Myers writes that there are many myths that surround belonging. “Community is a complex creature. Many factors contribute to finding successful community. With the erosion of the geographically close family and the heightened mobility of our culture, many people struggle to learn healthy competencies for community” (p11). Some of the myths that are common include:

- **More time = more belonging** - length of time that people have spent together is not on its own a predictor of belonging. There are many who have had the experience of meeting someone and experiencing an immediate connection (p11).
- **More commitment = more belonging** - healthy community is formed not out of committed relationships, but rather significant relationships. A significant relationship is not the same as a close or committed one (p12).
- **More purpose = more belonging** - “Sometimes people who have a common passion and purpose do connect. But a common purpose or goal does not guarantee that people will connect” (p14-16).
- **More personality = more belonging** - There is a misconception that because extroverts appear to connect very easily with others, that they must experience deep belonging. However, many extroverts “speak of a deep search for belonging” (p16).
- **More proximity = more belonging** - “Remembering a time when the culture was less mobile that it is today, people tend to believe the fifth myth: geographical proximity creates greater community” (p17).

Belonging is the experience of identifying with another entity, whether that entity is a person, organisation, culture, or ethnic group. The other party does not have the same feeling of belonging for the experience of belonging to be real (p25). This has great application for the church, as this means that there are many who may consider themselves to be part of our communities of faith, until we tell them differently. Our behaviour towards “Christmas and Easter” Christians may lead them to wonder, “Why don’t I belong?” (p25). A key for nurturing community and not killing people’s sense of belonging is language. “As people search for community, they are listening with their eyes, ears, and emotions. They are keenly aware of how we tell them they belong or don’t belong” (p26). The church needs to be careful to use language that indicates that all are welcome, and that anyone can belong to God if they choose.
“GIVE ME SOME SPACE”

Myers uses Hall’s theory of proxemics to discuss how people connect. “Hall’s findings form the backbone of proxemics, the study of how physical space influences culture and communication... Hall’s spaces are helpful categories not only for culture and communication, but also as they relate to community—our sense of belonging. We experience belonging in the same four spaces Hall describes: public, social, personal, and intimate” (p36).

We use spatial language to refer to relationships all the time, “small groups, close friends, distant relatives, family connections, neighbourly attitudes” (p36). These terms indicate levels of belonging and often a value judgement about the significance of those relationships. What is particularly important to understand is that “in all four spaces: we connect, we are committed and participate, we find the connection significant” (p39). A relationship does not have to be close to be significant.

Healthy community allows people to grow significant relationships in all four spaces. “It means permitting people to belong in the space they want or need to belong. Insisting that real, authentic, true community happens only when people get ‘close’ is a synthetic view of reality and may actually be harmful” (p52).

GROUP CHEMISTRY

Connections between people form spontaneously. We cannot program connections. This is why in many small groups, community does not form. There is a false pressure to be close to people who we either do not know well, or have been pushed into a group with because of similarities in life stage. “Small groups are not necessarily the most significant way to help people to grow in relationship to God and to one another. People connect in all four spaces, not in just one or two. Community happens spontaneously. We can facilitate environments that help people connect” (p61).

The key is to find ways to facilitate environments that help people connect. “Community emerges when there is a ‘chaotic harmony’ of belonging. Trying to organise this is much like trying to organise a boat bobbing in the ocean. People connect spontaneously but not randomly. This is good news. It means we have the ability to help” (p78). One of the key ways that community can be facilitated is in the telling of stories of spontaneous connection. A church that values spontaneous connections, is one that will tell those stories that make spontaneous connection and belonging part of its culture (p79-80).

TRADING SPACES

No relationship remains in one space all the time. We move among the four spaces throughout the life of all relationships, “Many times, we do so unconsciously and without effort” (p89). For example, during times of stress and pain, many people move those around them into different spaces. This can happen very quickly, and the transitions between different spaces can produce stress in the relationship. “One of the hardest transitions in a person’s life is when he or she is forced to move from one end of the spatial relational continuum to the other. This giant leap wrecks a person’s search for community. This is what happens with divorce. Divorce is a move from intimate belonging to being a stranger” (p101). Similarly, there is a change in space when someone gets married; this is a cause of marital stress when one of the parents cannot handle having been moved from intimate to personal space.

SEARCHING FOR A FRONT PORCH

In the US, the front porch of a house used to be a public-social space. It provided a space which was public, but allowed for the formation of social and personal relationships, without encroaching into the personal and intimate space of the house indoors. It formed a median space. Myers writes, “In our time people have a hunger for a significant ‘median space’...Median spaces are the spaces that include our social and personal connections” (p120). (This concept is similar to the “third place” theory of Ray Oldenburg).

Myers argues that the church needs to find median space, where people can visit and get to know them before becoming one of “us”. “How do we invite strangers into the family? How can we help with the experience of belonging? How do we develop healthy community? I believe the answers may be found somewhere in the median spaces—somewhere on the front porch” (p126). In our culture, it is rare to invite someone over to your home. Friends who want to catch-up are far more likely to go out for a coffee or a meal. It is a neutral space, a median space. “Developing a front porch to your congregation’s house of belonging may help those who come hoping for a good date with the promise of a good family” (p131).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information about The Search to Belong can be found at the following websites:
- Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Search-Belong-Rethinking-Intimacy-Community/dp/0310255007
- Book Depository: http://www.bookdepository.co.uk/book/9780310255000/The-Search-to-Belong