

Andrew Casto
Stewardship Reflection/Mission Moment

What does it mean to belong in a place?

This is the question I've found to be at the root of my thinking approaching this talk this morning.

My family; Heidi, Amari, Beatrice and I moved to Manhattan a year and a half ago. We left Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I'd taught at a small college for two years, and where for many reasons, we felt we did not really belong. Heidi and I are originally both from Ohio, and before Cedar Rapids, we'd lived in Montana, a few other stops in Iowa, and several places in Ohio. In fact Heidi and I have moved 11 times in the twelve years we've been married. Needless to say, we've had a lot of practice developing our sense of when a place "feels" like we belong in it.

Our move to Manhattan was full of hopes and excitement for the stability and academic community of a research university. To be fair, Kansas was never really on our "short list" of places to live, but we were pleasantly surprised when we visited Manhattan, and felt we could make a life here for our family.

The move was hard - it always is. I'm terrible with transitions, and the stress of the relocation was pervasive in all we did those first few weeks. We were confronted with many things we weren't prepared for, from extreme heat, to unforeseen wildlife and critters around our house in the country, to a major, major home repair we were blindsided by three weeks into life here.

We were completely overwhelmed by these things, and often wondered if moving here had been a huge mistake. Facing a new place, landscape, and a major financial hardship in an unfamiliar place with no friends or loved ones for support is no small thing. We quickly lost all confidence in our house, and in our choice to come here. Iowa hadn't been fantastic, but at least we had a reliable place to live, and could buy real beer at the grocery store. Every creak in the house signaled disaster to me. Every encounter with the idiosyncrasies of red-state living felt like another permanent strike against our hopes of finding happiness in our new town.

The one bright spot for us at this time was this church. Over the years we've been part of several different churches families. Some have been better better fits for us than others, but I have to say that it never crossed my mind that we might actually find a church that practiced authentic, socially engaged progressive Christianity, and where we felt a real sense of connection, in Kansas of all places.

It didn't take long before we did feel like we at least belonged in this room... regardless of our feelings about our house or anything else. And that was, I think, the beginning of the tipping point for things to turn around for us. Life slowly began to improve. Today we are actually beginning to love where we live. Our house is beautiful, and thankfully free of any other surprises thus far. Our girls are thriving in their respective school programs, and work is engaging and supportive for both Heidi and I.

In our marriage, we have always made it a priority to give to causes we felt a sense of belonging with. Sometimes this has been churches, but also we've given to disaster relief, sponsored a child in Senegal, and helped out when we could when friends faced tragedy in their lives. We feel like it's simply the right thing to do to give back to places that we feel nurtured by, and we in turn feel nurtured by the act of giving. We also feel that God shows up in a very real way in our lives when we use our money to invest in others. Part of coming to terms with Kansas, and our initial struggles here I think had to do with making real commitments to "belonging" here, and putting our actual dollars into the first place we felt like we belonged upon our arrival felt like a tangible way to take action in our time of need.

It's also been true for us that when we take steps toward God, God seems to take steps toward us, and this has been true with our finances. Budgeting money for regular monthly giving, and to other causes we believe in helps us be more conscious with how we spend the rest of our money. It teaches our kids that money isn't just about buying things for us, and it increases the bond we feel with all of you.

We don't always feel like we have a ton to give, although I'm conscious of the fact that many people have less than us. I don't think this matters at all though. We try to think about it in percentages, and increase our overall giving by a percent when we're able. We do our best to live on less than we make, save some money, and give some money.

This strategy helps us take real steps toward belonging to God, to belonging to the place we live, and to belonging to a future that nurtures our family.

Beatrice's baptism today is another step in this process of belonging, and we're thankful that you're all here to share that with us. Thanks for the smiles you give our kids, and for the friendship this place provides our family. We feel like we belong here.