Church and belonging

Learning from lockdown

Sandra Lindqvist

Abstract

Author: Sandra Lindqvist
Title: Belonging, Learning from lockdown
Supervisor: Malin Arvidson
Assessor: Roberto Scaramuzzino

During the COVID-19 pandemic governments all over the world went into lockdown to stop the spread of the virus. Lockdown severely challenged the preconditions assumed necessary for the development and retention of a sense of belonging. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding about the components of belonging, how they interrelate and critically examine ruling assumptions about the creation and retention of belonging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty participants who experienced lockdown in England who claim belonging to different Christian congregations. The interviews conducted were analyzed and interpreted through a thematic analysis in relation to an integrative framework on belonging suggested by Allen et al. The results show that even though lockdown was recognized a threat to the participants sense of belonging, they left lockdown with an intact or increased sense of belonging. The factors ensuring a retention of belonging was found to be regular contact albeit not physical, reciprocal care, and factors relating to strong community-identity.

Key words: belonging, sense of belonging, social relations, lockdown, COVID-19, church, faith-based organizations.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

The sense of belonging is a common positive human experience, and most people feel they belong somewhere. Somewhere, where they feel accepted and welcomed as a member, or a part of something. Something which protects them from the painful experience of loneliness and stimulates actions of involvement and interaction with others, therefore thwarting reclusion, and isolation (Hagerty et al. 1996: 235). Not belonging on the other hand, is a profoundly painful experience connected to negative consequences such as deteriorated mental health, stress, and marginalization (Ibid, Li 2019). A sense of belonging could be described as a person's interconnectedness with others. This interconnectedness can be achieved through direct interactions with people but also through the interactions with place, things, and collective narratives. These interactions provide us with clues on who we are and our place in a community. They enable us to make sense of our existence and assign purpose to our actions**.**

There are many contexts in which an induvial can seek out these interactions, sport clubs, choirs, family, and school to mention a few. For the participants in this study church is where they carry out these meaningful interactions. Other than being a place of interaction the church is also one of many actors on the arena of professional social work with a long history of targeted support for the marginalized. Creating a place of community and belonging is alongside worship and education at the central functions of religious congregations (Ammerman 2009:572). Churches or other arenas of faith constitutes a unique setting for the study of belonging as it enables the participant access to a group of people (other believers), places (places of worship and community activities), things (religious objects) and spaces (the spiritual or divine realm). The believer can also find confirmation of belonging in religious teachings and narratives, for example in words from holy scriptures or texts used in rites. In addition, faith puts the believing individual in a unique position of belonging. They have access to connecting with other people in their faith communities just like a member of any organization. They also have access to the connection with a divine being, in this study the Christian God. From the believer's point of view this connection is understood as more than the mere knowledge of the existence of God. Even though the experience of God's presence might vary, God is always actually present. This sets the believers belonging apart from the belonging one might experience within for example a sports association. You might be aware

of your football club even when you are not on the field. You might be aware and find comfort in the knowledge that members of the club might think of you even if you are apart. The football club, it´s members and your connection to them, however, cannot be experienced as more than an idea if you are physically separated.

In 2020 the outbreak of COVID-19 caused worldwide lockdowns and forced individuals to adapt to restrictions, like social isolation, put in place to stop the spread of the virus. Many were deprived of the benefits originating from social interactions obtained through community activities. Compared to Sweden, the measures taken by the British government in response to the COVID-19 outbreak was much more intense (Hale et al. 2021). Among these measures were full lockdowns on both national and regional scales. During these people were ordered to stay at home, permitted to leave for essential purposes only, such as buying food or for medical reasons. According to WHO (2021) the COVID-19 pandemic had serious negative effects on mental health. A long-term upsurge in the number and severity of mental health problems was also predicted. Some of those were brought about by control measures such as lockdown, self-isolation, and quarantine leading to social isolation and loneliness (Ibid). The social preconditions set by lockdown posed, without any doubts, a great challenge for millions of people. Because of the unprecedented scope of lockdown, it offers a unique opportunity to examine social interaction.

 It is easy to see how lockdown was a difficult time for many. A time of loneliness, fear, and uncertainty. The church, usually able to welcome people in times of crisis to provide support and comfort were forced to adhere to restrictions of capacity limits, social distancing, and isolation. This made it difficult or impossible to physically welcome a congregation and led to an interruption of established interactions with place, things, and people. The church, faced with radically changed conditions was forced to find new and creative ways to maintain belonging.

So, as we are more or less back to normal, it is time to look back on lockdown and ask, what have we learnt? What have we learnt about preserving and recultivating a sense of belonging? Can we use the experiences of lockdown as a lens to critically examine previous assumptions about the key components of belonging? Can we identify new possible factors for the cultivation of a sense of belonging? Doing this we might be able to gain a deeper understanding of belonging, something which might be more important now than ever before.

1.2 Aim of study

The aim of this study is to critically examine the assumed key components of the cultivation and retention of a sense of belonging.

1.3 Research questions

How do the congregants describe their belonging and how did lockdown and other restrictions affect the congregant's sense of belonging?

Leaning on the experiences of lockdown what can be learned about the assumed fundamental key conditions of creating and maintaining a sense of belonging?

2. Literature review

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a general understanding of previous research on belonging of relevance for this study. The participants in this study exists in a specific context, the church, where several dimensions matter for belonging. One of these being religious conviction, experienced as faith. Research dealing with matters of different dimensions of religiosity and belonging is therefore presented separately.

2.1 Belonging: Initial definitions

The literature on belonging is broad and theoretically diverse with authors approaching the topic from many different perspectives and with little integration across these perspectives. Due to this diversity the concept of belonging has been defined in many different ways (e.g., Goodenow, 1993; Malone et al., 2012; Nichols & Webster, 2013). In general, when describing a sense of belonging one refers to feelings of connectedness and mattering (Strayhorn 2019: 2). The concept of social connectedness, understood as positive connections to others, or to a place, is frequently used to measure a sense of belonging (Fernández et al., 2023; Grieve & Kemp, 2015; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Mahar et al., 2014). Mattering, is understood as the feeling of being important to others and that one is an integral part of the systems which surrounds them (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, Hagerty et al., 1992). A sense of belonging can also be viewed in a larger motivational framework as in Strayhorn's

2018 study on College Students' Sense of Belonging. In this study Strayhorn concludes that the sense of belonging is undeniably critical for student´s learning and development.

Maslow´s theory on the hierarchy of needs might be one of the most widely known theory regarding belonging. According to Maslow (1943) human needs can be depicted as hierarchical levels of relative prepotency within a pyramid. Unfulfilled needs will be perceived by the individual experiencing them as something lacking and a desire to fill the void will arise i.e., the individual will be motivated to act. In order to attend to needs higher up in the pyramid the needs lower down must first be satisfied. From the bottom and upwards in the hierarchy, the needs identified as fundamental, are: *Physiological* (breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep), *Safety* (health, employment, property, family, social stability), *Love and belonging needs* (friendship, intimacy, sense of connection). Maslow´s theories are supported by several other studies concluding that the need to belong is stemming from deep inside our human biology and almost all people spontaneously seek to satisfy this need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Slavich & Cole 2013). When Tay and Diener (2011: 361f) tested Maslow's theory they concluded that psychosocial needs, such as the need to belong seemed to be fulfilled even though more fundamental needs such as food or shelter remained unmet. The need to belong might be just as fundamental as our need of food, water, and physical safety from harm (see also: Baumeister and Leary 1995:498).

The unfulfillment of the need to belong have been linked to a multitude of negative consequences. To mention a few, higher levels of mental and physical illness and impaired ability to cope with stress (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995:9; Baumeister & Leary, 1995: 51; Hawkley & Capitanio, 2015; Berkman & Glass, 2000; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; O'Donovan et al., 2010). The need to belong is a strong human motivator, and thus influence our behavior (Maslow 1943; Strayhorn 2019: 4). Our brains are wired to systematically identify and avoid behaviors which might have a negative impact on our belonging. The need to belong can therefore be understood as a regulator of social interaction and crucial for social functioning (Slavich, 2020; Hagerty et al., 1996:235ff). Many studies on belonging focus on the impact of belonging on an individual level. But there are some studies who highlights the risks of not belonging on community levels, of which a majority relate to migrant communities (Li, 2019; Lincoln et al., 2022; Barwik & Berman, 2019; Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015). Some of the risks recognized are

radicalization, exclusion, marginalization, and violence towards minorities. Studies which can be interpreted as examining the consequence of unfulfilled belonging on a macro level generally use the phrases inclusion or exclusion from social relationships or social connections (Putnam, 2000; Hansen et al., 2021; Renström et al. 2021). Some of the risks highlighted in these studies are eroded trust in public institutions, lower levels of citizen participation and political involvement. Putnam (2000) concludes that the lack of frequent and positive face- to-face social interaction, which also is identified by several researchers as fundamental for a sense of belonging, have negative effects on crime rates and the economy.

2.2 Creating belonging

Many studies on belonging focus on how the emergence of a sense of belonging and the emergence of a sense of self is interconnected. This is done by examining interaction within given social dynamics and how these are facilitated or hindered by self-identification factors (Slavich, 2020; Allen, 2020; Kern et al., 2020; Allen et al. 2021). Through a sense of belonging, a human can for example experience being valued or important for another human being. Through this they can create strong interpersonal attachments which are associated with finding life meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013:1418f; Hagerty et al., 1992:173f; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Haslam et al. 2022). Some studies suggest that the sense of belonging vary depending on situations and experiences and the individual´s perception of those situations (Ma, 2003; Sedgwick & Rougeau, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Certain factors outside the individual are therefore crucial for the individual´s sense of belonging. One such factor is the response from individuals in the group to which the individual claims or seeks belonging. Several studies, for example Baumeister & Leary (1995) conclude that these necessary responses are responses characterized by affection. They also need to be frequent (Ibid; Hagerty et al. 1992).

In literature on community psychology and environmental psychology, some perspectives of a sense of belonging are applied to theories of place and place-identity. A place can according to Toolis (2017:186f) facilitate a sense of belonging through shared cultural, historical, and political meaning, narratives, and activities. A church building for example, is infused by different meanings, (religious, cultural, historical, or political) and can therefore be regarded as an arena for place-identity making. The importance of place when it comes to belonging have been studied particularly in minorities and other groups who have been historically marginalized by mainstream cultures (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; O'Leary, 2020). Other

studies argue that the link between feelings of belonging to a place and processes of self-formation although not obvious are mutually implicated. Therefore, the question *Who am I?* cannot be isolated from the question *Where do I belong?* (Antonsich, 2010; Loader, 2006: 25).

2.3 Post-COVID belonging

As this study is being concluded, in June of 2023, COVID-19 is no longer considered a public health emergency (WHO 2023-06-03). Given the short time that has past, since the WHO declaration and most restriction lifts the effects of lockdown are still being examined. What is already clear is that the COVID-19 pandemic has had huge impacts on belongness and adjacent phenomena like social interaction, social connectedness, and loneliness. Studies examining these factors among different populations found that lockdown posed a threat to the sense of belonging for students (Tice et al., 2021), the elderly (Derrer-Merk et al., 2022), the young, and those living alone (Caro et al., 2022). Within all populations the lack of face-to-face interactions was highlighted as a great challenge. The negative consequences of the lack of face-to -face interactions were to some extent mitigated through remote interaction which in turn had positive effects on the retention of a sense of belonging. Derrer-Merk et al (2022) found that amongst the elderly some followed the recommendations of social distancing more strictly than the governments' advice. Due to fear of getting infected some of then continued to avoid social interactions even after the restrictions were lifted making it difficult to re-connect and casing gaps in their sense of belonging.

2.4 Religion and belonging

Several studies has been done on faith and belongingness. Most of which conclude a positive relation between faith and a sense of belonging. Newham & Graham (2018:1) concludes in their examination of religious adherence and well-being that religion can "fulfill needs such as a sense of belonging and community affiliation, which promote well-being*"*. Groups sharing a cosmic narrative have a potentially unique advantage in cultivating feelings of belonging for members (Stroope 2011: 583). Through the perspective of the believer, a sense of belonging can be understood as an experience of a metaphysical connection with a being that exists at a cosmic level (Hagerty et al 1992:174). The Christian narrative of belonging could function as a warrant of belonging even in times when the believer is unable to take part

of shared rites or access places of faith, which are factors that enhance a sense of belonging (Krause, 2002; Krause & Bastida, 2009; Stroope, 2011). Many biblical texts affirm belonging (e.g., Rom 12:5, Gal 6:10, 1 Cor. 12.). When in need of confirmation of belonging, it is reasonable to assume that the believer turns to these specific parts of scripture. This does not however, necessarily mean that the narrative alone is enough to support the development and retention of a sense of belonging. Most people belonging to religious groups did not fully understand the theological belief structures of their own religion. They were on the other hand, well aware of who in their community belonged to which religion (Baumeister & Leary 1995:522). Many early social theorists argued that social ties in church were the very essence of religion itself. Simmel (1905: 366) stated for example that faith, which is to be regarded as the essential or the substance of religion is first a relation between human beings. The sacredness ascribed to the relationship between the believer and God infuse interhuman attachments in faith communities. Thus, human interaction can be understood as mimesis of divine mysteries (Berger 1967:38). A full separation between faith narratives and human interaction is difficult. Lockdown, enforcing a separation between the two therefore offers a unique opportunity to examine faith and belonging.

2.4 The contributions of this study

Regardless of faith, religious individuals generally gain a sense of belonging trough religion (Stroope, 2011; Gebauer & Maio, 2012). Christian precepts, all though these may vary between different churches and traditions, require believers to gather on a regular basis. This might be in home groups, every Sunday during mass or other regular activities. This coincide with Baumeister & Leary's (1995) theory that frequency and stability is necessary to gain a sense of belonging. During ordinary circumstances, based on the theories of belonging it is reasonable to assume that the frequent gathering is an important factor in creating a sense of belonging within a congregation. As a result of COVID-19 forced-isolation policies in England, churches were closed. Thus, church leadership were challenged to find new ways to maintain the social ties within their congregations. This provides a unique opportunity to examine and question assumptions about the cultivation and retention of a sense of belonging. A single study of this scope is far from enough to grasp the amplitude of what could be learned from lockdown, but it aims to be a contribution to the well of knowledge on belonging. A sense of belonging matters for an individual's sense of meaning, general wellbeing, and social functioning it is therefore of high relevance for social work. A deeper
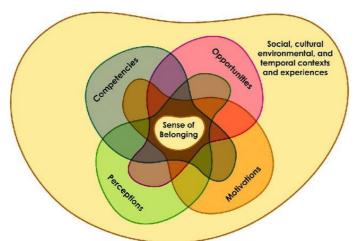
understanding of the dynamics of belonging could be of use when working with induvial clients suffering from loneliness, social isolation, marginalization, or feelings of hopelessness. The role of civil society actors of social work in Sweden, which includes a variety of faith-based organizations, is changing. These organizations already find themselves covering more and more human needs previously covered by public welfare support (Harju, Hjort & Montesino 2010:36ff). With this in mind, understanding faith and religious communities as factors for belonging and social wellbeing could be beneficial for both the faith-based organizations themselves, public welfare agencies and their cooperation.

3. Theory

The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with knowledge about the theories that are of relevance for this study. Allen et, al and their theory on the dynamics of belonging is central. As demonstrated in the literary review a sense of belonging is assumed variable and depending on regular interaction which provides social and emotional feedback. Lockdown is understood in this study as a break in the ongoing assumed necessary preconditions for a sense of belonging, both to emerge and to be retained. The theories presented were chosen to make use of this specific temporal circumstance and thus theories regarding the dynamic processes of belonging were recognized as suitable. Initially Maslow´s theory on belonging as a fundamental need and source of motivation was considered. However, even though belonging might seem like a subjective feeling it exists within and depends upon social dynamics. Maslow´s theory might be sufficient for exploring the belonging needs within the individual, but it does not consider the social systems within which the individual exists. Being a fundamental need, just like food or shelter, it is strongly dependent on an individual's society (Tay & Diener 2011: 361f). The chosen theory, Allen et al., take individual or internal variables such as motivation into consideration as well as external. Antovsky´s Sense of coherence (SOC) theory is presented in short as a SOC just as a sense of belonging is a lifelong and often overlapping dynamic process (Meier Magistretti 2022:120).

3.1 The dynamics of belonging

Allen et al. (2021:91ff) suggest that belonging is to be understood as a social dynamic system supported by four components, illustrated in Figure 1.

(1) Competencies for belonging (skills and abilities).
(2) Opportunities to belong (enablers, removal/reduction of barriers).
(3) Motivations to belong (inner drive).
(4) Perception of belonging (cognitions, attributions, and feedback mechanisms).

These components interrelate by reinforcing and influencing one another over time. As an individual moves through different social, environmental, and temporal contexts the interconnection between the components decide their sense of belonging.

3.1.1 Competencies for belonging

The first component necessary for belonging to emerge is *competencies*. Meaning a set of skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging. These are both subjective and objective. Skills enable the individuals to relate to others, identify with their cultural background, develop a sense of identity, and connect to a place. Competencies enable the individual to ensure that their behavior is consistent with group social norms, align with cultural values, and treat the place with respect. Most people can according to the authors, develop skills to improve their ability to connect with people, objects, and places. Because of the social nature of the competencies necessary to develop a sense of belonging, the use of them may be socially reinforced through acceptance and inclusion. A sense of belonging may therefore in turn assist and inform the individual's use of the socially appropriate skills.

3.1.2 Opportunities to belong

The second component suggested is *opportunities*, meaning the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable the cultivation of a sense of belonging. One could think of this component as the soil in which the seeds of belonging are sown. Without this component neither competency nor motivation to belong are of any use for the individual. An opportunity to belong could be understood as an opportunity to connect with others. The connections among individuals, the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust make out the content of what Putnam refers to as social capital (Putnam 2000:26-27). Putnam make a distinction between *bridging* and *bonding* of social capital. Bonding (or exclusive) social capital is about the connections found within a community of people sharing similar characteristics or background (Ibid: 31-32f). Bonding social capital is referred to as exclusive as it is an inward-looking process which focus on strengthening already existing bounds and/or reinforce exclusive identities within homogeneous groups. Bonding creates a "sociological superglue" of strong in-group bonding but might also create out-group antagonism by purpose or unintentionally (Ibid). Bridging social capital on the other hand creates broader social networks and is also referred to as inclusive. This occurs whenever there is an opportunity for an individual to interact with another such as at sports events, political manifestations, or public celebrations (Ibid). Bonding and bridging of social capital are often done simultaneously. Some connections could be motivated by the sense of not belonging. Thus, leading the individual to seek for alternative and possibly problematic contexts for belonging such as cults, radicalized political groups, or gangs (Allen et al. 2021: 93).

3.1.3 Motivations to belong

The third component *motivations* is described as the need or desire to connect with others. These motivations vary among individuals due to psychological function or sociocultural preconditions. It refers to the fundamental need for people to be accepted, belong, and seek social interactions and connections (Leary & Kelly, 2009). However, a lack of motivation to seek out belonging might be caused by traumatic circumstances or repeated rejection (Allen et al. 2021: 93-94).

3.1.4 Perceptions of belonging

The fourth and last component is *perception*, a person´s subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences. An individual with the motivation, competency, and opportunity to belong might still express dissatisfaction with their belonging. Humans constantly consciously or unconsciously evaluate if they belong. The subjective experience and perception of these experiences act as a feedback mechanism letting the induvial know if they fit in or not (Walton & Brady 2017). Past experiences of rejection could, according to Allen et al. (2021) cause someone to question their belonging. A individual who experiences repeated rejection could become viewed by themselves and others as not socially acceptable. This negative perception of the self or others can undermine motivation to belong.

3.2 Cohesion and Meaning

 In 1979 Aaron Anotonovsky introduced the term salutogenesis, which has come to refer to a core concept in the sense of coherence (SOC) model (Mittelmark 2022: 3). Antonovsky defined SOC as: *a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement* (Antonovsky 1987:19). The three interrelated components of the SOC are in this formulation, comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility is a cognitive component and manageability has to do with coping mechanisms (Gassne 2008:27f). Meaningfulness, ascribed as the most important component by Antonovsky himself, is a motivation or emotion component. Together these components reflect the coping capacity of people to deal with stressors. Individuals with higher levels of SOC should be better equipped to deal with stressors due to their greater ability to retain and foster health and well-being (Ibid).

Many of the COVID-19 containment measures radically transformed people´s everyday environmental stimuli as they were confined to their homes or unable to move freely and take part of known activities. Another transformation of environmental stimuli is having to relate to the frequent messages regarding the spread and consequences of the virus. Transforming

places, contexts, and people functioning as resources in the dealing with stressors to potential dangers. All these changes and other pandemic generated stressors such as becoming sick, negative financial impacts, and uncertainty posed considerable challenges to people's psychological well-being. Individuals with a strong SOC was found in a study by Barni et al., (2022) to better cope with stressors and traumatic experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feelings of belonging to a group can provide life with meaning in various ways such as helping individuals create a shared social identity and allowing them to pursue higher order collective goals (Lambert et al. 2013). It is also likely that a sense of belonging to a large social group plays a particularly strong role in contributing to the experience of meaningfulness (Ibid). The development of a strong SOC is defined as a lifelong learning process (Meier Magistretti 2022:120). It is therefore possible that an individual, with a strong sense of belonging could exit lockdown with a stronger SOC. Their sense of belonging might not only provide them with meaningfulness during the pandemic, but also with an enduring feeling of confidence in their available resources to cope with future stressors.

3.3 Theoretical/Analytical Framework

The results are presented with headlines corresponding to belonging in different times. These being before, during and during/after lockdown. Under the first headline, *defined belonging*, belonging is defined by the participants. This is to be considered as a starting point or a before in relation to lockdown. Belonging is understood independently of lockdown and the aim is to identify essential factors of belonging.

As we move forward on the timeline to the headline *threatened belonging*. Here the aim is to identify how Lockdown affected the participant's sense of belonging. We can for example assume that lockdown and other restrictions challenged many people's sense of belonging as the opportunities to belong was severely limited or changed from actual face to face interaction to digital interaction. Some might be excluded from digital interaction due to the lack of access to technology, but it might also encourage development of new skills. The insecurities arising from these changes could lead to the perception of not belonging, if I cannot adapt to the new way of the group, then do I truly belong in the group? This in turn,

could have a negative effect on the perception of belonging and therefore posing a risk to the motivation to belong.

The third headline, *establishing belonging*, covers the time when lockdown is recognized as a threat to belonging, this happens at different points in actual time, but is presented as simultaneously to facilitate an easier reading. This section has dual purposes. Firstly, to examine if and how new approaches to the creation and maintenance of belonging were identified and applied. Secondly, to identify what was learnt about belonging and if this had any impact on the understanding of belonging and its essential factors.

4. Method

To test out the assumed components of belonging in real life would be difficult, if not impossible. It would also be ethically indefensible. The conditions needed would mean for example coordinating communities of faith to close their buildings, cancel their meetings, stop the execution of rites of importance such as weddings and funerals, and subjecting study participants to forced isolation. However, as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic governments all over the world found themselves forced to subject their citizens to these conditions. One way to view lockdown is therefore to view it as a belongingness experiment. In this chapter I will discuss methodological approaches including research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods and analysis strategy. I will also elaborate on ethical considerations and on my role and some challenges during the process. Thoughts on possible weaknesses and limitations will be interwoven in the text.

4.1 Research design

Within social science there is a great variation of research traditions and methodological standpoints which reveals the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher (Eliasson-Lappalainen et al. 2008:17ff). Simplified, these different approaches could be divided into two research traditions; qualitative and quantitative methods, each with their own distinctive characteristics and challenges (Bryman 2018:61ff). Because of the abstract concept of a sense of belonging and the difficulties respondents experience with concepts as identity and belonging in surveys a qualitative approach was found best suited (White & Argo 2009).

In qualitative research of the challenges to quality and credibility are due to the limitations of reliability and validity (Ibid: 484ff). This is because findings cannot be generalized to a study population or community. However, Gobo (2004: 405) argues social significance is what validates qualitative research rather sample sizes. If the results can be applied to understand explain patterns of human behavior and interaction, they are to be considered valid. Flyvbjerg (2004:395) even argues that one single strategically chosen case might be enough to validate a study. The participants and context (lockdown) of this study was strategically chosen to benefit from the force of example. The communities the participants belong to have, for a long time, made intentional efforts to create and maintain belonging. These efforts are made in interaction with an ongoing reflection and dialogue on belonging motivated by faith narratives. This means that members of faith communities are likely to have both great awareness of, and unique perspectives on belonging. In order to achieve reliability, this study has been conducted with rigorous reflexivity, transparency, and carried out in settings chosen by the participants to ensure their comfort. The interview guide was designed to encourage the participants to talk freely and openly about their lived experiences.

4.2 Semi-structured interviews as a method

Adhering to the aim and objectives posed in this study, qualitative methods, specifically a hermeneutic phenomenological approach has been applied. Central for this approach is the aim of trying to understand the complexity of human life, beyond what is quantifiable, and seek out the essence of a chosen phenomenon, in this study, a sense of belonging (Fuster 2019). A suitable method when aiming to gain an understanding about how people perceive their life in different situations and contexts is interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:15; Miller & Glassner 2016:51ff).

The topics discussed in this study are topics which many might find difficult to verbalize. The abundance of material dealing with matters of faith and the diversity in belongingness theories surely attest to this difficulty. This calls for openness and flexibility in the interviews making open or semi-structured interviews, rather than structured interviews, suitable alternatives (Bryman 2018:562ff). With open interviews, given the width of the topics and the many possible interpretations there is a risk that the amount of data exceeds what is reasonable and manageable. Semi-structured interviews, allows for an open investigation of interpretations and meanings at the same time as it allows for the holding of direction and for

some comparability. This method also allows for the researcher to approach their research questions from different perspectives and through different theoretical lenses (Ruslin et al. 2022:25).

The interviews were carried out during two different trips to England after most of the pandemic restrictions was lifted. The first in April 2022 and the second in June the same year. Regrading restriction adherence the different congregations where able to make slight adjustments in accordance with local needs and traditions. During my first trip I had the privilege to join one of the represented congregations as they celebrated communion together for the very first time after the COVID-19 outbreak. During my second trip most churches were mostly back to normal. Some COVID-19 adaptions such as an increased use of hand sanitizer or arrows directing the congregation how to move throughout the church with retained distance remained. Carrying out the interviews after lockdown, rather than during, or before, during and after most likely effected the data. Asking participants to describe something in retrospect rather than here and now means depending on memory. Our memories of something in the past are recalled amidst the present which means that the past might be re-evaluated from the present position (Randall & Phoenix 2009:127). In the participants present position, they know that lockdown is over, they have full access to their churches again, and they are able to physically interact with others. This knowledge which was inaccessible for them during lockdown might affect the data as some of the threats experienced to belonging have been mitigated. A possible consequence of this is the possibility that some of the negative experiences of lockdown has been toned down. Context also matters for memory recalling (Ibid). The extent of remaining COVID-19 adoptions in the interview place, how many lockdowns one has been through and attitudes towards the restrictions might also affect the memories of lockdown and therefore data.

During a semi-structured interview, the interviewee can express their experiences and thoughts in interaction with the researcher (Andersson & Swärd 2008:236ff). This approach demands that the researcher is aware of and is transparent about their own experiences and preconceptions as these influence the interaction with the participants and the interpreting of their accounts. This awareness, understood by Göransson (2019:37f) as reflexivity is a significant as the researcher influence is inevitable factor in qualitative research. It is not, however, necessarily a factor which dilutes the validity of the results of said research. Rather, it could be used as a tool to enhance the quality of the data as the transparency builds trust

between the participant and the researcher. Trust and willingness to open up to the researcher is a key determinant in data collection (Ibid:39). Each individual participant contributes with their own experiences, at the same time as they share commonalities with other participants. The individual statements are understood as the truth, meaning all participants experiences are valid, undeniable and therefore can be used as means to gain a broader and deeper understanding of a matter (Creswell & Poth 2017: 76ff). Through clarifying and being aware of the influence of my position and my own experiences at every stage of the research process, the aim is to ensure results solely derived from analysis of gathered data.

4.3 Sampling strategy

4.3.1 Participants

Within qualitative research there are no set standard sampling strategy regarding number of participants or how to choose participants (Bryman 2018:495ff). This includes phenomenology and a study can range from a single participant to hundreds of people (Creswell & Poth 2017: 159). The number of interviews needed for the study is dependent on context and the quality of the case and could therefore not be assumed beforehand. A smaller sample size gives the researcher the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of the topic and the participants experiences. On the other hand, the smaller sample size might not be enough to reach saturation of data. In order to do justice to the data collected and due to resource management 20 interviews of various length have been conducted in this study.
The participants in this study are identified as clergy or congregants. *Clergy* in used to identify those participants who are formal leaders of a congregation such as pastors or priests. *Congregants* are those participants who self-identify as belonging to a congregation. A congregant can lead activities or groups in the congregation, but they generally do so on a volunteer basis. A smaller number of interviews might have been enough to ensure saturation of data. However, as the participants were eager to contribute and the researcher being able to spend full days conducting and preparing for interviews, there was time enough to include all 20 participants. In this study a purposive sampling strategy is used to identify suitable participants based on criteria relevant for the purpose of the study (Bryman 2018:498). The following criteria was considered relevant.

1. *The participant must be in age of majority.*

    This criterion was set to avoid interviewing minors, not because their experiences of belonging are uninteresting or unimportant, but because of the difficulty of attaining an informed consent.

2. *The participant must speak English.*

    Speaking English was set as a criterion to enable interviews without involving an interpreter which would be costly and time consuming. This does unfortunately exclude interviews with non-English speaking congregants and their experiences of belonging which is one of this study´s limitations.

3. *The participant must identify as a member, clergy or as belonging to a congregation.*

    The participants belong to a range of different types of congregations, (Methodist, Church of England, Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal) some of the churches are territorial, meaning they have geographical borders. This does not necessarily mean a member experiences belonging to the congregation in which they reside. Members are free to visit, participate in activities, and take on volunteer positions in any congregation.

4. *The participant must have spent time in lockdown or lockdown´s.*

    Depending on their geographical location and time spent in England most participants in the study experienced multiple lockdowns of various length. During one interview it became clear that the participant (IP 1) did not fulfill this criterion as they had recently arrived in England. I decided to ask complementary questions on the topic of belonging and will include the data from this interview as it holds relevance for the study.

5. *The participant must be able to read, understand and sign the information and consent forms.*

    This criterion is set to comply with the principles of good research ethics.

4.3.2 The participants in this study

The participants in this study represent two different groups, congregants, and clergy. Within these groups there is a great variation in age, church belonging, and social circumstances. This variation is intentional and strived for in order to obtain different perspectives on belonging. The social life of the participants in this study varies. For some of them their congregation is their main social circle and closest of friends whilst for some it is one of many groups to which they sense belonging. The level of participation also varies amongst the participants with some being in their churches several times a week, leading activities and having other responsibilities. Some of the participants come only for Sunday service, only for choir or other activities. Some of the clergy have not chosen to work in their respective congregations but are sent there whilst some independently applied for the leadership position. A list of the participants can be found in appendix 3.

4.3.3 Initial contact

To reach out to participants fulfilling the criteria I contacted two clergy members via e-mail. The first in a congregation I spent some time in during a previous trip to England. After a few zoom calls where ethics and practicalities were discussed, they agreed to invite me to the congregation. I spent four days in this congregation, joining the members in various activities such as prayers, a cleaning day, a game night, and Sunday service. The six participants from congregation A were asked directly by me, with one exception, if they wanted to be a part of the study. The exception is participants 5 and 6 who approached me after the service in which the reverend had encourage the congregants to join. After checking of the criteria, the participants were free to choose where and when they wanted to be interviewed. The second contact made, is a member of clergy who visited the church where I am employed as a deacon a few years ago. After a few zoom meetings they used their network to get me in contact with participants belonging to various church traditions. Participation was confirmed by e-mail or in direct contact. After checking the criteria, the participants were free to choose where and when they wanted to be interviewed.

4.3.4 Conducting the interviews

In total 19 interviews were conducted, IP 5 and 6 was interviewed together in their home. Each interview took approximately 30-90 minutes each. During the interview it was made clear to the participants that they had the right to not answer questions, take a break, and end the interview, all at their own discretion. The participants were given an information sheet (appendix 1a) and signed a consent sheet (appendix 1b) before the interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews are suitable method when aiming to examining how people experience their own life and different situation (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:15). Allen et al. (2021) study on belonging informed the design of the interview guide (appendix 2) but the participants were also encouraged to freely go into detail and dept on topics of their choosing. The interview guides were used in all the interviews to make sure that as many as possible perspectives on belonging would be covered. When necessary, in order to achieve a flow in the interviews the interview guide was not strictly followed but adjusted in accordance with which topic the participants chose to touch on (Bryman 2018:581f). The questions have also been altered during interviews to allow for follow up questions to gain a deeper understanding and verify the participants statements when necessary (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:46f, 79). During the interviews I made sure to encourage the participants to express themselves freely through verbal and non -verbal cues such as nods and smiles to reduce tension and create space for the participants to self-interpret their statements as suggested by Hermanns (2004). All participants were eager to share their experiences, and none chose to not answer any questions, this might be due to the topic being mainly framed in a positive sense as it does examine the feeling of belonging rather than experiences of the opposite which might be more difficult to talk about. Some participants expressed joy over being able to contribute to the study, and an appreciation over being given an opportunity to reflect over or express their belonging.

4.4 Data analysis

The source of this this research is the conducted and manually transcribed interviews. The preparations for the interviews were done parallel to the literary review and consideration of relevant theories. The analysis itself is not driven by testing of theory-derived hypotheses but found literature and considered theories did influence the construction of the discussion guide, the researcher's prior knowledge and expectations. I must therefore consider myself an

accessory in the generation, construction, and interpretation of data (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2015:28ff). Applied theories were chosen after the gathering and analysis of data. During the analysis the considered theories served as tools of exploring and making sense of themes found during interpretation of the data. The analytical approach is an abductive approach, meaning the interpretation of the data is done in inter-action with considered theories, including acts of both induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:12ff) A inductive research approach allows the researcher to fully concentrate on the lives and experiences of the participants (Patton 2015: 545). However, without any theoretical foundation whatsoever the study is at risk to become too wide and general. Due to the rather diffuse phenomena "sense of belonging" there is a risk of a "common sense" understanding, making it difficult to identify possible entries of deeper exploration and understanding (Seale 2004: 387).

The generated empirical data have been transcribed as closely as possible to the original recordings. Some details have however, been ablated or altered to fulfill the requirement of confidentiality. As gender is not a factor considered in this study all participants are referred to as the gender-neutral pronoun, they. Details which might serve as indicators for what type of congregation the participant belong to or work for are ablated when possible. One of the most common and flexible approaches to analysis of qualitative data is according to Bryman (2018) thematic analysis. A method which allows the researcher to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) and various aspects of these themes within the available data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of analysis was done in accordance with the phases suggested by Braun &Clarke (Ibid).

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data.
The initial step of the analysis is what Braun & Clarke refers to as an immersion. At this stage the transcribed data was re-read several times, while actively looking for meanings and patterns. Even though all data was collected and processed by me this step was necessary to gain a comprehension of the depth and breadth of the material.

2: Generating initial codes.
During this phase of the analysis the list of initial ideas were manually coded using highlighters and making notes in the margin of the printed transcripts. The codes and their attributed color were written down in a separate document to make sure the coding was kept consistent throughout the data.

3: Searching for themes.

The codes were grouped considering how they may combine to form an overarching theme. Braun & Clarke (2006) recommend using visual representation to help with this step which I did.

4: Reviewing themes.

These themes where then refined through a review process in which some of the themes were bundled, some differentiated and some abandoned. Each theme and the selected statements were transferred to separate documents where each statement was reviewed. Statements in contradiction with other statements but on the same theme were kept and marked as they can provide interesting perspective on the theme.

5: Defining and naming themes.

After identifying the essence of the themes, I did one final re-reading of the transcripts in full and added some statements into each document. The working title themes were *Family*, *Place*, *Identity*, *Faith*, *Threats*, *Access*, *Teaching* and *Intimacy*. The presented statements are chosen depending on how well they illustrate the theme. Even though my ambition was to equally present all the participant´s statements some participants are more frequently cited than other´s due to empirical gravity.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations of this study have been informed by the general rules of good research practice set by the Swedish research council (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). These practices include truthfulness and open accounts of methods and results, commercial interest, or other associations. There are no commercial interests of this study. When discussing the matter of association, it is important to review the researcher's role as a deacon. From my point of view serving the church does not include shying away from honest and critical self-reflection, as these are tools for improvement and development. A full and transparent presentation of all data and of the analysis is therefore not only favorable to ensure scientific quality but also in line with my personal and professional interest.

Whenever humans are involved in research, and potential sensitive data is gathered, a deep consideration to ethics are required. In this study the participants disclosed information of

such nature which was not expected to cause any substantial distress or harm. The researcher and the participant might however have different opinions on what constitute as sensitive or harmful information and careful considerations has been made to make sure to avoid judgmental or critical questions and statements (Bryman 2018:566f). To ensure no harm for the participants effort have been made to achieve a balance between being supportive and objective as this is necessary to achieve good quality data (Ibid:84f). Considerable attention has been paid to ethical considerations in matters regarding the social relationship between the researcher and the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:32f;77ff). All the participants in the study were informed of the fact that I am employed as a deacon in the church of Sweden. Even though my role as a researcher was made clear trough the information sheet and when initiating the interviews, this had some effects on the interviews. The first effect noticeable was me finding it somewhat challenging to balance the role between deacon and researcher. This was as especially clear when the participants shared experiences that I think of as difficult or when the interviews were conducted in church facilities similar to the facilities where I work. In these situations, I found the interview guide to be a good tool, helping me recalibrate where to steer the flow of the interviews. Data collected in the situations where I found myself challenged in my role have been filtered out or selected with care only when relevant for the analysis.

Most of the participants belong to Church of England where the role of a deacon is similar to the role of a deacon in Church of Sweden**.** I made sure to familiarize myself with the church of England before conducting the interviews. Due to these similarities, some assumptions on my familiarity with church structures and church specific language were noticed. This mostly had a positive effect for the flow of the conversation. Being a deacon also had positive effects on gaining access to the congregations. I was trusted to use church spaces and was included in activities. This made congregants aware of my presence and encouraged them to make contact.

Before conducting the interviews, an information sheet and consent form were provided and signed by the participants (see appendix 1 and 2). This is crucial as it ensures the participants the possibility to make a well-inform choice whether they wish to be a part of the study and under which conditions (Bryman 2018). The information sheet contained information about the purpose of the study, the conditions of participation and withdrawal, how the interviews would be conducted, possibility of declining answers, confidentiality, data collection and data

security. Confidentiality is an interesting aspect to this study. One might argue that the participants are not guaranteed full confidentiality as many of them either agreed to be a part of the study publicly or was recruited through contact persons. As the participants have volunteered to be a part of this study, how and when they disclose their choice to participate is not under the control of the researcher. Three of the participants expressed clearly that they gave statements they would not have if they were not under confidentiality. For these reasons, I have chosen to not disclose what type of congregation the participants belong to, neither their names or gender, nor geographical location. The participants will be presented as their alias IP (interview person) in an order different from that in which the interviews were conducted and are referred to as the gender-neutral pronoun, they. These measurements were implemented to limit the possibility that one can draw conclusions about the identity of the interviewees, even if for other interview persons, other members of the visited congregations or the contact persons.

Another important aspect of ethically conducted research is keeping the data collected well organized and safe. In this study this is ensured through keeping the collected data in password protected devices and files, deleting recordings after transcription, and only printing anonymized transcriptions of interviews while simultaneously saving the transcripts in a password protected file to make sure no data got lost.

5. Analysis

5.1 Defined Belonging

The purpose of this section is to examine how the participants describe their belonging and which factors they describe as crucial for the cultivation of said belonging.

5.1.1 Family

When asked to describe their belonging to the congregation several of the participants compered their sense of belonging to being part of a family. Some discussed how they feel close to their biological family, and how those emotional bonds are similar to the emotional bonds they felt towards their congregation. Others reflected on how being a part of the congregation felt like being a part of a family even if they do not have strong emotional links to their biological family.

IP 1: *I don´t know what you mean by the word congregation… but it´s like a small family.*

All the participants describing their belonging to the congregation as the belonging to a family do so while recounting family as something positive. As a context in which they are supported and cared for as well as feeling safe and protected.

IP 8: *I always call them my church family…. Because they are very protective of me, we're protective of each other.*

Generally, with exceptions such as in the case of adoption, when talking about an individual being part of a family, we understand this as belonging to a biological family or marital family. Being part of a family is in this sense belonging, which is justified or guaranteed by biology, or by law. A family member belongs to their biological family regardless of how they behave, if they wish to belong to the family or not, how other members behave or if others wish they did not belong. Even tough being part of a family functions as a guarantee of belonging, it does not guarantee a sense of belonging. IP 10 comments on the phrase church family, recognizing the fact that family does not always amount to an unequivocally positive sense of belonging.

IP 10: *It´s a nice phrase, isn´t it? "Church family" … Because it does denote a certain sense of belonging, of being part of something. But of course, families can be very mixed. Families can be extremely mixed and externally, not everyone in your family is well thought of, and not everyone in your family necessarily behaves in a way in which you would like them to behave. And there can be skeletons in the cupboard. And there can be all sorts of things. And there can be the ones that go off and don't want to be part of the family, and then they return, or they don't return.*

As IP 10 states the positives of belonging to a family, such as being cared for, feeling safe and protected is not guaranteed. Rather it is dependent on the acceptance, agreement, and compliance to a set of expectations on behavior and wanting to be a part said family. Even though several clergy members in this study recognize the existence of unspoken expectations of behavior, and could highlight some of them, none of the congregants did. Walton & Brady (2007) conclude that humans both consciously and unconsciously constantly evaluate if they belong. One could argue it´s possible to assume that some of the conditions for belonging are unconsciously processed. Through observation and imitation of the group behavior and the

individual's internal feedback (Ibid) the conditions for belonging are internalized, and so the behavioral norm is fulfilled. It is possible that the individual is unaware or unable to pinpoint these rules and expectations as they are so internalized. So taken for granted that they provoke no reaction whatsoever and only recognizable when broken (Finnimore & Sikkink 1998: 892). One of the expectations recognized by some of the clergy participants is the expectation of regular physical presence on members of the congregation. The absence of someone is not only noted but, in some cases, reported to the clergy. The expectation of physical presence can be experienced and interpreted in different ways. One way of interpreting them is as burdensome, demanding and possibly encroaching on private matters. It can also be interpreted as confirmation of belonging as the individual are a part of the social context even when not physically present.

IP 8: *But take, for example, this morning. I've not been coming as often on Saturday mornings, due to other circumstances. And I was greeted with…we were only saying the other day that we don't see as much of you, and we've missed you.*

Receiving help and support without asking for it is among some participants understood as being recognized as a part of something even when not physically present and being known and understood on a deep and intimate level. IP 4´s example of the care they receive from their congregation resembles to a certain extent, the way a loving parent would know and care for their child, who might not be able to fully express their needs.

IP4 *Ok, I've allowed you to care for me enough. But most people in this congregation aren't willing to accept that. So, they just continue to be like well, no, I'm also cooking dinner for you and walking you home and you have no say in this. So, I feel like extra cared for even when I haven't said I want it. Which to be honest, is a good thing, because I'm not very good at asking for it…. I have never up to this moment have had people that are so aggressively for me. Like genuinely 100% have my back…In this church. They say they're for you. And they fucking mean it…*

The belonging inherent in the phrase family is confirmed with practical experiences of care and support. IP 4 differentiates between their present congregation and previous ones, in *this* church. They then conclude that they are now in a context where the promise of support and care is backed up by actions. IP 4 sense of belonging is fulfilled not because of the knowledge of a social bond but by frequent and affectionate interactions with the other members of the

congregation (Baumeister & Leary 1995: 515). Reciprocal acts of care seem to work as confirmation of belonging. The acts of being cared for or caring for others is understood as a confirmation of a bond between the participant and the rest of the congregation, providing the feedback necessary for the induvial to determine if they fit in and belong (Allen et al. 2021: 94).

5.1.2 Home

Another reoccurring way to describe belonging to the congregation is by using phrases connected to home and the feelings connected to having a home like safety. Participants belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community and IP 1 newly immigrated to England turned out to emphasize home in their descriptions of their belonging. Therefore, their perspective and statements will be heavily featured in this section.

IP 7: *And for me, it's what the church should be, it's a safe place, it's a second home.*

In theories of place making researchers differentiate between *spaces* and *places* (Aguila et al. 2019: 256). A space is any physical space, a location, or a specific geographical area. A place on the other hand is still a location or specific geographical area but linked to the human experience of that space. The process of place-making is according to Toolis (2017) a person-centered process with emphasis on collaboration and community participation. A *place* is the aggregate of human interaction on an individual and on a community level, the design and use of space, as well as the residing ideas and stories of the place. As human thoughts and experiences cannot be understood aside from the settings in which they take place the physical church building plays a role in the cultivation and retaining of a sense of belonging (Toolis 2017:184ff). The church building is therefore simply not only a building but a *place* which can facilitate a sense of belonging, attachments, and purpose.

IP 4: *I was given keys during lockdown. So, this church was my refuge space, because you weren't allowed to go anywhere. But I could come here by myself. And I could sing when I couldn't sing in my flat because I had neighbors, and I couldn't do noise. But in here I could. So, I could come down here with my guitar or music and practice singing, because I had the keys. And so, it was like a little lockdown safe space. And I think I probably would have gone even more crazy if I didn't have that.*

For IP 4 who had been experiencing a lot of rejection in the past, something which could have a negative effect on their perception of self and motivation to belong, being given the keys to the church is a clear sign of confirmation of belonging (Allen et al. 2021: 93-94). This act communicates, we care, and you fit in. Acceptance and inclusion can be tools used in socially reinforcing the necessary competencies to develop a sense of belonging as they inform the individual´s use and development of the socially appropriate skills (Ibid). Using the church as a refuge space is making use of the church in accordance with the community narrative of this specific church and congregation as safe and welcoming. IP 4 is contributing and upholding the shared story and identity of the place. By doing so they become a part of the *we* of the place.

A place is formable. The church as place can therefore be understood and interpreted in many different ways depending on individual experience and preferences. But it can also be claimed by people or groups of people who do or wish to retell or rewrite the story of the place. The story of the place is in part the story of who belong and who does not belong (Toolis 2017). The church in which IP2 claim as their spiritual home was not until recently, according to some of the participants in this study, a place where members of the LGBTQIA+ community were able to claim belonging. This changed with new leadership, education, through incorporating symbols signaling inclusivity such as rainbow flags alongside already existing symbols, including queer theology in the church library and using gender neutral and inclusive language. The narrative of the place is now one in which IP2 can play a part.

IP 2: *It's an interesting space with all the kinds of pillars and things… And it´s such an interesting building historically. Which adds to… I mean, it's kind of like a queer building, because it doesn't conform to a kind of architectural norm… I´ve grown to really appreciate that haphazardness of the building.*

The visible efforts made by the church leadership to welcome and include a group of people who might not have sensed belonging before enables more people than before to experience what Toolis (2017:187) refers to as a sense of *insideness*. The idea of *insideness* (and outsideness) comes from the welsh geographer Relph. He claimed that when a person feels like they are rather here than there, safe rather than unsafe, and enclosed rather than exposed in a place a person feels inside a place. That the more profoundly inside a place a person feels, the stronger their identity will be with that place (Seamon & Sowers 2008). With the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in the church/place story they become insiders and as insiders

they are also given the right to claim and re-interpret other aspects of the place such as historical and cultural significance. This way the community creates an attachment to a place, the activities in that place and to the history of that place (Aguila et al. 2019:249). It also changes the narrative of the place, so the place is understood as a place of inclusion. IP 1 lacking historical claim to the place insert themselves in this chapter through a process of anthropomorphism of the church, where the building is described as a conversation partner to which they can have a relationship.

IP 1: *Because the church is old, I think. Even you touch the wall, or the bricks, you can feel that. Oh, I don't know how many years? Oh, are you? I really like it. I feel like there is life or there´s this thing. Not just a stone.*

Researcher: *What do you think it is? If not just a stone?*

IP 1: *A story, yes, a story and a connection. Something like that. How are you? How many wars you have experienced? How many renovations you have experienced? And you're still sitting here? … And, and just felt like have you are so sturdy, you're still standing here after so many years?*

In the conversation between IP 1 and the place IP 1 is the active partner. IP 1 is the one asking questions, expressing care and compliments the building. This could be interpreted as if IP 1 through their conversation with the building, claims a part in the story of the place. Through this they can gain equality with other´s who also are a part of the same story. Main & Sandoval (2004:83) found when looking at the relationship between place, identity, and agency that place belongingness had significant consequences for an individual´s wellbeing and sense of agency. The story of a place does not only tell a story about the physical building but about the surroundings, ideology, and the community. An individual belonging to a place is a part of and a carrier of this story. They simultaneously represent and reproduce the story through interaction with others and their communal actions. The story of a place to which an individual belongs also says something about who they are. The place you describe as home, where you belong, will therefore describe who you are (Ibid). Home can be understood as your childhood home or the home you created for your self as an adult. When you call a place home it says something about your fundamental identity formation and/or manifesting who you are and/or have chosen to be.

IP 6: *I remember going here as a young adult. And I always remember going for communion where the altar is now. You walked through there to go to communion, and there's a choir on either side. And they would be singing, it was a university, fantastic, choir. And as you walked through, it was like, whoa! It was like the best headphones ever. And I still get that, I still get that feeling of being 20 something again when I go in. So is a bit like going home, going back to roots, that kind of thing.*

Not only does IP 6 express their sense of belonging to a physical space right now but they also make connections to their past. At the time of the interview IP 6 was relatively new to their congregation. Through pointing out their previous belonging, they can interpret their return to the church as a sort of homecoming and claim present belonging.

5.1.3 Scripture

The idea of the church (as a faith fellowship) as a family, has theological bearing. As an example, according to Matthew 12: 48- 50: *He (Jesus) answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother*. (New King James Version). One of the most familiar and common prayers across different Christian denominations is *The Lord's prayer,* which starts with the words, Our Father…, indicating that those joining in this prayer share a father and therefore being siblings. The idea of the divine family as God the father, Jesus the brother (or in some cases the groom) and the church being the siblings (or the bride) of Jesus infuses sacredness to the interhuman relationships within the church making them a mimicry of divine relationships transcending the physical (Berger 1967:38). Belonging to a congregation is in this sense not dependent on shared spaces, frequency of meetings, group sizes or even knowing who the other individuals in the group are. Rather it is dependent on faith i.e., if God is my father, then my fellow Christians are my siblings and I belong with them regardless of if I meet them, know their name or is a part of other shared social structures. The recognition of that interhuman connection is a recognition of the divine connection.

When examining the phrase church family from the perspective of an admitted believer, their belonging is justified by God. This means that everyone who claims to share faith or that can be presumed to share faith through participating in certain activities, belong to the family.

IP 9: *Although you may have a shared faith, you may actually not very much like the other people. You love them in the best possible way, in Christ, but actually not get on with them very well in it in other respects. It's difficult. It's like families everywhere, isn't it? Some you get on well within your own family and some of you do not….*

In the statement above shared faith is described as a strong factor for identifying a group, and who belongs to that group. Expressions of faith and acts of faith could therefore be understood as significant for establishing belonging as these are acts of bonding social capital (Putnam 2000:26). Many of the participants expressed a strong sense of belonging when taking part of communal acts motivated by shared faith.

Researcher: *So, would worship be one of the situations or experiences where you feel like you belong to the congregation? Are there any other situations or activities?*

IP 3: *Yes… and I've been involved in Bible study groups and things, so I ended up leading a small group that was basically Bible study group. I think we are a community of faith held together by the gospel and sacrament…*

It is fair to assume most people taking part in church activities more or less do so because of their individual faith or persuasion, in which the interhuman connection could be considered an essential factor. Of course, participation could also be explained by other factors but when looking at the participants in this study some amount of religious conviction is expressed with the exception of IP 1. Even though shared faith and communal expressions of faith, particularly in smaller groups seems to be of importance to the participants sense of belonging it is not always expressed as an important factor. This is supported by Baumeister & Leary (1995:522), stating that most people belonging to religious groups are better at recognizing their religious community fellows than the theological belief structures of their own religion. This is illustrated by the experience of IP 10 below.

IP 10: *A few years ago, when there was a different minister, we had a survey of what people felt about the church, what people wanted in worship, and so forth. And in this questionnaire that we've put together quite carefully and then we analyzed the responses and the words people used. It was very interesting that things like warm welcome came up a lot, friendly, sociable, like to meet together, but the mentions of God, Bible study and the things which you would relate more to the faith side of church, were very, very low.*

It is interesting to note the recognition of two separated sides of church in this statement, that one could call a faith side, and a social side. Different words and actions serve as expressions of these sides. Faith is the foundation of and what separates a church from other social contexts. Without faith there is no church to which the participant could belong. This might be why acts of faith is distinguished from other acts in the church setting. The faith side could be understood as the guarantee of belonging to the church, much like biology or law guarantee an induvial belonging to a family. This belonging is signaled and confirmed through the participation of acts recognized as acts of faith. Such acts could be participating in bible studies, praying, going to mass, or serving the community in different ways. Weber (1978:399) stated that religious acts must be understood as is it understood by the religious and the meaning the religious attribute to the act. Religious acts should therefore not be separated from other acts, as they are both oriented to the experienced world of the performer. The social side of church, including acts like warmly greeting one another, spending time together and being friendly towards each other, could therefore also be understood as equal expressions of the individual's faith. A sense of belonging and a conviction of faith seems therefore to be informing and to some degree dependent on each other.

5.2 Threatened Belonging

The purpose of this section is to examine the effects of lockdown on the participants sense of belonging.

5.2.1 Uncertainty

The links between belonging and mental wellbeing have been thoroughly examined and defined (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al. 2021). Allen et al. (2021) also suggests the link is to some degree reversable. Some factors such as depression, other psychological dysfunction, isolation, and lacking opportunity to belong might affect the motivation to seek out connection to others. As the congregants were asked to describe how lockdown impacted their sense of belonging, it seems to be coinciding with other experiences during lockdown or during the pandemic as a whole. For example, feelings of depression, being lost, worry about loved ones and general uncertainty. Some participants expressed a worry that the effects lockdown and the isolation it enforced on them, would impact their belonging both during lockdown and after. This was explicitly expressed by the participants who were fairly new in their congregations.

IP1: *But if you stay inside you start to feel lonely, and when you feel lonely you start to stay inside. It´s like vicious circle.*

Involuntary loneliness has negative cognitive and emotional effects on human beings, including but not limited to changes in personality traits and behavior (Hawkley & Cacioppo 2010). In order to achieve a sense of belonging an induvial needs a certain set of competencies. These competencies are developed and refined in interaction with others (Allen et al. 2021: 92). The threat to belonging caused by lockdown therefore consists of the lack of opportunity to retain and refine the correct set of skills. If one is unable to break the cycle of loneliness and isolation it might lead to lasting mental states in which the induvial is consumed by negative thoughts of themselves and their ability to belong. Some of the participant´s found themselves wondering if they ever would make friends in the city, however they would dare to leave their home at all after lockdown was lifted, or however they still fitted into the congregation being unable to participate and keep up due to lacking technical know-how. The experience of loneliness is subjective and some individuals who experience it can be motivated to seek out and achieve a sense of belonging rather than surrendering to the cycle of isolation and loneliness (Allen et al. 2021: 93).

IP 4: *I feel lonely and isolated all the time anyway. I have a real, massive problem with loneliness. That is massively triggering for the trauma part of my brain. So, I feel like that even when I'm around people. And usually, I can spend a full day with somebody and go home really late at night, and I will still feel chronically lonely in that space of time. So lockdown was the fucking worst.*

A lacking sense of belonging and loneliness are often used interchangeably as they are in many ways overlapping constructs and understood as opposite ends to a continuum. The statement above might therefore seem contradictious as IP 4 have previously stated that their sense of belonging to the congregation is strong even though they feel lonely all the time. Their perception of belonging is separated from their perception of loneliness. Lim, et al (2021) suggests viewing loneliness and belonging as independent yet related constructs, both contributing to explain the complexities of human social needs. Seeking a refuge from loneliness IP 4 turns to people in the congregation rather than the God they believe is omnipresent. At first one might think of this in conflict with ideas about the relationship between God and the believer. However, it is not as one could understand the need to belong as of divine engineering. According to the creation myth in Genesis 2:18 God concludes "*it´s*

not good for the man to be alone". This is a quote depicting a time, when according to scriptures man is in close relationship with God. Meaning that even though connection is warranted through the God-human relationship, man is recognized as alone without human-to-human interaction. Seeking out human-to-human interaction during times of loneliness is in accordance with a divine plan and encouraged by scripture. It seems like IP 4 strong sense of belonging motivates behaviors, such as seeking out other people´s company, which mediate the possible negative effects of loneliness. During lockdown when unable to engage in a familiar matter in these behaviors they are ineluctably exposed to the painful and triggering experience of loneliness making it a difficult time. When reaching out to members or clergy of the congregation and they answer with care and support it functions as further feedback confirming belonging (Allen et al. 2021: 94). The participants who express a sense of belonging to their congregation all claim to receive care and support but also all claim to be the providers of care and support to other´s. The opportunity of reciprocal care is important for belonging as it makes the provider feel that they have earned their place in the group, that they deserve to be there, and they are likely to feel that the people at church need and depend upon them (Krause & Bastida 2011: 5f). Similar mechanics for the cultivation of a sense of belonging is being trusted with specific roles or tasks in the congregation.

IP 4: *I think when I'm involved in leading something, or somebody trusts me to do something in the church, because it's very difficult to lead, or be responsible for something without having a sense of belonging. You can't help run something and develop something, if you don't feel like you have ownership over it. Because it would be like going into somebody's house and cleaning up a bunch of stuff that doesn't belong to you, without asking, you just wouldn't do that. Unless you were comfortable enough in the house that you have a sense of ownership of it.*

Belonging in this statement is again associated with the idea of home, which can be understood as an environment providing the induvial with a sense of safety and identity. This makes the environment worthy of investment and engagement as they are meaningful to the individual and help them to make sense of who they are (Antonovsky 1987:19). The environment is not dependent only on the shape of the physical space. Environment is also created through acts carried out in or affiliated with a place and with a group preforming those acts (Toolis 2017:186f). Being trusted with responsibility of an act is therefore similar to the experience of being trusted with the care of a group member. They both can be interpreted as

a confirmation of belonging to the place or to the group. During lockdown the participants opportunities to perform these belonging confirming acts were limited or inoperable. Not being able to participate in the collaborative and on-going place making process and the inaccessible church building poses a threat to the sense of belonging (Toolis 2017:184ff). Although minor, it did cause confusion among some of the participants about their role and attachment to the church.

IP 10: *So, my role in this congregation now is as a member. It's an unusual situation, because if you are a minister, in this type of church, then you stay for a number of years, and then you move away somewhere, usually entirely different. If you have a lay work like I did, in the place where you're living, you're still here. So there had to be a period of distancing myself from myself in role as a pastoral worker, and just me as a member of the congregation. So, when our minister came there was a certain amount of stepping completely back because she had arrived. And then now it's a process of finding my role again, really finding my identity again.*

IP 10 struggling with their roles and identity indicate that self-formation and a sense of belonging is not static (Allen et al. 2021: 91f). The foundation for belonging seems to be created by dynamic processes of constant, conscious, and subconscious evaluations and re-evaluations. Factors informing these evaluations are identity, activity, and the response from others. IP 11found when going through these processes that they were unable to be truly themselves in their congregation. IP 11 is the only participant in this study who decided to not return as an active member of their local congregation.

IP 11: *We were in the choir, we really got very engaged, properly raised money for things. I wanted to get fully into it. I didn't just do it half-heartedly. … I liked the service. I liked the sermons. The priests were amazing, all of them. We've made some good friends from there. So, there were lots of positives. But after a while, I felt like I was playing at being this kind of typical English little chap.*

When asked to reflect on reasons behind not returning most of the participants make statements about individual factors such as lasting worry about the virus, falling out of habits, lost faith, or old age and bad health. Some of the people who has not returned seem to still be included in the *we* of the congregation. Their absence is spoken of with understanding and clemency as they are expected to return sooner or later. Some, on the other hand seem to have

been excluded from this *we*. They are not expected to come back and unless because of old age or bad health their absence is spoken of with a sense of loss or betrayal. Provided that the members of each congregation choose to participate of free will, the choice to participate is partly interpreted as a choice of responsibility of the *we*. Similarly, the choice of returning or not returning after lockdown could also be interpreted as a choice of taking responsibility of the *we*. Showing up is the baseline effort expected by the individual. Without making this effort the individual cannot be rewarded with acceptance and inclusion from the others. Individual perception of belonging is dependent on the feedback one receives from the group and on the opportunities, one is given by the group to belong (Allen et al. 2021: 91ff). Some participants recognized sort of a group responsibility influencing individual choices of returning or not returning.

IP 4: *I think it's very easy for people to get missed. And I think in a way, there was a little bit of… I didn't know lots of people before lockdown so other people can probably comment on this better than I can, but I have the sense that there were some people that just didn't come back after lockdown…. Some other people have just, lockdown happened, they stopped going to church.*

The person *being missed* could be someone who was unable to participate because they lacked technological resources or knowledge. It could also be someone who is new or on the fringe of the community and simply forgotten about. It could also be someone who finds other groups and people fulfilling their need to belong.

Some participants, even though they express dissatisfaction with the efforts needed to belong could still recognize its meaning.

Researcher: *Did you had any reflections about belonging during lockdown?*

IP 10: *I think it's just almost what I've said already is the sense of belonging to the wider church community. The sense of thinking, do I belong in my individual church community? Where do I fit into that? … There was a certain feeling of disconnectedness and where do you belong? And it would be easy in this situation, just to slip below the radar and not feel as though you belong to anything, actually. … And part of the feeling of coming back was, oh dear, I´m going to be drawn into all that again and it is so time consuming, and some of it I don't want to do.*

IP 10 decision to return to the congregation could be interpreted as dependent on a sense of duty. There are several scriptures possible to interpret as descriptions of the duty members of the church have towards each other and towards the church as a whole. With IP 10 being deeply rooted in scripture it is likely this sense of duty provides them enough purpose to make the efforts to be an active part of the congregation even though their sense of belonging could be described as ambivalent.

It is possible the ambivalent belonging is partly due to being unsure if they fit in to their local congregation. This questioning of fitting in has its basis in IP 10 desire to put more focus on spiritual activities, whereas they find their congregation putting more focus on social aspects of church. One could say IP 10 seems to interpret the purpose of the *we* differently from what they experience the rest of the *we* are doing, creating a chasm between them and large parts of the congregation. This could in turn make it difficult for IP 10 to agree with certain decisions made in the congregation, causing distance to the others and possibly disrupt their place-identity. Not agreeing with the acts of the congregation and consequently no longer being able to view the congregation as a positive we which one can, and want to identify with, seems to damage the sense of belonging. IP 11 understands the congregation's adherence to the Covid-19 restrictions as an act of support of something which causes people harm. This made it impossible for them to identify the congregation as a we who is doing something good and consequently not wanting to be a part of it.

IP 11: *So, I was very angry about lockdown and I was really angry with the church for supporting it. Really, I still don't understand why that happened. Why the church was so compliant. … Because being isolated from one another…. we humans are not meant to be separated from one another, we are designed to be part of a community. And so, I think locking everybody down was just a crime… You know, and that really knocked my trust in organized religion… I felt betrayed by the church, by organized religion, because I think they should have made a stand.*

5.2.2 Honesty

Deep in our biology is the knowledge that belonging is crucial for surviving (Rofe 1984). Feelings of safety, being protected from harm and feelings of belonging could therefore be considered, in some sense, as equal when viewed as expressions of the fulfillment of basic human needs (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary 1995:498). Feeling safe, being in a place

where I don't have to defend myself or my loved ones or be on guard seems to be significant for the sense of belonging. Church, for many of the participants is such a place.

IP 2: *I perceive that there is a lot of vulnerability in people here. That's what I perceive just looking around. And I feel very privileged to be in a place where people feel safe. To be vulnerable and feel safe... I feel like I belong here. Just because I feel vulnerable and I just kind of identify with what I see around me here.*

Another possible threat to belonging posed by lockdown is the loss of access to a place where one can be true to themselves and have that true self accepted and included. The only available space for interaction during lockdown was online spaces. If one is not comfortable in these spaces for any reason it might cause insecurity whether one possesses the right competencies to belong. Without any actual interaction the induvial is simultaneously excluded from the social feedback mechanisms on however they do possess these competencies or not. Most participants, however, stated they were happy about being able to stay connected to their congregation during lockdown but recognizes some potential negative effects of only online interaction, which could potentially impact their sense of belonging.

IP 6: *It was quite successful doing it on Zoom. It kept everybody together. Although it did make you lazy, because you did think, Oh, well, it's on Zoom. So, I don't have to go anywhere. It's quite easy to stay in. It's quite easy to just switch the computer on. It's also quite easy to not fully engaged...*

When engaging in social technology you can, depending on the platform be more or less anonymous. Even when using technology like Zoom you can change your name, turn of your camera, and use whatever profile photo you wish, should you use one. Your presence when interacting through these technologies could therefore in some sense be considered censored or unauthentic as they allow, enable and to some extent encourage a selective self-presentation. The sense of unauthentic self-disclosure may make people feel less socially connected (Luo & Hancock 2020: 112f) and therefore have a negative impact on the individuals sense of belonging and as previously discussed their motivation to belong. Furthermore, Luo & Hancock (Ibid) states that distressed individuals may be less honest in their disclosures online and more likely to present a false self, leading to an even greater sense of depression, loss of connection and potentially a lesser degree of engagement in the congregation.

Given that a social connection needs to be characterized by frequent interactions to provide a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary 1995: 513) time is of importance when examining what effect lockdown had on the sense of belonging. The participants in this study (all but IP 1) experienced two national lockdowns and some of them additional regional lockdowns and it seems like the participants experience, and how it inflicted on their wellbeing and sense of belonging varied between the different lockdowns. When describing the first lockdown the participants use words like uncertainty and worry, not knowing how long the lockdown would last or what would happen.

IP 12: *I don't think loneliness was too bad. But I think we're starting to get depressed. It's more sort of the worry about family and what was going to happen. And will this disease really become a bit like the flu pandemic 100 years ago? Is going to be if it's going to be like that? Are we're going to make it? So, it's quite a dark time that initial phase.*

After the first lockdown ended it seems the participants were more content, knowing that an end to the lockdown would probably come, making it easier to accept the circumstances.

IP 8: *I think we were a bit more complacent with the second* (lockdown)*. Not a lot more. But I suppose with the first one, it was difficult to see an end. And that was very worrying. And I suppose when we went into the second one, we knew that there would be an end.*

It seems that one of the reasons that lockdown had no or little effect on the participants sense of belonging is because lockdown was temporary. The negative effects of the isolation enforced on the participants belonging during lockdown might have been mediated through knowing it is temporary and that the other members of the congregation are there to meet me when it is over.

5.3 Establishing Belonging

In this section we will examine the efforts made to retain belonging once it was recognized as a threat to belonging.

5.3.1 Establishing new arenas for belonging

Before lockdown the opportunities to belong were plenty and usually available to the congregation in the form of physical meetings in the church, in adjacent church or community halls or in the homes of the congregants. These places functions like arenas in which the

individual can seek out belonging through face-to-face interaction. In these arenas belonging can be established, confirmed, and negotiated. To support and retain a sense of belonging among the congregants throughout lockdown new arenas for belonging had to be established.

Researcher: *... could you tell me about it (lockdown)?*

IP 20: *We were very conscious from the when first restriction has been put in place that we needed to carry on being church in some way.*

It seems lockdown was interpreted as a perceived threat to, not only the congregant's sense of belonging, but to the very being of the church. This led to conversations about what defines church.

IP 7: *Church can be different things. Sometimes it's very much about a building. But it can be a meeting of people, anywhere. A Parkland or a forest or any open space, or someone's house can be a place where people connect, and God is just happy if you do that. So, connection is the key. Wherever it is.*

Several participants seem to define the connection to other´s as the core of what church is. This comports with previous research theorizing that the essence of religion is connection between human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:522; Simmel, 1905: 366). Making sure to enable a maintained connection seems to have been of high priority amongst the participants. This was mainly done through the of use video call services, telephone chains, e-mails or using social media platforms to interact such as Facebook and Instagram. But also, through delivering things like care packages or supplies for activities to use later during digital meetings to the homes of congregants. Zoom seems to be the most common way to create opportunities of belonging trough connections.

IP 20 *Zoom enabled more interaction and particularly through the breakout rooms that we did at the end of the Zoom service that allowed people to build relationships with people they maybe didn't necessarily know within the congregation even. So, there were some advantages to that in terms of enhancing sense of belonging.*

The zoom meetings did not only enable connection. It also allowed for experimentation with of the social dynamics of church through challenging fixed groupings and encouraging new

connections to be made. The new opportunities to belong opened up for new senses of belonging to emerge.

IP 14: *The interesting way in which zoom enabled some sense of belonging; circuit-belonging, so wider than this church community because it introduced people from one local church to another local church that they just hadn't met before or wouldn't…. And on Zoom, you have this power of putting people into breakout rooms and mixing them up. That´s quite a few people that already know each other here, let's move them into different groups. That give you an opportunity for people to get to know people from around the circuit, so that helped with belonging.*

It seems that when the congregants were put in this new and unfamiliar arena it did not have a negative impact on their inclination to form social relationships. Rather it is the opposite. Without knowing very much about each other the participants seem to connect and bond, almost immediately recognizing a new opportunity to belong in the circuit rather than their local congregation. These connections and the consecutive sense of belonging that followed seem to emerge without any other efforts or encouragement from leadership. For some the online interaction provided an opportunity to not only keep up important connections but also to explore new ways of interaction through the simultaneous use of different media.

IP 12: *One of the nice things was that the course was still running online. So, zoom, which nobody had ever heard of before, during the pandemic we all became experts. Together with a group of ladies who I used to share the same table with when we met in person. We became known as "the naughty table". Because if the lecture was boring…. which it often was. We used to try to make each other laugh. So, because we were connected on Facebook chat you would put various comments and things there and then you sort of watch their faces on the zoom screen. And if they're trying really hard not to laugh, trapeze up, probably set me off as well… And if it was really bad, they basically switched the screen off because laughing so much.*

There is a clear difference between the group's interaction on Zoom versus Facebook, both are different from how they would be able to interact offline. In an offline classroom they would not be able to share what they shared in the Facebook chat, as this would disrupt the class. The effect of the interaction in the chat is not appropriate for zoom. On zoom, unlike during offline interactions, the group members can easily opt out of the interaction through

turning off their camera. Opting out from interaction offline is much more complicated and require a lot more social discretion. Due to having the opportunity to explore these new ways of interacting, IP 12 states they found a lot of joy and have a deeper connection to the other members of "the naughty table".

Several participants highlighted how the connections with other´s during lockdown felt more meaningful than before, having a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Why the connections felt more meaningful varies. For some it is because of a perceived quality increase in conversations.

IP 3: *So, we started by going round and asked each person for a glimpse of glory, and how we could pray for them. So, then got you to know a bit about their lives… what they were worried about, what sort of things they did. And then we would have the liturgy through the readings, and then we'd go into breakout rooms to "dwell on the word". We were actually talking more deeply than just sort of vaguely waffling over tea and coffee after the service.*

This might be because the interaction is limited compared to normal circumstances. According to Boland et al. (2022) conversations via digital video conference change the way people interact with each other, making the interactions mentally draining. Several of the participants point to how difficult it was to stay focused for long times on video conferences and how their churches put time limits to these types of interactions. It is possible the limited time brought on a sense of urgency in the conversations. This sense of urgency encourages the participants to open up to each other faster and go deeper which boosts intimacy.

For some the interactions were described as more meaningful because they brought about a sense of familiarity. It is possible that this sense of familiarity supports the retention and development of a Sense of coherence (SOC). The first component of SOC is the feeling that one´s environments are structured, predicable, and explicable (Antonovsky 1987:19). IP 4 was able to experience a sense of familiarity when celebrating communion online. Noticing how the objects the other participants brought into the celebration corresponded with their ideas about who the others are. This recognition confirms that some things are the same and that they know the others in the congregation. The environment in the celebration is therefore provides structure, predictability, and explicability. This provide comfort and joy in a time when much is different and uncertain.

IP 4: *And I looked at the screen and looked at how many stupid different things people have picked for communion, and how there was an adequate representation of who they were.*

The interaction highlighted by IP 4 is during a celebration of communion. Communion, also known as eucharist, mass or the lord´s supper, can take many different forms but there are some fundamental aspects. Central for the rite is the sharing of bread and wine symbolizing the body and blood of Christ. It is one of the most important Christian rites and is highlighted by several participants in this study as something they missed during lockdown. Participating in the rite seems to confirm and enhance the participants sense of belonging. The mystical aspect of communion is important as it is thought of as a communal meal shared with others transcending time and even death. In communion the participant not only share the bread and wine with the other´s present but with all those who has ever done it before and who are now, in heaven. Belonging, confirmed through the participation in communion is belonging incorruptible by death. The rite is also characterized in many church traditions by belonging confirming words, prayers, and scripture. There is also a physical aspect to communion. In many churches in addition to eating and drinking the participants are encouraged to greet each other with peace. This greeting can take the form of a handshake or a hug. Even in churches where participants choose to greet each other with a nod or a slight bow there is an element of touch when they receive the bread. IP 9 states they are aware of some members whose only physical caring contact with other´s is during the greeting and receiving of bread during communion. The value of physical touch, whether of other people, objects of meaning or places were recognized as something that had been taken for granted.

IP 13: *For me, it reminded me of the importance of a physical connection. And you may say, well, would you not have realized that prior to the pandemic? But I think that, you know, when you have something taken away from so abruptly you suddenly realize… gosh! I can't meet with people.*

It seems for many; lockdown reminded them about the importance of things taken for granted. For some, physical touch and for some the church buildings in their areas. Because of this the church as place is infused with more emotional attachment, longing. Some of the clergy experienced how more and new people reached out during lockdown.

IP 16: *But people wanted contact locally. They wanted contact within their own church community. And so very quickly… I'm not very technologically savvy, so I started off by producing a weekly service, which was on paper and given to every single person who belong to the church in any way. And they could do the service on their own at home, knowing that everybody else was doing it at the same time.*

Being unable to provide the congregation with opportunities for physical closeness IP 16 set out to achieve a sense of connection through the participation in shared activities. The activity set up by IP 16 provide the participants with several points of connection. For example, the receiving of the paper could be understood as being recognized as someone who belongs to the church. The touch of the physical paper can be a reminder of the agenda used in a "normal" church setting for those who already are familiar with the rite. It also serves as instructions for those not familiar to help them understand the context. The shared time, and actions of faith is a reminder of the groups shared faith and values.

The efforts to keep the congregation connected without access to the shared physical space can also be seen in the use of language.

IP 14: *But we tried to word it so that in the language the building was closed, but not the church. Because the church isn't the building.*

The shared physical reality of IP 14´s congregation is the church building, as previously established the church building is not just a building. However, the attachment to the physical building varies in different congregations. The congregation of IP 14 have a close bond to their church building as the building is of historical and social value to the wider community. This made it crucial for IP 14 to reconstruct the story of the congregation and to emphasize that the belonging to this congregation is dependent on the fellowship of faith and not on access to a specific building.

5.3.2 Overcoming barriers of belonging

In order to seek out belonging in a new arena, or in any arena the individual must have access to it. Some barriers of access were recognized by the participants. Lack of technical resources and know-how was a major concern as well as not feeling comfortable with being on camera or showing your home on camera. Some participant´s also recognized other barriers that they themselves overcame but worry other´s might not. These were for example not having spaces

in your home where you feel comfortable preforming acts of religiosity or spirituality. The elderly and the economically marginalized were recognized as groups particularly vulnerable during lockdown. A high priority for the congregations seems to be breaking down these barriers, to enable participation.

IP 19: *Within the first week of lockdown, we got all our older folks, particularly our people who couldn't afford a tablet or an iPhone or something they had access to zoom with, a device through Google spare devices… We ran for two weeks, every single day, three times a day, Zoom training for people to just join onto the Zoom meeting to learn how to use it and feel really comfortable. So, after about two, three weeks of the pandemic happening, the whole congregation to the eldest of the youngest, felt really confident in how to use Zoom, which took away any of the fear around it, then became our life tool, really. Yes, those first two weeks was so crucial here saying, we don't want this to be the barrier to not feeling like you can't engage with church. We've got to get you familiar with the infrastructure of how we are engaged in this space. And saying, we know you are here every time, and we want you to feel as confident and happy in this space as possible.*

Not all congregations were able to make the same efforts even if they recognized vulnerability among the members. The ability to make these efforts depends on many variables such as staff and volunteer health and resources, the financial preconditions of the congregation, or the state of the church building. In some the elderly suffered what seems to be long lasting consequences such as depression and hopelessness.

IP 9: *Some of the older ones at a church they just felt so cut off from everybody, although they could talk to their family by phone, nobody was allowed to call or visit, and they couldn't hug their grandchildren. And they just got so depressed. And they haven't actually really got out of it. Because two years of it is a long time… It's a lot especially when you are older, and you think your life is limited now. You know, there's not going to be that many more years in which to do these things.*

An induvial who is longing for belonging will, in social situations seek similarities and things in common with others (Allen et al. 2021: 94), this is because they are motivated to belong. The congregant entering the new arena, motivated to seek out belonging might lose this motivation if their competencies to belong are not in tune with the new norms of behaviors and interactions (Ibid: 91). In many of the previously known arenas for the congregants these

norms are already more or less understood depending on how long they been involved in the church. It is not uncommon for churches to have someone meeting people in the door, keeping an eye out for newcomers, and making sure they are as comfortable as possible. For many religious rites there are more or less detailed agendas illuminating how to behave during e.g., a mass and in some cases even why certain gestures or texts are used. You are also able to watch the other participants to gain a sense of what is expected so, even if you do not fully grasp the meaning of e.g., a religious rite you will probably be able to display a behavior consistent with group norms, reducing the likelihood of rejection or ostracization from others (Allen et al. 2021:94). For many congregations the digital interaction was in large part exploratory, meaning the norms were established during the interaction, putting high demands on the existing and developing social skills of the participants.

IP 3: *I also used to knit or crochet my way through zoom services. I will knit through the sort of keynote talks and the workshops and things. I wouldn't do that during the worship. A number of us would knit, crochet, embroider, cross stitch various things, and most of us did it in the talks, but not worship. But there was one woman who would do it during worship, which is… interesting* (IP 3 using a tone of voice and facial expressions I interpret as disapproval)

The knitter in the statement above seems to be unfamiliar with the existing behavioral norm of not knitting during worship. Knitting being allowed during preaching or workshops but not during worship was according to IP 3 not an outspoken rule but something everybody was expected to understand. Several participants recognize the importance of knowing and understanding a context as an important factor for their sense of belonging. The participants in leadership roles, either as clergy or other generally describe lockdown as a time of uncertainty. Lockdown is also described as a time characterized by access and exposure to basically unlimited and sometimes conflicting information. Worrying this would have a negative effect on the sense of belonging efforts were made to keep the congregants well informed and up to date.

IP 15: *We did keep people informed. That was a big thing. We kept the newsletter going. We had an emailing list. I was going around houses posting newsletters through the door if they didn't get the e-mail, this sort of thing. So, we made sure people were informed all the time, that contact was being made as much as we possibly could.*

Keeping the congregants informed not only let them know what´s going on or where they can turn for support. It also lets them know that the *we* to which they belong exists beyond face-to-face or in-place interaction. This could also subliminally let the congregation know that even though *we* are facing these difficulties *we* are sharing this experience, our *we* are still here, our *we* are resilient and strong. The insight of how important knowledge and understanding of one´s context is for the ability to connect to others led some clergy to contemplation on the accessibility of their traditional spaces.

IP20: *We've been trying to improve how we start our services. And certainly, since we've come back from lockdown, we have much clearer introduction to the service explaining why we meet week by week. But the problem with low church, I think is sometimes we can assume what we do is really obvious. And this would be low church, which is probably why I'm not wearing a collar now. We don't robe or anything in in services. We've quite light on liturgy. It's not a communion service every week... whereas there is just as many rules or hidden rules about it in some ways, as in a high church setting, it's more obvious that it's strange, that needs explanation.*

A low church is a church in which relatively little emphasis is given to ritual, sacraments, and the authority of clergy. IP 20 assumed there to be no, or low mental barriers of participation compared to those of a high church. This points to a recognition of the duality of insideness, and how it influences a sense of belonging. It might be a positive factor for those familiar and comfortable with the ways of doing things as the context is recognizable and predictable. But it can also become oppressive and inhibiting, undermining individual agency and growth (Maclaren 2014:62) as well as making it difficult to welcome new people or allow change. Change that might be necessary to survive as a community.

IP 12: S*o, because of I lived in the village church, I wasn't aware of unspoken norms and rules because they were part of my being. I noticed that when we opened up again when lockdown finished, because we opened up the big church only. The big church, I found there was a small group of very active parishioners, mainly ladies of a certain age that not only did everything but were rather antagonistic to everybody else doing anything...*

5.3.3 Teaching and preaching belonging

Accessing an arena of belonging is not enough to cultivate belonging, it also requires the participant possesses certain competencies (Allen et al. 2021: 92). Some clergy state that they actively strived to encourage the development of such competencies among their congregants.

IP 20: *There´s some people who clearly, that I've met in my time here, have felt in the past, they've tried to contribute, but not being allowed to. So, there's a work around encouraging them to step forward. And there's also been those who have expected to have their voice listened to who, at times had needed to be challenged to make space for other people… Also one of the ways that we as a church here have been trying to work on belonging particularly with our preaching is trying to get people to make more connections with the gospel and the story of salvation as well, which is something in the more practical elements I may have missed talking about. Because of course, the story of the gospel is a story about belonging.*

IP 20 is actively working on the social dynamics within the congregation, which could be understood as a way of assert and enforce social norms. In the statement above the norm of contributing and allowing for other to contribute. This does encourage the development of social skills such as being aware of oneself and others, behavioral regulation, and active listening. When the participant displays these skills, they will probably be met by approval and acceptance. Examining IP 20 statement there seem to be a connection between the expected and encouraged connection among the congregants and their connections to the gospel. When talking about gospel in this context IP 20 refers to the interpretation of the texts appearing in the New Testament describing the words and deeds of Jesus. Adhering to social norms of the congregation, making space for each other, listening, contributing, could be understood as adhering to the divine purpose of the congregation. This was especially significant during lockdown as the congregants have had many of the familiar ways of experiencing belonging to their church stripped away. Without physical meetings, and without buildings the only thing left to confirm belonging is the shared convictions. The love and care one might feel for others would be considered by many theologians a crucial part of the individuals experience of faith. Some even claim that an "unworldly" relationship to God is impossible (Johnson 2007: 46). This means that the love and care of others is one of the essentials of faith. Faith grants me belonging. If I love and care for others I do belong in the church.

IP 19 also apply faith narratives to teach their previously culturally homogeneous congregation on who belongs in their "family" teaching them to expand their idea of family to include people who are not looking like them.

IP 19: *So, it's about being family, but they hadn't learned to expand their sense of family beyond what they knew. And I think that their sense of belonging was caught up in people looking like them. And that made them feel safe because it was familiar. It was it was knowable; it was predictable. As things they're not like that anymore. That then meant that they feel insecure in their belonging, because they've only had been rooted in with a group of people being just like me and it wasn't suddenly. And that was a big shift for them.*

To cultivate a sense of belonging among the congregants, it is necessary to contain tendencies of internal categorizations of we and others. In this situation IP 19 had to try to create a *we* where everybody feels safe and able to trust each. Faith could in some ways be understood as trust. The believer trust something they cannot always comprehend with their senses and trust it to be, not only real, but loving and just. When IP 19 in their role as clergy speak to the congregation it is understood that they are speaking the words of God. When using words like family to describe the congregation they are asking the members to self-transcendence and trust God´s identification of others rather than their own. In some congregations this way of relating to each other is taught from an early age.

IP 7: *And there's some great relationships coming through with the children. You've seen some great connection. And I'm hoping they're just going to grow as brothers and sisters, as disciples together.*

The congregants belonging, as members of the same family, is confirmed through the use of words like brother and sister used by the congregants when referring to each other. Cultivation and construction of belonging can therefore be observed in interactions of languages and rites in which the congregants invoke and negotiate belonging (Fitzgerald & Housley 2015:6). Some of the participants displayed examples of ongoing inner negotiations or evaluations on belonging.

Researcher: *Did you ever questioned your belonging here?*
IP 9: *No, because I've I think I've always felt that it's bigger than me. And if there's something wrong with it, then perhaps I'm doing something wrong. I'm perhaps not going out of my way.*

Perhaps I'm being too selfish of what I'm expecting of other people, and I should be trying more myself.

That IP 9 have never doubted their belonging could be because they are committed to a collective idea of belonging as a shared responsibility. A lacking sense of belonging is understood as individual inadequacy and as something than can be adjusted through a change in behavior. The purpose of the behavior adjustments is simultaneously guided by the fundamental need to belong and encouraged by faith narratives. Even though self-transcendence is encouraged, it is important to note that the purpose of the self-transcendence is not self-effacement. In order to belong the induvial must be somebody, as the perception of self and the feedback provided by other´s reactions to the self are necessary for the evaluation of belonging (Allen et al. 2021: 94). When preaching about self-transcendence and care of others many clergy give examples of messages of individual growth, connecting doing, being, and belonging.

IP 17: *So that sense of belonging… Our mission statement is come and belong... So, it's come, grow, go! Grow in purpose, and then go and serve. And the cycle begins when you are called, you grow, and then you go… it´s that continuous cycle.*

IP 4: *You'll notice that it doesn't take very long for somebody to be in "name of congregation" before they are asked if they want to do a reading, or they want to do prayers. And every PCC* (Parochial Church Council) *we're asking the questions of who are we noticing that is new? And how can we bring people further in? How can we include them? And if they want to participate? In what ways? Can we offer that?*

Through social activities a collective and dynamic, self-transcendent *we*, consisting of continuously growing and caring individuals were established. The group to which we claim belonging, helps us to define who we are. Claiming belonging to a *we*, perceived as positive thus support a positive perception of self (Straka 2022:1).

IP 17: *So, during COVID our main priority was to keep people connected. Keep in touch with people as much as possible. And that proved vital. Especially for people living on their own and people in isolation. But you could still have that one-on-one… either through a zoom meeting or through their connect group, there was always somebody to contact at least once or twice a week. One of the things we encourage early on was, to think about who have you*

spoken to today? Why not? Why wait for that phone call? You make a phone call. So, you contact somebody. And then if you contact somebody, somebody is bound to contact you.

The *we*, which is as previously discussed determined by the divine is narrated as a *we* of equals. The congregant is not only an object of other´s care and concern. They are also an agent. Through actions of care and concern they confirm their own and others belonging to the group. Even tough lockdown was a difficult time for many it seems, for some it was an opportunity to confirm belonging through acts of care. These might even be especially meaningful in times of uncertainty. The clergy recognize these positive effects of lockdown as they interpret the greater degree of commitment among the retuning congregants as sign of a greater sense of belonging. Those coming back to church also share a sense of overcoming shared tribulations.

IP 16: *So, what's happened after lockdown is that the people who have come back to church are much more committed.*

IP 5: *I think the people who we're coming along, maybe just for social reasons, but not for their faith. I think they left and never came back.*

This seems to add a new layer to the sense of belonging as it created deeper connections between the congregants participating in activities as well as in mutual care and support.

IP 8: *One of our members here, she used to come over every Saturday morning and do some weeding. We'd have a cup of coffee and a biscuit, and we'd do a bit in the garden as well. And she was not allowed… but she's love weeding. And said I'm going to come and do some weeding at your house and then I'll see you. And bless her she still phones every week. So, our relationship was much stronger because of COVID. … They became friends rather than members at church. They became my friends. Because of COVID!*

Personal faith does not seem to be necessary to experience a sense of belonging to the congregation. An example of this is IP 1 who claims to not be Christian but of another religious conviction. Despite this shared faith is the raison d'être of the community and faith narratives was applied to make sense of their situation.

IP 14: *We actually did some quite in-depth Bible study on Zoom. The church in this country has an initiative called Bible month, and they pick a book of the Bible every year in June and say, really dig in and have a good look at this book of the Bible. And it was Ruth that year, so we had some brilliant Bible studies. And we were reading the Bible differently because we were reading it through the lens of lockdowns and COVID. It was very special. I think a lot has been published about exile and what it was like to be in exile, to be in a foreign strange land, and COVID took us into that strange land.*

The theme of exile in Judeo-Christian tradition is important. The analysis of the theme in this section is far from complete and does not take into consideration the complexity of the Judeo-Christian relationship. A simple way to understand the theme and how it is applied in the bible study mentioned by IP 14 is to interpret being in lockdown or under other restrictions as being in exile. Thus, the church building is understood as the place where the congregation will end the exile, their promised land. The greater biblical story about exile is a story about how God leads the chosen people through exile and into the promised land where they belong. The church building can here be interpreted as the promised land of the congregation. By doing this the experience of a mutual emotional bond between the congregation and the building can be upheld. Emotional attachments to a place can be a by-product of an emotional attachment to God. Proximity to God can be achieved through proximity to places of religious significance (Counted & Zock 2018:13). Being forced into separation from the building even though the community agreed on the reasons, is to be understood as a sacrifice on an emotional and spiritual level. The church as community sacrificed something, namely the comforting and reassuring proximity to the building, for the greater good. This is consistent with Christian ideas of sacrificial love as exemplary. Understanding lockdown through the lens of sacrificial love helped the participants find the separation meaningful. This made the demands of isolation and following restrictions worthy of engagement and investment (Antonovsky 1987:19). Furthermore, this interpretation of lockdown fortifies the understanding of the community as a community of good having a positive effect on self-identity.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to examine how a sense of belonging is cultivated and retained. Further on to apply the experiences of lockdown to critically examine the assumed key components of a sense of belonging. Several assumptions about belonging have been examined. Based on the results of this study it seems there is a great coherence between belongingness theories and the lived experience of the participants. There are, however, several aspects of belonging of value to highlight and of interest for further examination.

The participants in this study experience a sense of belonging through interacting with other humans and with non-humans (buildings, and things). These interactions were characterized by strong emotional mutual attachments such as trust, care, and longing. This way of describing belonging were expected as it is in accordance with several established theories on belonging for example Baumeister & Leary, 1995. The interactions were rooted in a narrative about a positive *we* infused with religious ideology. Christian narratives and religious themes were used not only to motivate social and emotional connections, but to make sense of and give meaning to lockdown.

Leaning on the performativity theories of Judith Butler, identities are social constructs informed by our actions and behaviors (Leach 2003:78f). Belonging, as it is closely linked to identity formation is similarly dependent on performativity (Ibid, Slavich 2020). In this study acts informed, supported, or motivated by religious convictions were recognized as significant for the participants sense of belonging. Even though religious ideology is of importance for the participants in this study, it is not in itself a decisive factor for belonging. The function of religious ideology in this study is as justification of group existence. The adherence or support of religious ideology enabled the participants to continue their belonginess performance as it allows for identification with the group even when not able to physically interact. A religious ideology is however only one of many possible ways to justify the existence of a group or a context where an individual can seek out belonging. If I claim belonging to a club of hobby astronomers but the weather does not allow for me to watch the stars, belonging can still be performed through behaviors in accordance with the reasoning behind the group's right to exists. My belonging in this case is justified by an interest of astronomy. Complaining about the weather with the other hobby astronomers, reading a book on the topic, or getting involved with volunteer work for the club are all performative acts solidifying my identity as

a hobby astronomer. Therefore, justifying my belonging to the club. Opportunity to perform belonging in coherence with the group raison d'être seems to be key to create identification with, and therefore a sense of belonging to the group. Establishing ways of performing belonging that is not dependent on physical interaction could help the individual retain a sense of belonging when physical, psychological, or material resources interfere with participation.

During lockdown, a sense of belonging was retained through practical adjustments as well as through retelling and re-scripting the *we* narrative to maintain community identity. All but one of the participants went through lockdown with a retained sense of belonging to their respective congregations. Though their sense of belonging was not lost, it was threatened. The threats to the participants sense of belonging were manifested in expressed worry about their belonging. This attest to the theories claiming the constant evaluation of belonging (Allen et al. 2021). As expected, those who suffered from mental illness and those that had previous experiences of rejection expressed greater worry about their belonging (Baumeister & Leary 1996). Variations in perceived belonging were expected (Ma, 2003; Sedgwick & Rougeau, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Even within groups who claim to open for all there are expectations the individual must fulfill to belong. These are not always expressed as demands but serves the purpose of boundary making which enables the group to distinguish who belongs or not. To understand and fulfill these demands might be difficult leading to insecurity, stress, and negative self-image in the individual seeking belonging. This might be even more difficult for those suffering from mental illness or from previous rejection, individuals who benefit from gaining a sense of belonging (Allen et al. 2021). Any group wishing to be inclusive need to have an ongoing and honest discussion on what is expected from the members. The accompanying clarity following such discissions might also serve the group as is support individual and group identification processes. The demands of belonging could be further examined in relation to the individual's competencies to belong (Allen et al. 2021). Doing this could potentially rationalize inclusion strategies and facilitate smoother cooperation between social work actors like social welfare providers and civil society actors.

During lockdown clergy and other church leadership put focus on upholding the social and positive emotional connections to church among the congregants. These connections were understood, not only as important for the congregant's sense of belonging but as the very being of the church (compare with Simmel 1905: 366). Two different methods to enable interaction and participation were most common. One of them was mobilizing the

congregants into smaller units with the purpose to make sure that no one was or felt forgotten or abandoned and to make sure people were safe. The importance of smaller group to create and retain a sense of belonging was assumed. Several theories on belonging conclude that frequent interaction with the same small group of people is the most efficient way to create a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Using zoom or other video conference tools to create interactive activities was another common method to retain connections. These methods were important as they provided new arenas for belonging, or opportunities to belong (Allen et al. 2021). The congregations who recognized barriers of access to these new arenas made efforts to help members overcome and gain access. Despite efforts from the community and church leadership not everyone was successful in overcoming barriers of access. That the efforts made by the congregants to overcome barriers would vary were assumed by the participants. One of the reasons might be because of lacking motivation for belonging. This is an important component for belonging as it refers to the experienced need or desire to connect with others (Allen et al. 2021: 93-94). Not returning to church after lockdown ended is dependent on either wanting but not being able to return or being able but not wanting to return. Those expressing a want to return could be considered still a part of the belonging performance. Those able but not wanting to return are interesting as their actions causes cracks in the *we* narrative. A further examination of the reasoning of this group could help us understand deficiencies in the efforts made to create and retain belonging. It might also help us understand the mechanisms behind leaving certain contexts and apply this understanding in empowering those who need support to seek out new and safer belonging. Please note I have no reason to suspect any of the congregations being represented in this study for being anything but safe and supportive communities.

When the participant´s in this study was asked about "church" they related to the building and to the people identified as belonging to their community in tandem. The participants described emotional attachment to the church building similar to those to the people. The sense of belonging to a congregation emerge from positive emotional attachments to "church". "Church" is understood as a fusion of place and community. This was also to be expected as several theories on place-making connects processes of place belongingness to processes of individual and collective identities (Antonsich, 2010; Loader, 2006: 25). Firstly, the relationship to the physical place and its importance for identity formation. This speaks to the potential of place-belonging as a tool in social work. Understanding somebody´s physical environment and the attachment to this environment might help us as social workers to better

understand what might hinder or promote wellbeing, comfort, and security. How does the relationship to place influence client decision making? Are there any places our client needs or wish to access but cannot due to fear, self-image or previous experiences? Can we support them in creating attachment to places of necessity, benefit, or agency? There are no neutral places, and certainly not in social work. Places where social work are being carried out tells a story about those connected to that place. Could applying place-attachment and place-identity thinking to our own places of work help us to better understand client-professional dynamics?

As assumed the interconnections between the components of belonging presented by Allen et al. fluctuates (2021:91ff). It seems however, that once a sense of belonging is established severe or long-term absence of influence from the other components are necessary to have a negative effect on the perception of belonging. Furter on, a sense of belonging had a positive effect on the participants wellbeing as they were going through lockdown. Going through lockdown together the congregations developed a stronger sense of we through continued belonging performances. As a by-product the participants developed social resilience feeling more safe, trusting, and willing to engage. After the conclusion of this study, I have been involved in several discussions about belonging with different social work actors who all attest to not only the individual but the societal benefits of belonging. These include the previously defined individual benefits like resilience, increased mental and physical wellbeing, and meaning. This means that a sense of belonging has the potential to factor in on individuals' ability to find social support and wellbeing outside strained public welfare systems. Establishing belonging starts with finding opportunities to belong. These opportunities might not be within an individual social workers own organization and might take time and efforts to find. Finding ways to cultivate belonging in clients could however be motivated by the longevity and benefits of an established sense of belonging.

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8. Appendix 1. Information and Consent sheet

8.1a Information sheet

Participant information sheet

Title of the research project: A sense of belonging redefined

Researcher(s): Sandra Lindqvist   **Supervisor:** Malin Arvidson

Invitation

Thank you for showing interest in this study. Your participation is much appreciated!

Before you decide to participate, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what the study will involve. Please take some time to read this information and feel free to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The Project's Purpose

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding from both congregants and clergy about their experiences of a sense of belonging before, during and after lockdown. The purpose is to understand the essentials of a sense of belonging and how this is achieved.

Why have I been chosen?

You may have been invited to be a part of this study either because you are part of one of the congregations deemed suitable for the study and/or because you have volunteered after being approached by the researcher or someone representing the researcher. You are free to decide however you choose to participate or not. There are no consequences in choosing not to take part. If you do wish to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form which indicates your agreement to participate in the study. You may still withdraw up until analysis begin and there is no requirement to give a reason for such withdrawal.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to attend a one-to-one interview in the form of a conversation between myself, the researcher, about the topic laid out in the aims. You will for example be asked to answer questions concerning factors making you feel like you belong to the congregation, your engagement in the congregation and your experience of lockdown. Interviews are estimated to take approximately 1 hour and will be recorded and later transcribed and anonymised.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

Participating in this study is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. You are free to refuse to answer any questions during the interview and/or end the interview should you wish. If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me or my supervisor know by contacting us through the e-mail found in the end.

Will my participation in this research project be kept confidential?

All information collected during this study will be kept strictly confidential. You will be anonymised in the thesis and given a pseudonym. Likewise, any data collected and anonymised will be stored securely on a password protected hard drive. You will not be documented or recorded in any other way than what you consent to through the consent form. Data collected will then only be shared in final anonymised/transcribed form. This study is subject to the GDPR (2018). The personal data is stored only for as long as it is needed to fulfil the purpose of the data processing.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results will be published in a final thesis and submitted for my Master´s degree in social work. You will not be identified in any report or publication. If you wish to be given a copy of any of these final documents, please don't hesitate to ask.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research project is part of my master thesis in social work at Lund University, Sweden

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

Supervisor/ Senior Lecturer Malin Arvidson, School of Social work, Lund University

Contacts and further information:

Malin Arvidson	**Sandra Lindqvist**
School of Social Work	School of Social Work
Lund University, Sweden	Lund University, Sweden
E-mail:	**E-mail:**

Participant consent form 1

Title of the research project: A sense of belonging redefined

Researcher(s): Sandra Lindqvist

Supervisor: Malin Arvidson

Please initial box: Yes / No

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet 1 dated [**March 2022**] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until analysis begins, without giving any reason. In addition, should I not wish to answer any question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. The research study complies with GDPR (2018) to which the study will be always subject. Under this, I understand that I can ask for access to the information I provide, and I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until analysis begins, without giving reason.

4. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and I will be anonymised in any publications.

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.

6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to the use of these recordings for the following purpose: to create written transcripts which will be referred to in the report.

7. I understand that the information collected about me may be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.

8. I understand and agree that once I submit my data it will become anonymised/transcribed and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.

    ☐ ☐

9. I understand that other authorised researchers may use my words in publications, reports, webpages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

    ☐ ☐

10. I agree to take part in the above study.

_____   _____   _____

Participant name   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Researcher   Date   Signature

Supervisor   **Student/Researcher**

Senior Lecturer Malin Arvidson   Sandra Lindqvist

School of Social Work   School of Social Work

Lund University   Lund University

e-mail   e-mail

Intro/Background info

Relation to this congregation (time, activities, roles)

Family situation.

Sense of belonging

Description of congregation, feelings of belonging, description of self,

- Do you feel you belong to congregation x?

Yes: Can you try to explain that feeling?

Are there any activities/situations where you clearly can recognize your belonging?

Can you describe your relationship to the other members of congregation x?

- Do you feel you are closer to some members? How come? How big is that group?
- Do you feel they care for you? How do you recognize their care? (words, actions, touch)

No: Do you have any idea of why you do not feel like you belong?

Are there any activities/situations where you feel more clearly than others you do not belong?

Can you describe your relationship to the other members of congregation x?

- Would you say the members of congregation x share your faith if you have one? (in general)
- Would you say this shared faith is important to your sense of belonging?
- How would you describe these shared faiths teachings about belonging?
- Do you feel you belong to any other places/communities?

Perception

How do you think others perceive congregation X?

"Not ok behavior"?

Lockdown

Sweden was never in lockdown so I do not have any experience from living in lockdown, could you try to explain it to me?

- Experiences of lockdown in general

- Feelings of loneliness or isolation during lockdown

- Contact with congregation x during lockdown. Wants. Hinders.

- Effects on sense of belonging to congregation x.

- Filmed/streamed services. Feelings/Ability to relate to congregation x.

- Experiences during lockdown that caused reflections about belonging. (Other words might be used as connection)

- Did you experience more than one lockdown? Was there any difference?

Coming back

Physically returning to church. How did you experience that? Had something changed? In your relationship to others or to the place? Is someone missing and why?

10. Appendix 3. Participtant list

Alias	Role	Interview location	Remarks
IP 1	Congregant	Church	Did not experience lockdown. New in congregation.
IP 2	Congregant	Church	Clergy in another church tradition from which they claim belonging for this study.
IP 3	Congregant	Church	Congregation is main social circle
IP 4	Congregant	Church	Congregation is main social circle
IP 5	Congregant	Home	Married to IP 6, New to their congregation
IP 6	Congregant	Home	Married to IP 5, New to their congregation
IP 7	Congregant	Church	Congregation is one of many social groups. Volunteer in congregation.
IP 8	Congregant	Church	Congregation is their main social circle. Volunteer in congregation.
IP 9	Congregant	Church	Married to IP 16, involved as volunteer.
IP 10	Congregant	Church	Congregation is one of many social groups. Volunteer in congregation.
IP 11	Congregant	Home	Left the congregation during lockdown
IP 12	Congregant	Home	Congregation is one of many social groups. Volunteer in congregation.
IP 13	Clergy	Church	Applied for place of service.
IP 14	Clergy	Church	Was assigned place of service by church.
IP 15	Clergy	In their car	Was assigned place of service by church.
IP 16	Clergy	Home	Married to IP 9. Retired but asked by church to come back to serve a congregation in need of clergy.
IP 17	Clergy	Church	Applied for place of service.
IP 18	Clergy	Church	Was assigned place of service by church.
IP 19	Clergy	Church	Applied for place of service.
IP 20	Clergy	Church	Was assigned place of service by church.