

1. A Belonging Place (Tell the story of the long ago church in Rome; caught in a racial, cultural, and sociological struggle; disconnect between Jewish and non-Jewish believers on how to practice Christianity. The Apostle Paul had to intervene—write a letter we know as the NT book of Romans to arbitrate; mediate; and legislate their differences—while emphasizing God’s eternal plan of unity and togetherness in his son, Jesus. He lays a thorough theological groundwork in the first 11 chapters; follows that with making practical application—calling for a transformed like marked by God’s love; mediates some of their specific differences and then he arrives here)
2. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” – Romans 15:7 (This was his ultimate goal for this church—acceptance of each other—differences, struggles, failings and all. It was really the only way they could ever become church—a belonging place. Otherwise division, strife, suspension, and hurt would continue to define and defeat them. **Accepting one another was imperative. In a sense Paul wrote the entire letter to enable him to get to this overarching point. Accept each other—with the only criteria of that acceptance being Christ and how he accepted each of them. No hoops to jump through; no ethnic pedigree; no law to keep; no performance-based agenda—just Christ.** And think with me of some biblical descriptive terms for us—filthy rags; chef of sinners; there is none righteous, no not one—and it is clear that the only basis we have for acceptance is Christ. He became righteousness for us. That is why Paul could say in this letter—8:1—“there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” So if Christ could accept us—me—a filthy rag of a person with absolutely no way to perform or pedigree my way out of it—then why can I accept others—why can’t the church really be a belonging place for all regardless of background; differences; shortcomings; etc.? This, IMO, was Paul’s message to the Romans. No doubt it was challenging for them to hear and process—just like it can be for us as well. Often we still operate like they did—think about it this way)
3. (A standard model for belonging has long looked like this) Believe—Behave—Belong (but I believe a more biblical model looks like this) Belong—Believe—Become (I think the latter would be called discipleship and is evidenced in how Jesus accepted all. Long before his followers had figured out and embraced his values; before all the dots were connected; he accepted them. He did so in order for them to become his disciple—a process. This approach is crucial for us to be a belonging place now. It is the only way to overcome our own racial, cultural, sociological differences and grow together to be that place that accepts one another just as Christ accepted us. **I like what the lyrics of this song say about it.** So let’s return to Romans 15—see the expanded text—vs. 1-7 and see)
4. What This Looks Like
 - a. A patient place (bear with one another)
 - b. An other’s focused place (do not please ourselves)
 - c. An encouraging place (through the knowledge of scripture)
 - d. A hope-filled place
 - e. A harmonious place
 - f. A God—glorifying place
 - g. An accepting place (now just pause to consider what such a place—lived out—would look like to the others, who navigate a world of outrage, hate, hurt, identity-based acceptance, and loneliness. Don’t you think such a belonging place would be a refuge to them? I think that is the biblical idea.)
5. It is a Jesus Place (and he invites us all to it)—Matthew 11:28-29