

Belonging Co.: The Sound of a Holy Spirit Movement

The Belonging Co. is transforming the spiritual culture of Nashville, Tennessee, with a focus on desiring the presence of God above all. The Belonging Co., officially started in February 2014 by senior pastors Henry and Alex Seeley, derives its name from both the term “companion” and the old French military term “compagnie,” which means body of soldiers. The church’s official website says it’s a reminder that all members are “standing as soldiers in the same army and eating as friends at the same table.”

The church has grown over the last six years to include a worship collective, a conference and even a college. But as the scope grows, the Seeley family tells Charisma the church is as focused as ever on the fundamentals, neatly summed up in The Belonging Co.’s mantra.

“We desire encounter over entertainment, presence over presentation, intimacy over industry, people over position and Jesus over everything,” Alex says.

A growing, worship-minded, Spirit-filled church with a well-curated social media footprint may call to mind other ministries like Bethel Church in Redding, California, or Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia. The Seeleys—who helped pioneer Planetshakers in Melbourne, Australia, before coming to the U.S.—say there is absolutely shared DNA between the movements. But they also point out that each church has carried something fresh for that specific generation and community.

“The reason why Planetshakers grew ... was because all we cared about back in those days was that young people would get so wrecked in the presence of God that they would go and change

their world for Jesus,” Alex says. “We’re dear friends of Hillsong, and they never set out to be the next big worship thing. They just wanted to create a moment where the church could sing songs and encounter the presence of God. Bethel is very much the same. Bill Johnson actually says that with every movement comes a sound. God is always moving. Even though He’s the same yesterday, today and forever, He’s always moving. So if you see things like Planetshakers, the Belonging Co., Hillsong, Bethel, they’re movements; But in that movement, the Holy Spirit is always doing something fresh and new. ... That’s why I think there’s something tangible when you listen to the worship or you’re in one of our meetings. People can’t put their finger on it, but they say, ‘What is it about this place? I can sense the presence of God.’”

Henry and Alex Seeley spoke to Charisma about the Belonging Co.’s origins, what it means to pursue God’s presence over all else and how the Holy Spirit is impacting the larger Nashville community.

A Place to Belong

About a decade ago, the Seeleys say they felt God was stirring their hearts to leave Planetshakers and go to the United States. In 2012, they finally moved from Melbourne to Nashville, though their next step was still unclear.

“We felt God quite clearly tell us that we needed to go,” Henry says. “We didn’t know what we were going to end up doing. We’d been involved in ministry, but we really didn’t think that this season was going to look like church stuff, ministry or anything like that. I had been involved in worship, music production and mixing records for a long time. So Nashville just seemed like a good option. It was really probably about six months into being here when we just felt like we had no idea why we were here.”

The move was particularly difficult for Alex, who says she did

not like the atmosphere of the city or enjoy living in Nashville.

"I'd been in ministry myself for a very long time, and I was here doing nothing," Alex says. "We couldn't find a church to plant in. ... Even though there are many great churches in Nashville, there just wasn't that church that really grabbed our spirit like we have always known and loved.

"I remember sitting at my dining room table, just saying, 'God, why have you got us here? Because it just feels very dry and doesn't feel like home.' And I actually opened the Scriptures to 2 Kings 2:19, which says, 'The location of this city is good, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.' But then Elisha put some salt into the water and said the waters were healed, and they were fruitful 'until this day.' That was like this shot in my heart, where I just knew that God was calling us to be the catalyst to bringing some clean water to the spiritual climate of this city."

At that same time, through a studio set up in their home, Henry had begun to meet more and more artists and traveling musicians who were based in Nashville. After all, Nashville—as Henry notes—is basically the headquarters for the contemporary Christian music scene. Over months, he observed that many of these artists were doing incredible things for God but lacked a home church—because they were usually on tour during the weekend, when churches were meeting.

"We really started to see a need among some of these creatives, musicians, worship leaders and artists for family, for community, for some spiritual input and for people to build into them," Henry says. "We were having these conversations with God: 'God, someone needs to do something about this.' Then I felt that gentle stirring from the Holy Spirit: 'This is actually the reason why I have you here in Nashville.' Long story short, we ended up opening up our home

on a Tuesday night, to a handful of people initially, just to help build some community around them. After probably six or eight months, that went from a small handful of people to close to 100 meeting in our home every Tuesday night.”

Alex believes the meeting grew so quickly because they unknowingly tapped into a deep need within the city.

“We found so many people spiritually starving—needing a breakthrough and not wanting to do church as normal,” Alex says. “They wanted a real encounter with Jesus—a tangible touch. And that’s really what happened in the basement. The reason why it went from seven people to 100 so rapidly is because people came and found that living water they got to drink from, and it really transformed their lives from the inside out. So [for us] it was an accidental church plant, but it was very intentional by God the whole time.”

After roughly a year, The Belonging Co. officially launched in February 2014. Today, the church has a reputation for being a young, cool environment—Alex says some have called it the “hipster church”—but the Seeleys feel that doesn’t accurately express the church’s diverse demographics. Henry says that the original meetings at their house—which were predominantly attended by musical artists and creatives—skewed heavily toward a millennial age range, but since adding Sunday services, the demographics have shifted. He says there are plenty of seniors and families in attendance and that the church is ethnically diverse.

“We’ve tried to just let it grow organically,” Henry says. “... We’ve just said, ‘God, who are you bringing into this place?’ and allow God to draw people. I think that’s reflected in the church, and the larger the church grows, the more diverse it’s growing.”

One unique aspect of The Belonging Co. is that many CCM artists and A-list celebrities—as Henry puts it—attend the

church as ordinary members and volunteer in various capacities. In 2018, Forefront Productions pointed out that Kari Jobe, Danny Gokey, Sarah Reeves and Lauren Daigle were part of the church's volunteer team. But the Seeleys say these famous artists are not treated any differently than any other volunteer—and that's one of the main reasons why they attend The Belonging Co.

"People will always ask us, 'Do they get paid to be there?'" Alex says. "No, they're treated like every other volunteer in our church. I think the beautiful hallmark of our house is that servant leadership is at the forefront. True humility is in serving, and it doesn't matter what name you're given in the world's eyes. We're all sons and daughters of God, and we all get to be celebrated. I think that's been a relief to some of these guys and girls who have come in going, 'Finally, I can be part of a church rather than being the special presentation in a church.' They've been able to be disciplined, and so they've changed from the inside out."

Henry adds, "We don't advertise week to week who's leading worship or who's preaching or anything like that, because we've really just tried to make church a place where Jesus is the superstar. ... We've tried to keep our church very Jesus-centered. Maybe there are well-known people, but it's all eyes on Jesus."

As a result, worship pastor Andrew Holt says the church has become a home and community for him and many others in the Nashville area.

"It's grown way beyond just a few creatives in a basement [to encompass] people from all walks of life," Holt says. "But the first and foremost thing is that we're just a bunch of people who love Jesus, love encountering His presence and are passionate about seeing our city find the same thing. ... I'm honored to be a part of it. It's a great place. This church has changed my wife's life, my life, our family's life. And

now I get to be a part of that for other people, which is pretty amazing.”

Presence over Presentation

Despite its top-notch volunteer staff, the Seeleys say they are consciously avoiding a focus on performance at their church. They believe that’s one of the key distinctions of The Belonging Co.

“Especially here in the U.S., I think there’s been a real push towards a great presentation in the last decade,” Henry says. “In that, I think there’s been some positives, in that church is engaging, and it’s appealing to people. But if all you do is put on something that’s appealing to someone’s intellect or their feelings, then you’re actually not allowing them the chance to encounter the reality of who God is.”

Henry says they observed that same phenomenon when they moved to Nashville.

“When we first moved here, in a lot of churches, it felt quite performance-driven,” Henry says. “There was a sense of performance to worship. If that’s how people want to roll, that’s awesome. But we saw that people were hungry for something more than just a good show. ... We’ve seen a real hunger for something more than to be impressed by a message or entertained by some good singing. People want a tangible encounter with God.”

However, Henry says that walking this out in practice is both harder and easier than we make it out to be.

“How do you define whether or not you can sense the presence of God?” he says. “There’s no meter for that. You can’t put something up on the wall that shows you if the presence of God is here or not. The reality is, we carry the presence of God with us. And yet so often, we don’t focus on the fact that He’s there with us. We don’t give him space because we’re so

busy trying to get through what we've got planned for the day [or] the service. We're so busy. ... The most important thing about why we're gathering together is to point people to Jesus and to allow the Holy Spirit room to speak to us. That might be through a song. That might be through a message. That might be through a prayer time or ministry time. Whatever that is, it's not a structured thing. It's just being aware of His presence and responding to that in the moment."

Alex says the goal should be to want God's presence as much as He wants to be present with us.

"I think there have been churches that have almost left Holy Spirit out of the equation," she says. "But since the beginning of time, God has always wanted to be among His people. If you look at the Israelites, when He asked them to build the ark of the covenant, He had them center the presence in the middle of the camp, so that they would always be centered around His presence. But I think, as a church, we've come around His Word as a more important facet of God, where I believe it has to be the Word and the Holy Spirit that illuminate and bring revelation. ... I think when a person carries the presence and understands the presence of God themselves, then it's just an easy overflow to lead in the presence of God."

Though The Belonging Co. remains focused on chasing God above all else, visitors to the church's building or social media page will observe an artistic, beautiful style and clean aesthetics. Those qualities are commonly associated with "cool" or "seeker-sensitive" churches that want to look impressive in the eyes of the world. But Henry sees no contradiction between pursuing Spirit-filled presence and creative excellence—so long as those twin drives are properly prioritized.

"Some people have said to us along the way, 'If it were really "encounter over entertainment," then you wouldn't have any of

this stuff,'" Henry says. "But that's not actually right. It doesn't mean that if you want an encounter, don't have anything that's engaging. It just means that you know where its place is. I think that what's important about this is the focus. I believe God is a creative God. We are all made in His image. So we should be constantly creating—and not just average creations. I believe as sons and daughters of God, we should be the most creative beings on planet Earth. We should be doing things better than anyone else. ... We want to present something that appears beautiful, that engages with people in a creative and beautiful way, because that's actually reflecting the nature of God. None of those things are the center of what we do. They are an expression of our worship toward God."

Holt says the church's desire to be excellent in every way—including music and aesthetics—is a way of showing honor, love and gratitude toward God while also making church inviting to those not yet in relationship with Him.

"Because we've had this encounter with Jesus, because we've had our lives changed by what He's doing in our house, we want to do everything we can to present that well for people," Holt says. "... That goes with everything. From social media to anything we do creatively to the music we put out, we want it to be something that is well done, all in the effort of pointing people to Jesus and to His presence. I think it all goes hand in hand, but you have to have the balance right."

Henry shares an example of this balance from 2019's The Belonging Co. Conference. (For information on this year's conference, visit [.](#)) After a powerful worship session, he says he felt the Holy Spirit tell him, "Bring all the production people to the altar so that you can pray for them. You need to lay hands on everybody."

Henry made that announcement over the microphone. After a few minutes, he noticed that many people working in the production

industry had come forward—but members of his own team were staying at their posts, manning cameras for the video livestream or the PA system and sound board in the back. He felt the Holy Spirit telling him even those crew members needed to come forward too.

“I remember for a split second thinking, Man, this could be mayhem,” Henry says. “The PA might start feeding back. We’ve got people watching on a stream. What is the camera shot going to look like? But in the moment, I knew that more than the presentation was important. I knew that these people needed a touch from God, an encounter with God. ... God wants to show up, and sometimes He’s going to test where your priorities are.

“I’ve come to realize that the worst thing that could have happened in that moment is maybe the PA could have started feeding back. ... But the best thing that could happen in that moment is someone’s going to encounter God in a fresh, real way. And I think that’s really been just part of the goal for us—to do things as absolutely best as we can, but also realize that they are just a reflection of our worship towards God. They’re not in place of God. I think that’s sometimes where people can get tripped up.”

Sound of a Movement

In early May—when this interview was conducted with Henry and Alex Seeley—the Belonging Co. was in a unique season. After a month of coronavirus-induced lockdown, restrictions were being eased, and leaders began looking forward to reintroducing Sunday morning services. Many of the touring musicians who call The Belonging Co. home had been sidelined or out of work for a couple of months. A move into a new church building—scheduled for Pentecost Sunday—was up in the air.

Yet the Seeleys remained full of joy and gratitude for the fruit of their congregation during this tumultuous season.

“It took social distancing, I think, to bring the church

closer together,” Alex says. “I really feel like our church, personally, has been amazing at the intentionality of banding together and being intentional to reach out and be the church. Even though we’ve been a beautiful community, I think this has just really made us miss being together. I was saying this to Henry recently—when the pandemic hit—that I think we’ve done well in training and discipling our people to not fear this pandemic, but to actually allow God to use us through it. We’ve seen people in our congregation be full of faith and really persevere and push through the barriers of losing work. ... So many people have lost income, but their faith is strong, and they’re seeing God do the miraculous. I feel like we’ve equipped our church to weather this storm well, and so they’re banding together. Everyone is taking care of each other’s needs. ... We’re watching God use this thing that was meant to harm us, and He’s turning it around for good.”

That unity not only extends within the Belonging Co. itself but into the larger Nashville community as well. Though Alex may not have wanted to live in Nashville back in 2012, she says she’s encouraged by how she sees the Holy Spirit at work in her city today.

“I feel like there’s been a shift in the climate,” she says. “People are genuinely hungry for the real thing. We’ve seen unity in churches like never before in Nashville, and that’s really beautiful. There has been a shift from when we moved here in 2012. It felt very dry, very stale and very heavy with a religious kind of spirit. But now I feel like there’s been a real breaking open, like, ‘We want more, and we’re happy to co-labor together.’ It’s actually been a beautiful shift in the city.”

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