



FINDING MY PLACE when there is no one like me in the room TRANSCRIPT

Caroline: Have you ever walked into a room, and it might be a work meeting, or a work social event, and thought, wow. There really is no one else like me in the room. It could be because you're the only woman in the room. It could be because you're the junior person in the room. It could be because you're the only one who holds a particular position or opinion in the room.

Michelle: Yes, what I find hard is when I walk into a room and there's no one else like me, I often ask myself the question, Do I belong here, or will I be accepted for who I am?

Caroline: Hello again. Welcome to an episode of The Her Work Podcast. I'm Caroline Spencer. It's great to have you with us. Here at The Her Work Podcast, our tagline is Reframed by Jesus. We want to have conversations about work and what it means, as workers, to work well in God's world. This podcast is brought to you by City Bible Forum, where I'm a trainer and mentor.

Sitting across from me, my conversation partner for today, is Michelle. Michelle is a senior leader with 25 years' experience in corporate firms and professional services. Welcome, Michelle.

Michelle: Hi Caro, great to be here. I've been looking forward to our conversation today.

Caroline: Now, for our conversation today, what question have you brought for us to explore together?

Michelle: Well, I often find myself being the only Asian Australian woman in a room of Anglo-Celtic men, to use the right language. So I was thinking we could explore the question of How do I find my place when there's no one else like me in the room?

Caroline: Thank you. I understand what you mean about being outnumbered by Anglo-Celtic men in a room. What has that experience been like for you?

Michelle: Let me share an example. When I was in my second year as a management consultant, my boss invited me to a meeting with senior client stakeholders. I remember walking into the room and being struck by the fact that I was in a room with about a dozen Anglo-Celtic men.

I found myself asking, Do I belong here? Will I be accepted for who I am? What really stressed me was thinking about dinner after work that night and wondering what I would talk to them about.

Caroline: Do you have a more recent example?



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Michelle: Yes. In more recent years, it's less of an issue, but when I still walk into a room where I'm outnumbered, I still feel uncomfortable about whether I'll be accepted or not. So that's still a challenge for me.

Caroline: Just to be clear, this isn't a comment about the men in the room, is it?

Michelle: No, absolutely not. The issue is with me, not with who's in the room with me. In my experience, the men in the room and others I've worked with have been welcoming and inclusive.

Caroline: That's fascinating — that this question that you have been asking yourself throughout your career, and yet it has little to do with the men who are actually in the room with you. Do you think there's some imposter syndrome going on here? That you feel like a bit of fraud?

Michelle: Good question. I think I should be in the room with the years of experience that I've gathered. I think it's more about belonging and being accepted for who I am. I think I've earned my place in the room. So, I do think I should be in the room.

Caroline: And it's interesting that you've mentioned the word belonging, because belonging and fitting in are slightly different things. With fitting in, it implies some willingness on our part to change in order to be accepted, whereas belonging is more about being accepted for who we are.

So, Michelle, when you walk into a room and have that, do I belong here moment? What keeps you grounded?

Michelle: I remind myself of the words of Psalm 100 verse 3. And I knew Caroline, you would ask me this, so I have them words in front of me. So Psalm 100 verse 3 says: "Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture."

I know that God created me, He loves me, and I'm precious to Him.

Caroline: I love that sheep image. Biblically, it speaks so powerfully to this concept of belonging. It gets me thinking about Jesus' words in John 10, where He says, "I am the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep."

Jesus goes on to say, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."



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So, the sheep are known by the shepherd - Jesus says he knows them. They're accepted and valued by the shepherd. Jesus says, I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. They're also safe with the shepherd. Jesus says no one will snatch them out of his hand. The sheep are known, accepted, valued, and safe. Isn't that the essence of belonging?

Michelle, how does knowing you belong to God help you in those Do I belong in the room? moments?

Michelle: It's helped me become more comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. Knowing I belong to God gives me a quiet inner confidence to be who I am. I don't have to be the biggest personality in the room.

Caroline: I can see how being conscious you belong to God can be really freeing in those moments. It takes some of the heat out of the question of, *Do I belong here?* Would that be fair to say?

Michelle: Yes, yes, most definitely.

Caroline: I'm also thinking that if we belong to God, then we need to live like we belong to God, including in the rooms where no one else is like us. And that will include our speech and also how we use our words. In Colossians 4, Paul says, "Let your conversations always be full of grace."

That word grace is the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 2 when he says, "By grace you have been saved." So, what God did in Jesus was a generous gift to us. And the Apostle Paul is saying, make your conversation the same kind of generous gift to others.

So, Michelle, when you're in the room, how can your conversation be a generous gift to others?

Michelle: Yes, first of all, for me, it's about making every effort to connect. I find that I can have a common connecting point with just about everybody. Everybody loves to talk about their family, their holidays, they like talking about what they do to enhance their wellbeing. And so those are good conversation starters.

I also try and find words of comfort when someone shares, for example, a health issue that they're going through, or if they're facing a work challenge, such as a difficult project, or they feel overloaded with work. I try and find a word of encouragement or a word of wisdom or offer them some help.

And on the flip side, it's also what not to say, how not to use my words. So, I try not to participate in the office gossip, not spreading rumours and not speaking badly about my colleagues.



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And that can sometimes be hard in the moment, and so I ask God for help with this, to give me the words to say that will honour him.

Caroline: Thanks, Michelle. When our conversation is a generous gift, sometimes it may actually provoke a conversation outside of the room about why we're like this.

I'd like to take the conversation now down a slightly different path. What would you say to women listening who are thinking of, say, stepping up into leadership positions where they might be the only person in the room like them?

Michelle: I'd say, go for it. Remember you belong to God. Be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable and use your words in a way that honours Him.

Caroline: It strikes me also that being the only person in the room like you, it's a pretty lonely experience, and how there are lots of examples in the Biblical narratives of people who understand that experience.

I'm thinking of Elijah in the desert, 1 Kings 19, with his cry of despair to God, Lord, I'm the only one of your faithful people left. Then we have Jesus's cry of abandonment on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27 - and since Jesus is quoting Psalm 22 there, King David would have also understood that anguish.

These are examples of faithful people who are on their own, who cry out to God and are heard.

Michelle, how does belonging to God help address the loneliness factor when you are the only person like you in the room?

Michelle: I remind myself that God knows me, He sees me, and He's always with me — so even if I feel lonely, I know I'm not alone.

Caroline: Michelle, I've really enjoyed our conversation today. Thank you.

Michelle: Thank you, Caro. It's been such a helpful reminder that when I feel stressed about being the only one in the room, I can be more comfortable about feeling uncomfortable, because God is with me and I know that I belong to Him. And I can always ask Him for help to give me the right words to say that will honour Him.

Caroline: Michelle, I look forward to another conversation with you in the future.

Listeners, just so you know, I have a variety of conversation partners on the *Her Work* podcast. Each conversation partner brings their own workplace related challenge for us to explore. The episodes will drop twice a month, and you can find them wherever you listen to podcasts.



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If you'd like to get in touch, please feel free to email me at caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org.

On the City Bible Forum landing page, you'll find the Bible references. You'll also find some reflection questions. These have been designed so that you and a friend can listen to the podcast and use the questions as a springboard for a discussion around your own particular challenges.

Until next time.