

“Awesome Belonging”
By Chris Russell, Community Member
Church of the Covenant
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(Dan Harrison’s intro):

Have you ever walked into a room full of people and felt utterly alone? Have you ever had a conversation with someone and just felt like the other person wasn’t listening? Like they just don’t get you, or perhaps don’t want to get you? And the worst is the disconnect we feel when we’re with a group of people but we’re not really “with” them. We feel like we just don’t fit in. We just don’t belong. The pain in the loneliness is almost unbearable. We all want to belong. We all want to have friends we feel so close to we call them family. This is part of the attraction of a church family, a place of ideological refuge, a space of peace where we can mend our wounds and restock before going back out into the “real” world. Well in my conversations with my dear friend Chris Russell, it became apparent that Chris holds deep feelings regarding this very notion of “belonging”, hinging from personal experience related to what it feels to have “real” community. Or what I like to call “real” communion. So, he worked these past two weeks to put into words—his thoughts and feelings. As his friend and pastor, and my eleven years as an English Writing teacher certainly helped, I was on hand to consult and even assist where it made sense, but to also act as guardian of Chris’ unique, authentic voice. The words had to be his. The message his.

We started the process when we met together at Riverside Park two weeks ago, with coffees and sweet breads in hand. Here I would play the role of interviewer, asking Chris questions, and Chris filling the audio recording with his deepest thoughts on what it means “to belong”. If you’ve seen me and Chris together before, you have probably heard us. We are both pretty loud, and we both enjoy laughing (a lot!) and that’s exactly how we started our sermon conversation, laughing as Chris vividly reminisced about having a birthday party as a child at the very pavilion we were using to do his sacred sermon-writing. I laughed, imagining a littler version of Chris relishing the birthday celebration: cake on his face and all. What a beautiful sight that must have been! Well that “fun” relationship we have was not lost even while working through a methodical process, a serious process I believe we stayed true to.

Now, we all know Chris and he seems to know everyone, and I mean EVERYONE. No matter where I’ve been with Chris, people seem to recognize him. And why wouldn’t they? Chris emanates the very essence of love and care as he greets anyone who will listen. He naturally makes you feel like you belong no matter who you are. He makes us feel like we belong to him. We’re his. We’re both a part of something bigger than just us, and at the same time a part of each other. So, that brings me to Chris Russell in his own words:

(Chris Russell)—

I think belonging is being accepted in a community, and truly being accepted just the way I am. This means fitting in with everyone else even when maybe we are a little different. I fit in here at Church of the Covenant because of all of you. You made a decision to accept me just the way I am. I have not always felt accepted all the time, everywhere. But I have felt accepted most of the time, and most

importantly I feel accepted right now. I love the relationship I have with Daniel. He is nice and friendly and laid back, and I'm laid back too. So, this also makes me feel like I fit in, because I feel comfortable. Feeling comfortable is important to feeling like you belong. It's like when you're with family and you can take your shoes off and just be real with each other, and be laid back together. But how about awesome belonging? You know I love the word "awesome", and adding "awesome" in front of "belonging" makes sense to me. It's when your community accepts you completely. You're really family. Then you experience awesome belonging. And isn't that what we all want?

I am not disabled. None of us are. We all have abilities, and we all have different abilities. I make bird houses, maybe you do something else. I play basketball, maybe you play football. We are all abled people. So it isn't about our disability but our ability instead. In fact I want more people that think of themselves as disabled to come to Church of the Covenant, because here we are not disabled, we are abled. You and me, we are abled together. I love community because we all help each other. I like to be able to help out people in need, just like people have helped me over the years. I remember one time in the Lodge of the Fisherman, when I was just a kid at Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, I choked on a fish bone. Who would have thought but I ate fish at the Lodge of the Fisherman. Bev was there and he saw me eating the fish and made sure I didn't choke to death. He called the ambulance and I was taken to the hospital. It was not fun in there. But I survived and I'm with you today and there's no more fish at the Lodge of the Fisherman so we're all safe. Now, that's community.

I love music. I enjoy playing music here with the church, and with others too. It just makes me feel included. I like listening to my Zen music. It helps me get meditated before I go out into the community. Into the real world. This way I'm ready. I love to meditate. It's great. You can even meditate from the phone. Just silence the phone. That's what my dad does. Meditate from the phone. Now, my Zen music helps me relax, and I'm even more ready when I take a nice, long Zen nap. When I ignore all the noise and the Zen music quiets me down inside, then after I feel meditated, I'm ready. The question is, "Is the real world ready for me?"

I love Church of the Covenant. This has been my community for more than forty years. My family. My home. I love listening to the people here and when they listen to me. I enjoy the simple Christian feeling of our time together. It's not so Holy Roller. I don't mind the Holy Rollers. I'd play the bongos with them. But I like Church of the Covenant where the people and the chairs are laid back. Bev was laid back and he believed strongly in social justice stuff. Just because you're laid back doesn't mean you don't care. You have to care. This is what belonging is all about. If all people belong to each other then we have to take care of each other. Our problems belong to each other too. Bev understood this and David understood this, and Daniel understands this too. We all must belong to each other. I don't like being alone. I have felt like an outcast sometimes, but being here I don't feel that way. I am with you and you are with me, just like Jesus said, we are to love each other. This love is part of belonging to one another.

Like Daniel said earlier, he and I are loud. It's true. But there's nothing wrong with being loud sometimes even in a quiet community as long as we're being the voice of the voiceless, like my friend Derek Polley says. We have to be heard. We all need to find our voice and be heard over the noise, and even sometimes over the quietness. That's why I love drumming. I feel very happy and spiritual, and I can create songs in my heart and my drums. When I'm in my drum circle that we do here once a month, I feel alive, sharing my drumming in a group where we all belong. And just like when you are listening to me

drum, thank you for listening to me today. I know you accept my voice, and that's why I can say I really belong with you, and you really belong with me too.