a sense of belonging, which fosters deep connections where lasting relationships form. Congruent with this understanding is the challenge of negotiating our proxemics of spirituality in an online context. The online context presents limitless and sometimes challenging possibilities for cultivating connections that must be built on cultivating a sense of shared beliefs and goals. These accomplishments potentially can be our shared testimonies of personal growth and a deeper understanding of our spiritual walk. A

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[24] Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 17.

[25] Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 42.

[26] Proxemics is the term Hall coins for the interrelated observations and theories of our use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture. Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Repr, Anchor Books (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 1.

communal dimension of trust and belonging emerges, which includes acceptance, inclusion, humility and graciousness, and forgiveness, which shapes our pedagogical practices and principles.

II.C.2. *Acceptance and Inclusion*

Our feeling of being accepted and included is closely related to our sense of proximity. We feel accepted when others acknowledge and validate our presence and existence. However, being accepted and included goes beyond mere acknowledgment. It involves feeling heard, understood, and seen in the connections and relationships we build. We experience a sense of being included in the conversation, which has a powerful effect of validating our sense of presence and being. Being validated reinforces our sense of being accepted and encourages us to engage even further in that activity or relationship. The converse to this is devastating and can result in a long-lasting feeling of a lack of self-esteem. Moreover, one of the most significant barriers to belonging is attempting to change who we are to accommodate the opinions of others. Jennings gives voice to the experiences of many of us who have experienced insults and degrading comments from people making fun of our being, our names, and our accomplishments, especially during our formative years. These malicious acts are often imprinted on us. Feelings of not belonging, nobody likes me, and I hate myself. More devastatingly, these feelings frequently follow us into adulthood and manifest in our actions and reactions to people and situations. Jennings reflects on his relationship with his father: *"But I was a shy, slight effeminate; to his mind, I was a Sunday school Boy not ready for a man's Monday."*[27]

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[27] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 3.

Cultivating a sense of belonging is married to the praxis of acceptance and inclusiveness. The emerging conversation today concerns who belongs and who we will let in. In an ideal world, everyone should have access to the wealth of opportunities available in our community, especially in our churches. Part of the conversation the church and our community wrestle with is who we include in our fellowship. This is borne out in the discussions concerning the exclusion of the gay and lesbian community also, whether women should be allowed to preach, and even the hidden practice of ecclesial stratification in which the most popular ministers get the most benefit. For the scope of this paper, how does this translate into cultivating a sense of belonging through inclusiveness expressed in our pedagogical practices and principles, especially in the context of an online Bible Study?

Although challenging, an essential quality that must be fostered, especially in an online Bible Study environment, is that, as participants, we affirm each other. We validate each other by attentively listening and constructively responding to each other's ideas and thoughts as expressed. As we foster a climate in which everyone feels included and accepted, our proxemics of spiritual formation ultimately inform and edit our pedagogical practices and principles in that how we teach matters, who we teach matters, and what we teach matters—recognizing that people sometimes come to online Bible Study sessions as they would in a traditional setting to understand their innermost thoughts and beliefs. This has the potential to result in a sense of freedom as the Scripture declares whoever the Son has set free is free indeed (Jn. 8:36). For Jennings, this experience is crystallized in his pursuit of theological education in which he reflects:

> *"It was a freedom that said to me that I do not have to prove, show, demonstrate, acknowledge, or claim my being in any particular way that denies my being. This freedom shattered my Blackness and my Christianity into little pieces. These little pieces*

were everything: thoughts, ideas, stories, laughter, tears, poems, gestures, sweat and dance, and so much more. Now I could play with them, hold them loosely or tightly. "[28]

A pervasive aspect of a sense of acceptance arises in the "cult of cyber-bullying." In our daily lives, we encounter people who project onto people the discouragement and dissatisfaction of their lack of self-integrity because of their insecurities. This is an all-too-common occurrence in the social media world. Spending just five minutes on social media platforms, we encounter negative comments about people's appearance and language. This can also be a challenge in an online Bible Study because we must be mindful that not everyone understands at the same rate or cadence. It becomes incumbent upon the Bible Study facilitator to encourage an environment where participants garner a sense of belonging to ensure participants have opportunities to express ideas and thoughts and that their participation is valued. In accomplishing this, the facilitator must be mindful that they can be easily distracted online depending on the participants' environment. This can be easier to negotiate in an in-person setting, but we must facilitate constant interaction in the online context by generating meaningful and relevant discussion. Within this interaction, we gauge participants' responses, and in some cases, this may indicate that we revisit or revise discussion points. Moreover, people are more sensitive to the time they spend in an online setting; therefore, it becomes incumbent that we dynamically edit our content as we engage participants. It has been my experience that questions and answers are the currency of online discussions. We can use this opportunity to assess whether or not to go slower or even cover less information. As with our favorite movie, we feel like we are a part of the experience; similarly, during an online Bible Study, the goal is to facilitate an experience in which participants can virtually immerse themselves into the text such that, even though online, they feel like they are not online.

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[28] Jennings, 3.

II.C.3. *Humility and Graciousness*

As dimensions of belonging, words have enormous power. Nurturing our formation, our judicious use of words has the vast potential to encourage people to achieve limitless possibilities. Our words directly influence our cultivation of a sense of belonging as they convey our attitude of humility and graciousness. Moreover, we experience a sense of belonging both intrinsically and extrinsically. Humility and graciousness are intrinsic dimensions that encourage our faith as we pursue our Christian walk. Humility and graciousness: like twins—they work together. We may interpret humility as a modest view of one's importance. As a social norm, it directs persons to stay within their inherited social status, specifically by not presuming on others and avoiding the appearance of lording over another.[29] Graciousness can be viewed as possessing a kindly disposition or showing favor and mercy to someone, usually by someone of superior position and power over someone of inferior position and power,[30] and principles; our words influence our pedagogical practices and principles more than our actions. Within the genre of online Bible Study, the primary currency is our words. How and what we communicate online is "the whole ball game." I recommend we "salt" how and what we speak with graciousness and humility. We should direct our words to the point of the discussion. Moreover, we should be careful not to offend anyone's personality or "personhood." Subliminally and often unconsciously, we display an attitude of arrogance in the way we speak and present our ideas. Especially in an online Bible Study setting, if we are perceived as having all the knowledge and the proverbial savior of everyone, the gospel of grace we are attempting to teach becomes moot. How we receive someone into our places of worship and how we interact with them is essential

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[29] Paul J. Achtemeier et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 443.
[30] Achtemeier et al., 387.

in the culture of a congregation. People usually will remember their experience within an event more than the event itself. The anecdote is told that if you ask anyone how the service was today, they can recall the "high spirit" they experienced, but seldom can they explain what was said in the sermon or taught in the Bible Study and in an online context, this becomes magnified as people will move on to another online site. I contend that our preaching and teaching ministry should be more geared towards cultivating a sense of belonging in recognizing and addressing our congregations' and community's concerns and needs rather than primarily presenting hermeneutical expositions and theoretical programs for online ministry. This becomes one of our primary pedagogical principles in that our teaching methods must mature on the anvil of humility, and how we teach online must demonstrate that humility. Humility and graciousness are transformative and honor both us and others.

II.C.4. **Forgiveness**

Another dimension of belonging is the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness can be one of the most critical and challenging dimensions in cultivating a sense of belonging. Even more difficult online, forgiveness must be a quick and dynamic experience. Moreover, the only connection we may have with a person in an online context is within this virtual space. In demonstrating the challenge of forgiveness, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times (Matt 18:21-22). Often, we would like to retaliate against someone for what they have done to us. People commit harmful acts against us, sometimes intentionally or unintentionally. Within an online context, we can hide behind avatars and likes and dislikes. However, Christians are called to forgive for sometimes devastating actions.

Although we must defend ourselves in certain circumstances, there are lessons to garner in forgiveness, which help us navigate future interactions in similar circumstances. This is born in the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. As part of his teaching, Jesus teaches his disciples, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not also forgive others, neither your Father will forgive your trespasses (Matt 6:14-15)." In an online context, forgiveness must occur quickly, as incidents where people refuse to forgive, can derail the online Bible Study experience.

III.   CULTIVATING BELONGING IN AN ONLINE CONTEXT

III.A. Challenges of Belonging Online

As with our practice of cultivating a sense of belonging, cultivating belonging online consists of its challenges. Our connection experience will feel and look different from physical interactions in an online context. This understanding becomes crucial in negotiating and maneuvering this digital sphere by learning to re-socialize[31] us to interact more comfortably online. Still, however, challenges may arise as we engage in this digital world. At the outset, the perception of fellowship feels different compared to physical settings; we must adjust our sensitivities to the sense of connection with each other. The lack of physical presence can limit opportunities for organic relationship building. I contend that our faith in Jesus Christ becomes

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[31] Delamarter presents six approaches to designing an online course. In his third approach, he contends that the best online courses are designed to be student-centered constructivist learning environments, in which we re-conceive the teaching-learning process. In this model, Delamarter proposes that both the teacher and the student have to re-socialize themselves into a group. Steve Delamarter et al., "Teaching Biblical Studies Online," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 14, no. 3 (July 2011): 258, https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001862790&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

our locus of connection in an online Bible Study context. Through our similar faith, we connect spiritually and develop organic relationships independent of geography.

In addition to the perception of a lack of relationships, people struggle with many other insecurities that become magnified online. Insecurities are real and can significantly impact belonging in an online context. Some people may be insecure about their appearance and engage in an "avatar presence" in which they retreat into themselves and exhibit non-communicative tendencies. Indeed, personality and opinions are expressed online as one engages in conversation with some level of confidence and competence. It is essential that within this context, the group participates in covenants of engagement in which humility and compassion are expressed in our conversations. In addition to one's appearance, A significant challenge to belonging in an online context is how we speak. Although this may be a point of conjecture, we must pay attention to the inflection and tone of our voice as it can be perceived as overly aggressive and even condescending, although that may not be the intent. I liken it to preparing to give a speech. Prudence would dictate that we practice our delivery.

In this vastly emerging culture of digital communication, as we often overview our social media platforms, we see instances of trolling and cyberbullying. The obvious is stated as it relates to cultivating a sense of belonging. It becomes incumbent upon the facilitator and participants to be keenly aware of the possibility and repercussions of such practices. Moreover, as a sense of belonging is primarily a subjective feeling and attitude, the online Bible Study group must be sensitized to diverse opinions and not react to each other with condescending speech and even aggressive looks.

In a cumulative sense, considering the challenges to belonging online, if we are not sensitive and careful in designing our online Bible studies, we risk promoting a culture of

Othering in which people feel discriminated against and selectively exclude those we deem worthy of our fellowship. Dr. John Powell, Director, Othering & Belonging Institute Robert D. Haas, Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion, Professor of Law, African American, and Ethnic Studies, University of California at Berkeley, states, "The problem of Othering is the problem of the 21st century and serves as the opposite to Belonging."[32] For Selaelo, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Faculty of Humanities University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, 'Othering' as a form of marginality and expressions of prejudice serves as self-justification where tolerance, inclusion, and equality are annulled.[33] The aggregate is that within an online Bible Study context, Burmeister and Leary contend that if we "other" people and abuse their fundamental need to belong, the fabric of the online Bible Study will progressively degenerate into broken relationships. Our efforts at promoting an online context in which people can grow in their faith through our delivery of the Gospel of Christ's messages and developing and sustaining healthy relationships with each other become thwarted.

III.B. **A Pandemic Experiment: Selah**

Understanding the practice, theology, and the challenges of belonging in an online context is crucial for the modern church's thriving. In my local context, this was evident with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. This severely affected the ministry of our church as we could not conduct ministry as we were accustomed to. This meant a quick restructuring had to occur in our conducting ministry. Our ministry suffered greatly because we had no experience in a pandemic environment. Many questions concerning how communion would be performed and

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[32] See timestamp 8:30 *John Powell, Introducing Othering & Belonging Berlin | #OBConf23*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK3tMtI9K9g.
[33] Kgatla, Selaelo, "Allan Anderson's African Pentecostalism Theology and the 'Othering,'" *HTS Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7904.

how we would minister to the sick as COVID-19 ravaged our community. Also, with the mandate of social distancing, in-home visitations were indefinitely suspended. The impact on our congregation was severe.

To provide ministry, we attempted to migrate to an online presence as we progressed into the pandemic. A sense of urgency prevailed as our teaching ministry was challenged. As one of the principal Bible Study instructors, I tried to conduct Bible Study online. Initially, the congregation was excited about this; however, after just a few sessions, people began to attend sporadically and eventually stopped altogether. After talking with some congregation members, they felt like they were not learning anything. Also, they felt distanced as they could not engage with each other as they did when we were in the sanctuary. It became evident that I had to adapt to a new strategy concerning our online environment.

Here is what I did in pursuing this new strategy for developing an online Bible Study. After interacting with many online platforms, I realized that many of the names used by these platforms and online organizations seemed to be very descriptive of the platform's function and limited to very few words and, in most cases, just one word. With this, one of my first considerations was to abandon the term "Bible Study" and implement it as "Selah." Although "Bible Study" is traditional in our in-person context, "Selah" seemed more attractive and better suited to an online context as I intended to continue to uplift and encourage our congregation through such devastating times.[34] One of the complaints prevalent during the COVID pandemic is that people suffer burnout from too many online meetings for their job requirements, school,

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[34] "Selah" is found 74 times in the Bible. It is used predominantly in the Psalms, as in Psalms 3, 4, 52, etc. As most of the Psalms were composed as songs, Selah is primarily used as a measure of musical notation, a pause in singing for narration and instruction on dynamics to the choir. It appears additionally, as in Hab. 3:3, 9, 13, etc., Selah is used as a means of encouragement: to lift up or to exalt Achtemeier et al., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 993.

and other engagements. Considering this, I decided to meet biweekly from 11:30 A.M. to 12:30 P.M. Also, I chose the Zoom platform as it was the most economical, effortless, straightforward, and accessible to learn and use. Within each session, we averaged 12 to 15 people. One of the major concerns was that people previously felt bored and disconnected. With this in mind, I intended Selah to be more interactive and relevant. I approached this by reimagining how I would present the material for discussion. I electronically distributed the materials for our upcoming sessions the week before our meetings.

III.B.1 *The Flow of Selah*

The flow of each session was as follows: At the start of each session, we welcomed each other, and I invited someone to provide an invocation. Following this, everyone was invited to share a brief testimony of their previous week in a short check-in. Next, we reviewed the prior session's scripture and discussion. Then, someone else or I would read the scripture for discussion. We then discussed this text line-by-line, using each line to examine the impact on our current life experiences. Moreover, during our discussions, we compared several versions and translations of that scripture. I allotted about forty minutes for discussion. After the discussion, to reinforce the scripture, I invited everyone to participate in a brief Zoom poll of no more than ten questions, after which we discussed the results. Interestingly, these polls became quite popular as members expressed how they were more engaged in the scripture during our meetings in anticipation of the polls. We closed each session with a sneak peek into the next session and a prayer. With such a new and different Bible Study, we learned as we grew.

III.B.2 *Challenges to Selah*

As with any new program, Selah has its challenges. A brief overview of some challenges for Selah centered around the reality that up to this point, everyone had been accustomed to connecting in person Bible Study. The challenge became making people feel like they were not online even though they were online. One technique was to keep the conversation going and open the discussion so everyone could voice opinions and engage in discussion. Another challenge was promoting an atmosphere where everyone could feel the connection of their existing relationships. I accomplished this by encouraging the sharing of similar experiences in the hope that each person might identify with the experiences of others. At the outset, my goal was to provide a service for my congregation members. COVID-19 could have been an utterly debilitating occurrence for our congregation; however, in developing an online context by reimagining our approach to Bible Study, we could now engage our congregation members in their pursuit of Bible education and how it informs and potentially edits their life experiences and, spiritual formation. Now, after this research, I have a framework for evaluating what I did and understanding why it worked so well, and as such, I can continue to revise and improve my work.

III.C.   **Evaluating Selah – Focus Group**

In evaluating Selah's effectiveness and performance, I conducted a focus group via the Zoom video platform on October 23, 2023, at 7:00 P.M. Eastern time.[35] There were eight participants. Moreover, in recognition of my relationship with the congregation members, I decided to have a third party conduct this focus group. To assist participants in preparing for this

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[35] *Selah Focus Group*, n.d., https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/j4XExVYtaA-pEjhmRE8zQi3tuff8pkgU5xq4DBoVuSarw-ACz43sYdew7eczSoEn.lnqzw456XHu0kZiG?startTime=1698102214000.

focus group, I developed and electronically distributed a script (fig. 3) containing twenty-five questions, which I categorized in the following manner: Content, Facilitator, Time, Belonging, and Pedagogy. There was no requirement to return the script. One of my hopes in developing Selah was to provide a platform where people feel comfortable online. I assess that this online Bible Study successfully presented an opportunity for instruction and interaction. Based on the focus group discussion, the reaction to Selah was positive. Moreover, regarding whether there was any measurable difference comparing an in-person setting with an online setting, the general response was that although everyone had been accustomed to the in-person context, most felt more or just as comfortable online as they did not have to travel or get dressed up.

III.C.1 *Content*

In assessing the content, at the onset, I had to consider how much Scripture I would present for discussion. As a barometer, my experience with our in-person Bible Study, sometimes presenting an entire chapter of scripture for discussion, and my interactions on social media—where I came to understand that "less is more" allowed me to realize that I would have to use less material and, in many instances, much less material. Rather than focus on an entire chapter, depending on the topic, I focused on a few verses from scripture, sometimes six or seven. Moreover, based on the responses from the focus group, participants felt the content was just enough to engage everyone in the conversation. In addition, they felt like they were gaining a better understanding of scripture related to their individual experiences, which is one of my hopes in developing Selah. As some participants expressed, the relevance of the material to their daily life experience was encouraging. Responses included: "I was able to connect the dots" and "Now I can better understand the Scripture."

III.C.2 *Facilitator*

As a Bible Study instructor, I have always felt that one of my primary goals in teaching is to convey knowledge and foster a deeper understanding of the Scripture. With a deeper understanding of the text of scripture, one can identify and relate better to its context by applying it to daily experiences. People understand better as they identify with an experience. Further, the role of the facilitator is essential in that the facilitator's personality and verbal and nonverbal cues become part of the online learning experience. On any given day, we may experience setbacks and uplifting moments. How we express these occurrences can be reflected in our approaches to teaching, especially within an online context. As such, Parker Palmer informs us that in preparation for any educational program or platform, the teacher is well advised to examine both their motivations and aspirations concerning teaching, which he refers to as our inner landscape, and their intended outcomes, which he refers to as the outer landscape.[36]

Not only is the role of the facilitator essential for a fantastic online experience but so is our sensitivity to the diversity of abilities required to comprehend and understand the content. Recognizing that not all people learn at the same time and, indeed, all people do not understand in the same volume, one of my goals was to adjust dynamically the cadence of the discussions and the information presented so that everyone would have an opportunity to participate and clarify concerns and questions. Moreover, within an online context, our facial expressions become very noticeable. As facilitators, we must be sensitized to our facial expressions. Comments about the interactions of the facilitator were that the facilitator was sensitive to the issues discussed and never made anyone feel like their opinion or presence did not matter. One respondent said she felt excited anticipating the sessions because she expected to learn

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[36] Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Twentieth anniversary edition (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2017), 3.

something new and applicable to her personal life. As I am keenly aware, "The camera never lies."

III.C.3 *Time and Frequency*

One of the most important aspects of any gathering is respecting the time published for the event, and especially in an online context, this becomes crucial. If people attempt to join the meeting and it does not start on time, they may lose interest in the session. As such, I set Selah's meeting time as 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM. I hoped that participants would be comfortable with this time as we had been meeting for our in-person noon-day Bible Study. Another consideration is that during the pandemic, as people began to participate increasingly in online platforms, some began to suffer online burnout. As such, I was susceptible to the frequency of our sessions. With this consideration, we met on a biweekly basis. This time and frequency contributed to the consistency and consistent number of people attending each session. Also, participants appreciated that although we ended on time, I held the platform open at the end of each session, which allowed for further interaction and "catch-up."

III.C.4 *Belonging and Pedagogy*

This research aims to inquire about the pedagogical practices and principles we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible study. For Jennings, "the cultivation of belonging should be the goal of all education—not just any kind of belonging, but profoundly creaturely belonging that performs the returning of the creature to the creator."[37] As such, we have come to understand that a sense of belonging is not just a human desire but a fundamental human need, as

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[37] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 11.

Maslow, Baumeister, Leary, and Allen inform us. With this understanding, within an online Bible Study context, in recognizing dimensions of belonging, it becomes incumbent to calibrate our pedagogical imagination[38] to form an environment where we exercise humility, graciousness, and inclusiveness, respecting our proxemics of culture and spirituality as part of our pedagogical practices. In articulating responses from the focus group, people felt like their presence was valued and welcomed during each session. As part of our exercise, we took the time to introduce ourselves at each session. Participants felt that the flow of each session was easy to adapt to, and overall, they felt "at ease."

IV.   FUTURE IMPLEMENTATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As a model for online Bible Study, Selah presents an opportunity to enhance the church's auxiliary educational programs. At its core, this model requires careful consideration concerning the overall vision and mission in contemporary approaches to Christian education. For Jack Seymor, DMin, Vanderbilt University, Associate professor of Christian education at Scarritt Graduate School, and Donald E. Miller, Ph.D., Harvard University, Christian education must seek to clarify the relationship of Christian education to the broader environment[39]. To this end, the church's ministry must remain a viable and influential entity within its community. Workshops that introduce and instruct the sensitivity of the sense of belonging assist the church in attracting a more diverse population into its congregation. One of the core elements of our

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[38] Jennings contends that crudely put, theological education vacillates between a pedagogical imagination calibrated to forming white self-sufficient men and a related pedagogical imagination calibrated to forming a Christian racial and cultural homogeneity. Jennings, 7.

[39] Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 159.

pedagogy is how we present the information to be studied. Adopting a subject-centered[40] learning pedagogy in an online Bible Study allows for a more fluid and inclusive educational experience. To this end, reimagining the student-teacher model should encompass a vision of facilitator and learner in which everyone is simultaneously facilitator and learner. Moreover, some teachers and clergy may not have the necessary education to understand a culture of belonging and its cultivation. In other words, if participants do not feel a sense of connection—and this connection is not one-dimensional but encompasses connection to the mission and vision of the church and the personnel—the potential to meet the spiritual needs of our congregation diminishes significantly, if not altogether. In addition, in today's digital culture, specific workshops on the social and spiritual dimensions of belonging: grace, forgiveness, inclusion, acceptance, and humility are necessary for the church to educate its community. As Selah demonstrates, these dimensions become the pedagogical practices and principles from which we cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible Study.

In addition to identifying from which pedagogical practices and principles we cultivate a sense of belonging, part of the significance of this research is to highlight the emerging culture of online Bible Study and the necessity of the church to become more sensitive to the fundamental human needs of its congregation, especially as it relates to the connections people make within our congregations and their desire for those connections. With this in mind, consider the significant question with which the modern church struggles: Why are younger people leaving our congregations? Could it be that our youth do not identify with our liturgy or do not feel like

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[40] Palmer advances that the optimal framework for education is one in which a communal approach is employed. Palmer contends that our conventional pedagogical frameworks of a teacher-centered pedagogy and a student-centered pedagogy is hardly communal. The educational process would be better experienced within a community framework in which the best features of teacher and student centered education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 118–19.

they belong within our sanctuaries? What are we teaching this modern generation? Are we excluding generations by our insistence on our conventional pedagogy? With the rise of people turning away from the church, it becomes imperative that we engage our community on a much deeper level. Whereas the church has done a remarkable job in delivering the message of hope, grace, forgiveness, love, peace, and mercy to its community, according to Seymour and Miller, "the gospel itself will be impoverished if the educational efforts of Christians are impoverished. A vital feature for the church's educational program will require local denominational interdenominational and academic cooperation."[41]

As I bring this work to a close, I offer that our ministries are filled with limitless possibilities. These possibilities include our desire to cultivate a sense of belonging in everyday interactions by building meaningful relationships. For many of us, the church is where we initially realize a sense of belonging. Through its online teaching ministry, the church has an incredible opportunity to cultivate a sense of belonging within its community. Although we may experience challenges, our internal barometers will guide us in ministry to our community.

Finally, I reminisce on Antonia, my mother, and the bright red apple she gave us every year during our window shopping adventures. I reminisce on the precepts and values she taught me as a young boy. To me, this epitomizes what it means to belong truly. However, it was not until I became an adult that I understood and appreciated the sacrifices, the lessons, and the values she taught me and how she cultivated a sense of belonging on the mantle of my heart.

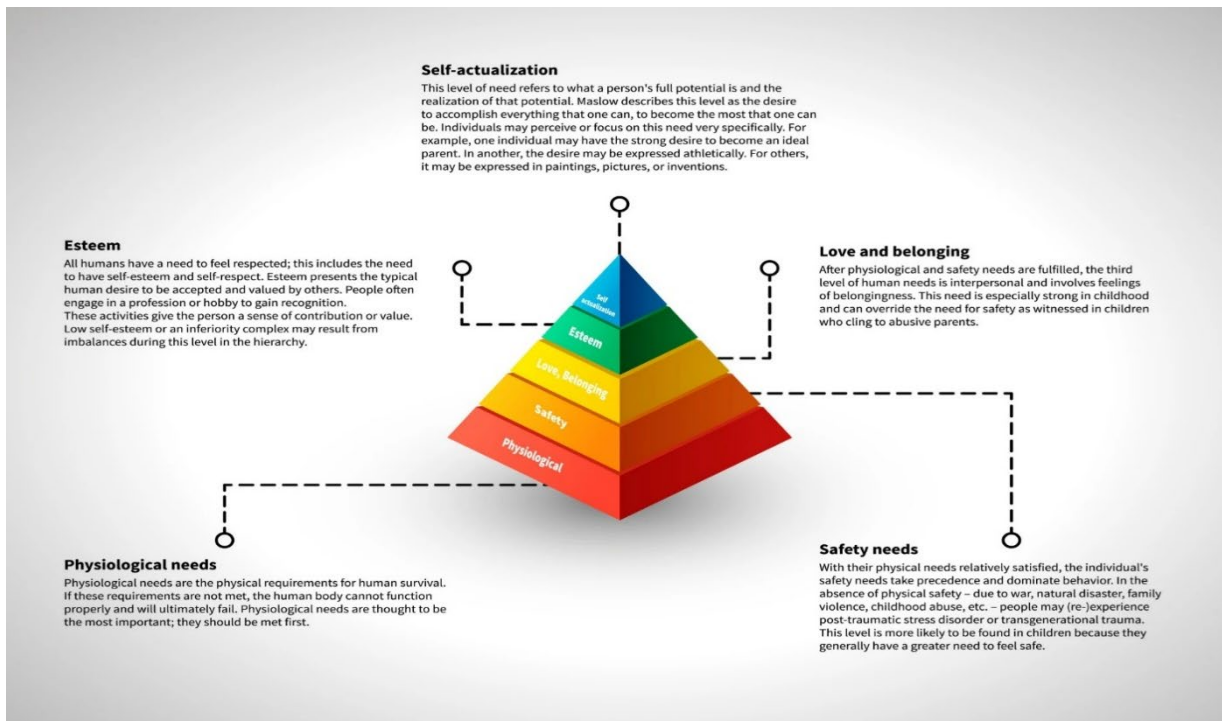[41] Seymour and Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, 164.

Appendix

Figure 1
https://www.simplypsychology.org/wp-content/uploads/maslow-hierachy-of-needs-min.jpg
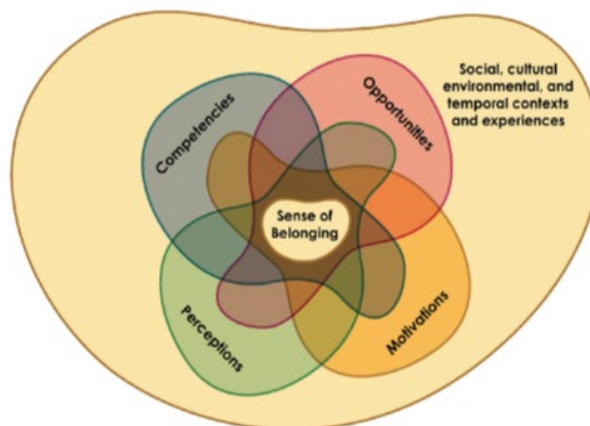

Figure 1. An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Four interrelated components (i.e., Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions) dynamically interact and influence one another, shifting, evolving, and adapting as an individual traverses temporal, social, and environmental contexts and experiences.

Figure 2
Belonging a review of conceptual issues an integrative framework and directions for future research.pdf (tandfonline.com)

Selah Focus Group
10/23/2023 Zoom

Informed Consent (consent form)
Participant Name: _____
Participant contact information: _____

Introduction:
 My name is Keithlyn Warner, and I am a student at Emory University Candler School of Theology conducting study for my Doctor of Ministry final research project.
Purpose:
This research investigates how pedagogical practices and principles cultivate a sense of belonging in online Bible study.
Procedure:
I will ask several questions about our SELAH online Bible Study in this telephone interview. You may choose not to answer any question.
Time required:
This should take at most 10 minutes.
Voluntary participation:
This is a voluntary exercise, and you may choose to stop anytime.
Risks:
There are no risks associated with this interview.
Benefits:
While this is not a paid interview, your information will be compiled into a more extensive study and used for future reference.
Confidentiality / Anonymity:
Your name will be kept confidential in all the reporting and writing related to this study. I will be the only person present for the interview and the only person who listens to the information. When I write the research project, I will use pseudonyms for all participants, if necessary.
Before you consent
In agreement with this focus group, the information you give will be transcribed and incorporated into the final project, of which, at your request, you may obtain a copy.

Content

1. What is the first word that comes to your mind when I say online?

   Response:_____

2. On a scale of 1 through 5, 1 being extremely uncomfortable and five being extremely comfortable, how comfortable did you feel during the Selah sessions?

   Response:_____

3. During the sessions, do you feel like you learned anything?

   Response:_____
4. Do you feel like you were actively involved in the material as presented during the sessions?

   Response:_____
5. was there adequate discussion about the material presented during the sessions?

   Response:_____
6. During the sessions, were you able to participate adequately?

   Response:_____

Facilitator

7. Recalling the discussions, do you believe the facilitator was adequately prepared for each session?

   Response:_____

8. Do you feel like the facilitator was friendly towards you?

   Response:_____

9. Consider the facilitator. Did you feel like the facilitator listened to your points and conversations?

    Response:_____

10. do you feel the facilitator acted more like an instructor or a learner-facilitator?

    Response: _____

Time

11. Did the sessions start at the time they were published?

    Response:_____

12. Length of sessions: Was each session's time adequate?

    Response:_____

13. Were you able to participate in the sessions?

    Response:_____

Belonging

14. do you feel your presence was valued during each session?

    Response:_____

15. during each session, were you welcomed?

    Response:_____

16. During each session, did anyone take the time to learn your name?

    Response:_____

17. Do you feel your opinions were supported during each session?

    Response:_____

18. after each session, did you feel like you would attend another session?

    Response:_____

19. Considering the overall attitude of everyone during each session, do you feel like you were appreciated?

    Response:_____

20. Considering the overall attitude of all present during each session, do you feel your opinions were respected?

    Response:_____

21. Considering the overall impact of the sessions, do you feel like your spiritual growth was positively impacted?

    Response:_____

Pedagogy

22. Considering the flow of each session, did how the material was presented positively contribute to your participation and learning outcomes?

    Response:_____

23. considering each session, do you feel the general attitude contributed to a positive learning environment?

    Response:_____

24. do you believe that the Presentation of the material made it easy for you to understand?

Response: _____

25. Considering your responses and the session's overall quality, did the SELAH learning experience cultivate a sense of belonging for you?

Response: _____

Figure 3

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