

“Homesickness and Belonging”
September 13, 2026

Romans 12:3-6a
I Corinthians 12:12, 26-27

The Pentacrest Museums held their third annual “Postcards on the Pentacrest” event last Wednesday. Walking down Clinton St., you could see students at a table, writing postcards home.

In the *The Daily Iowan* story about this, Jessica Smith, who works at the Museums, said that the event was developed after research suggested that “one of the most prominent threats to retention for University of Iowa students was homesickness that they experienced in the first couple of weeks of classes.”

These early weeks of the fall semester are challenging times. The promise of growth that college offers comes with the stress of change and adjustment—and a longing for home. Most university students experience some degree of homesickness. And it’s not only first year students. The DI article included some comments from a second-year student and a photo of a third-year student writing one of those postcards.ⁱ

This shouldn’t surprise us.

After all, home is a place of acceptance and welcome—a place of belonging. “Home,” the poet said, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” We human beings are made for belonging, but that experience can be painfully lacking on campus at times. Without such belonging, a deep sense of loneliness can set in.

Frank Bruni wrote about what is happening across the country, and maybe more importantly for us, what is happening all around us: college students are settling into their new lives, and grappling with something that is usually ignored, something that no one prepared them for.

“They’re lonely.”

“In a sea of people,” Bruni wrote, “they find themselves adrift. The technology that keeps them connected to parents and high school friends only reminds them of their physical separation from just about everyone they know best. That estrangement can be a gateway to binge drinking and other self-destructive behavior. And it’s as likely to derail their ambitions as almost anything else.”ⁱⁱ

Loneliness is a problem for college freshmen, but my guess is that, along with homesickness, it’s a problem for new graduate students and for continuing students of all years and ages. In fact, in a survey of nearly 28,000 students on 51 campuses by the American College Health Association, more than 60% of students said that they had “felt very lonely” in the previous 12 months. Nearly 30% said that they had felt that way in the previous two weeks.

Harry Rockland-Miller, who was the director for the Center for Counseling at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, told the story of a freshman he treated: “He was 18. He came to school and was invited to a party his first weekend, and he didn’t know anybody. So, he started to drink. He drank way too much and ended up lying on a bench in his residential hall, feeling very sick. Nobody stopped and said, ‘How are you doing? Are you O.K.?’ And he felt so

isolated. When he came in to speak with me the next day, the thing that struck him — what he said — was, ‘There I was, alone, with all these people around.’”

Alone, with all these people around.

Homesick on the Pentacrest.

If you’re a student, you might know that feeling.

If you’re not a student—if you’re a teenager still living at home, or if you’re an older adult—stay with me for a few minutes. I think you’ll see how this affects all of us.

And there is some good news for all of us as well.

Ian Corbin, a philosopher at Harvard recently said that Americans are experiencing a crisis of belonging. “We are confronting widespread and deep-seated loneliness in a lot of modern, wealthy populations right now.” This is not confined to college campuses. It touches the lives of all of us, students and non-students alike. “It seems,” he says, “like the way we’ve been organized in our common life is not working very well. People aren’t happy with it. They may have creature comforts that an 18th-century French aristocrat couldn’t even imagine, but there is this creeping, important, and maybe dangerous feeling of ‘not-at-home-ness.’”

The solution proposed by Corbin is a “virtuous circle,” alternating solitude with community participation. He gives the example of the Lakota vision quest, a rite of passage where a young person goes to a hilltop for several days to think and pray, and then returns to share newfound knowledge with their community. We human beings need to both go off by ourselves and come back to the group.ⁱⁱⁱ

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I hear that and I think: “That sounds like a congregation!”—a community that comes together, then sends us out, and gathers us back once more. A congregation is the place of belonging that we desire. A congregation is the home that we need.

In writing to early congregations, Paul used the image of the human body to describe the church: we are, individually, like members of a body, each with our own abilities. The individual gifts and abilities we have are vital to our well-being. And as we use them together, we reach our full potential. Our faith and our doubts, our hopes and fears, our strengths and weakness are gathered together. And together—*together*—we are one body in Christ.

This is to say, we *belong* to one another. When we rejoice and when we suffer, we belong together. In a congregation—in *this* congregation, we are here, with, and for each other.

Even in worry and adversity, there is a particular joy that we find as we come together in this place, in this community that is always made up of both friends and those becoming no longer strangers.

In this homesick and lonely world

we all need a place to be fed,

we need a place to grow,

we need a place to discover more of who we are,
we need a place to live out our identity.

We need a *congregation*—a home where we are nurtured in our faith, a home that sends us out to show the love of God, a home that welcomes us when we return to this place of belonging.

In the Congregational tradition, belonging precedes believing. We don't have creeds or other tests for membership. Instead, we put a lot of stock in our covenant with each other—our statement about how we *live* with and toward one another. For Congregationalists, how we act is as important as what we believe. We *believe* that God's love extends to all people. And we act on what believe. In this congregation, each of us agrees to *belong* to a *believing* community and, in that community, to work out our own beliefs.

Together in this place we restore ourselves in worship. We learn the ways of prayer. We gain insight into the ways of God as we study and talk with others. We are renewed for our sake and for the sake of the world.

Together. In this place.

It's easy to take a place like this for granted. But in recent years we have come to see in a deeper way both how precious and how threatened a congregation like this can be. We belong to:

a place of honesty in a nation of lies;

a place of peace in a violent world;

a place of welcome and acceptance in a world of hate.

For decades now, many have made a very concerted effort to cast Christianity in a ridged, conservative image—and even in a regressive and authoritarian image: consider the dangerous rise of Christian nationalism that we are exploring in our Sunday morning adult education sessions.

At the same time, out of our liberal Protestant tradition we have called people to a grace-filled and tolerant (in the best sense of those words) way as we advocated for civil rights, sought to restore the environment, advocated for the now threatened right for all people to marry, worked to end hunger and homelessness and poverty in America, and continued to pursue a basic human decency in our national life.

Out of our liberal Protestant tradition we bring the good news of God's love to the world rather than being shaped into what others think we are or should be as Christians. Because we *belong*, we find the support we need when the way seems especially rough, as it does to many in these days.

I know that liberal Protestants—and this congregation in particular—are a puzzle to many. As the church historian and ethicist Gary Dorrien says, we offer a third way between orthodox over-belief and atheistic disbelief. Liberal Protestants champion the right to academic freedom, accept biblical criticism, and allow science to explain the physical world. We are comfortable looking beyond the church for answers as we seek to be relevant to the modern world.^{iv}

Not all would choose such a way.

But here we are.

Here we are for one another. That's the good news.

Being a church with a generous spirit, a church of welcome, means that we can be a place of refuge for those around us, a haven in an often-heartless world. We've been doing this for some time now; which means that quite often we don't even think about what we're doing—how unique and how important this is. And we have to keep doing this because so many churches don't.

And if you are new to this congregation, if you are lonely or homesick, we are here for you. That's the good news.

You belong here.

Because, here, you belong.

ⁱ <https://dailyiowan.com/2026/09/09/pentacrest-museums-host-student-postcard-event-to-combat-homesickness/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/02/opinion/sunday/college-freshman-mental-health.html?mcubz=1>

ⁱⁱⁱ “How modern life compounds the ancient struggle to belong,” *FAS Current*, June 24, 2026.

^{iv} <https://adfontesjournal.com/interview/understanding-liberal-theology-an-interview-with-gary-dorrien/#:~:text=Elsewhere%20you've%20defined%20it%20as%20like%20a,compels%20right%20belief%20on%20any%20particular%20thing>