Faith and the Belonging Effect in Blue Zones

The Belonging Effect: What Faith Communities Can Teach Us About Longevity

By Nonjabulo Mlangeni BLUE ZONES LLC, ©2026 Blue Zones. All rights reserved ™

[Editor's note: See the full article at URL: https://www.bluezones.com/2026/08/the-belonging-effect-what-faith-communities-can-teach-us-about-longevity/ - this is a retitled and cut-down version of "The Belonging Effect: What Faith Communities Can Teach Us About Longevity", emphasizing (with the graphic and bolding added by me) those health benefits of belonging to a faith community which are also associated negatively with lead exposure, and those behaviours which increase lead exposure/absorption such as smoking and drinking alcohol or which mitigate lead absorption such as healthy eating habits. Illustrated by a Volcano Art Prize (VAP) entry where LID means Library Identifier in The LEAD Group's Library.]





2026 Volcano Art Prize Entry: Click the left image or here for bells video and then the right image or here for animals video. Artist: Alyson Kakakios. Title: Ikaria Mornings. Lead-Safety Message: Both low lead living and living in Ikaria in Greece have been associated with healthy longevity or longer healthspan. The slow rhythm of the life here in the Greek "Blue Zones" longevity hotspot with its emphasis on fresh foods, a plant-based diet, walking (although that is gradually changing in modern times) and social connectivity (including the "Grandmother Effect"), have all contributed to the longevity of the Ikarians. Description of Work: Two very short films: one (25 seconds) with bells calling the faithful Ikarians to church; and the other (1 minute) with animals greeting the dawn. https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/ikaria-mornings/ [LID 29950]

In studying the blue zones, where the world's longest-lived people are found, Dan Buettner and his team of researchers famously observed that they led similar lifestyles. This discovery became known as the Power 9®: a list of evidence-backed habits that support health and longevity. Often, discussions highlight items like natural movement and plant-forward eating, while belonging to a faith community goes overlooked.

Of the many factors feeding the U.S. loneliness epidemic, one may be the crumbling pillar of faith. For generations, religious structures provided not just spiritual fulfilment, but social and emotional support. Moreover, research shows that active members of congregations tend to be happier, live longer, and get more involved in community.

Yet traditional religious engagement has declined. Today, 58% of baby boomers attend weekly faith services, compared to 32% of millennials and 18% of Gen Z. As religious

participation dwindles, finding structures that can offer the same sense of belonging as faith communities remains important.

What's belonging, anyway?

The Power 9 pillar of Belong is often confused for the pillar of Connect, since both involve community. The most famous example of Connect is that of the Okinawans and their use of moais. These are friend groups that provide lifelong companionship and demonstrate how supportive social networks can positively impact health.

On the other hand, Belong refers to communities of belief. Of the 263 centenarians interviewed by Buettner, all but five belonged to a religious group. This aligns with other **longevity** research findings. A 1999 study found that attending religious services four times a month can increase life expectancy by 4-14 years. A 2016 Harvard-led study found that **mortalities of all causes** were 33% lower among women who attended services more than once a week.

How does it work?

Many faith spaces routinely engage with weighty subjects like death, loss, and the meaning of life. This can make space to unpack topics that aren't prioritized in other relationships or environments.

It can also be comforting and validating to partner with people who process the world through a shared framework. But beyond allowing people to feel seen, active faith can support physical health by setting behavioral standards. It's not uncommon for faiths to discourage **smoking** and excessive **alcohol consumption**, both of which are known health hazards.

Some groups promote specific dietary frameworks, be it vegetarianism or eating decadent foods in moderation. In the blue zones region of Ikaria—where many people are Greek Orthodox—fasting is a normal part of religious life. Though it's done for spiritual reasons, it has physical benefits. Research shows that fasting can slow the aging process for mammals in general and, more recently, for humans specifically.

There is also evidence that belief has mental health benefits, which may explain why the faithful report greater well-being. A literature review of eight studies involving over 3,000 adults found that religious people are more likely to believe that their lives have meaning and add unique value to the world.

This perspective differs from narcissism because it isn't coupled with a sense of superiority. Instead of "I'm better than others," the core belief is "I'm in this world for a reason," or "my life has a greater purpose." Significantly, multiple scholars have found that a high sense of purpose can add years to our lives. Most blue zones cultures center purpose. From Okinawa to Ikaria, elders can often articulate what drives them to keep going.

In his travels, Buettner spent time with a 100-year-old woman who was purpose personified. She rose at dawn to read her Bible, then hopped on her stationary bike and spent her days driving to various volunteer engagements.

Volunteering can stave off loneliness by expanding social networks. It's also linked to a range of positive health outcomes, including longer **life span**, lower **hypertension** risk, and higher **psychological well-being**.

In the words of Dan Buettner, "healthy centenarians everywhere have faith." Beyond the orthodoxy of the Ikarians, the Sardinians and Nicoyans are mostly Catholic, and Okinawans believe their ancestors live on. Undoubtedly, these people face some of the same challenges that others do outside the blue zones regions. But they differ in the fundamental belief that those burdens don't rest solely on their shoulders.

This is not the same thing as thinking one's fate is completely determined by outside forces, which psychologists would describe as an external locus of control. Instead, it's a belief in a higher power who can do the things that are beyond your own limitations. This can mitigate a range of challenges, including **depressive symptoms** and **anxiety**.

Ultimately, a wealth of research evidence connects belonging to a faith community to various benefits that meaningfully improve both length and quality of life.

How to apply this research to your life

In our work with cities, communities, and campuses, we help people apply the Blue Zones Power 9 principle of Belong to their lives. Because individual experiences with religious communities vary widely, and some may carry pain or exclusion, we encourage people to explore spirituality in their own way.

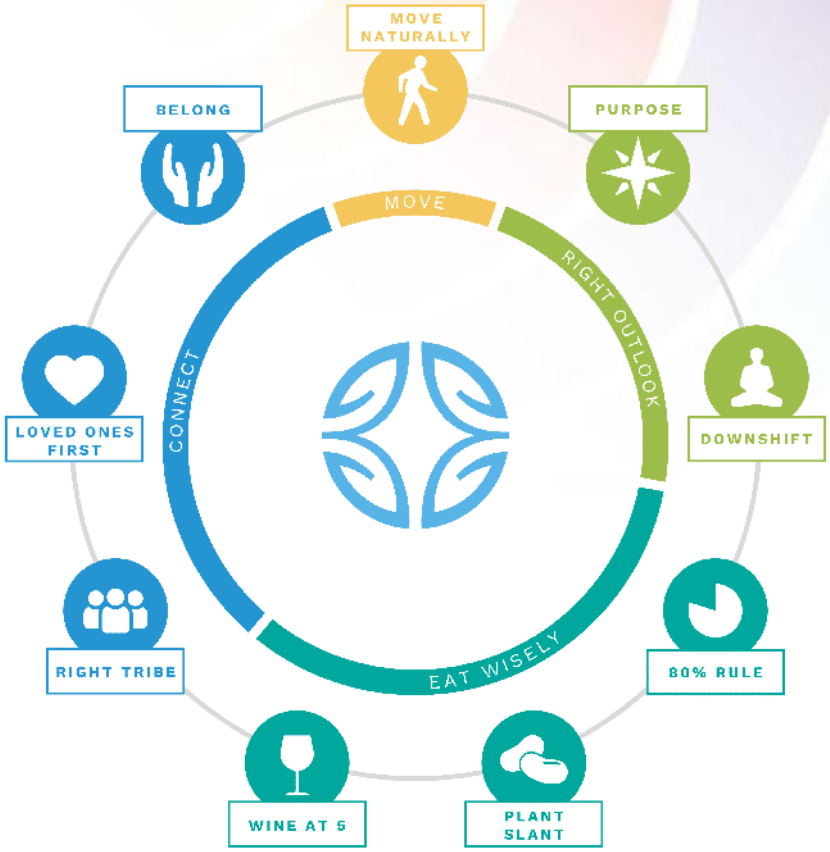
- **• Try a meditation circle or breathwork class**
- **• Explore a new faith or interfaith community**
- **• Sign up for a neighborhood volunteer activity (service as a form of spiritual practice)**
- **• Participate in nature-based gatherings (forest bathing, sunrise or sunset hikes)**
- **• Join a creative collective (art, music, or writing workshops offer opportunities for reflection and expression)**
- **• Take a Purpose Workshop (guided reflections and activities for exploring one's life purpose)**

The goal is to explore a new spiritual practice that speaks to you - ideally one that nurtures reflection, gratitude, and belonging - and then find and participate in a wider community.

Nonjabulo Mlangeni is a writer, researcher, and editor based in California. She focuses on health, equity, and creative nonfiction.

Tags • Longevity Power 9 Faith Communities Belonging

Related Articles



-

[Power 9®]

Reverse Engineering Longevity By Dan Buettner Life expectancy of an American born today averages 78.2…

[Religion May Reduce Stress and Increase Longevity]

In all blue zones regions, centenarians were part of a religious community. "People…

[Breaking the Cycle of Loneliness: 5 Tips to Build Better, Deeper, Stronger Relationships]

Thanks to technological advancements, many activities that once had a social component no longer…

[Future of Aging: Senior Cohousing as Antidote to the Loneliness Epidemic]

By Nancy P. Kropf, Dean of Perimeter College & Professor of Social Work at…

[Make Eating Wisely Simple & Delicious]

Get the Newsletter

Sign up for the BLUE ZONES® free weekly email where we bring you exclusive interviews, cutting-edge longevity news, and fresh tips for living better, longer.

Inspired by our identification and research of the original blue zones areas, places where people live extraordinarily long lives, we empower everyone, everywhere to live better, longer.

About Us

- About Us
- Original Blue Zones Explorations
- Our Values
- Our Research

Resources

- Articles
- News
- Recipes
- Live Better, Longer

Services & Solutions

- All Services and Solutions
- Blue Zones Speakers
- Where We Work
- Blue Zones Health
- Careers

Immerse Yourself in the Blue Zones Lifestyle - Explore Retreats