

Bridging Movements

How conversation builds
shared visions of the world

by Miriam Magaña Lopez

AFTER DONALD TRUMP was elected president in 2016, **PICO California** — the largest faith-based organizing network in the state — began to see increased polarization, othering, and racial anxiety in California and across their network partners. The divisions were impacting their movement leaders and members. In order to address the increasing divide, PICO California initiated **The Belong Movement** in 2019.

Prior to The Belong Movement, PICO California was already bringing together organizations from across the state to set priorities, take public actions, and facilitate trainings. Introducing Belong Circles — an integral part of The Belong Movement — to the PICO California network was possible thanks to the organization’s existing infrastructure.

Part of PICO California’s mission is to build a world where everyone belongs; through the facilitation of Belong Circles, PICO California aims to change the dominant narrative of division to one that fosters bridging among their partner organizations and Californians. This case is unique because The Belong Movement was born, in part, through collaboration and partnership with the **Othering & Belonging Institute**.

A Belong Circle is an intentional gathering of roughly ten people engaging in genuine conversations to build relationships of trust, connect across differences, and create opportunities to take action together.

Ashlin Malouf-Gashaw, the Chief Formation Officer at PICO California, states that they chose the circles because they are easily replicable and have the potential to help people move beyond solidarity — understood as, “I support you from the sidelines” — to belonging. Ashlin defines belonging as, “I am in such a deep relationship with you that no matter what space I step into, I hold your story and your experiences, and who you are has become a part of me.” Through intentional dialogue, bridging activities, and mutual understanding, participants are called to take that transformative step.

Rev. Ben McBride, co-director of PICO California, leads a march against the detention and separation of immigrant families by I.C.E.

Photo courtesy of PICO California.



Identifying a Breaking Dynamic

BELONG CIRCLES WERE primarily developed to address breaking between different community-based civic leaders and organizers across the state of California. Leaders in the PICO network and beyond were subconsciously buying into “us-versus-them” framings, even among allies. Ashlin explained, “there was a lot of competition on which issue would get addressed first.” Some organizers believed that if they worked on immigration issues, that meant not working on Black Lives Matter issues, and if they worked on education, that meant not addressing housing.

Advocates for all of these issues felt a sense of extreme urgency when Donald Trump was elected in 2016. It seemed like every day there was a new fear: the Muslim ban was pronounced by executive order, DACA was at risk of being revoked, undocumented immigrants and Black lives were under attack, environmental protections were being scaled back, and much more. While all of these issues are important and connected, organizers tended to become hyper-focused on “their issue,” and began to see other issues as competition. A type of scarcity mentality came into play, in which it seemed that only one issue or one group could win, making it necessary for organizers to compete for resources or people power.

Relatedly, when organizers failed to bring each and every important cause or issue facing social justice movements into their analysis, or even talking points, others were quick to criticize them as caring only about “their” one issue. Ashlin explained:

I am an Arab American, I am not Muslim but very much identified with the [resistance to the] Muslim ban. If I was talking about it in the front of the room but was not explicitly saying “Black Lives Matter, pathway to citizenship for all, affordable housing,” then it was assumed that I only cared about Arab people, only Middle Eastern people, and therefore I am a threat to the issues that other people are trying to move.

Thus feelings of urgency and scarcity bred competition and mistrust among organizers that threatened to metastasize into toxic tensions.

BREAKING between humans is a response driven by fear and isolation, when we turn inward only to what we know and who we know.

A *breaking dynamic* exists when one group turns against an ‘outsider’ group; the ‘*otherness*’ and threat of the out-group can build psychological or physical walls between the two groups.

In this case, the breaking dynamic identified is the tensions between organizers in the PICO network and beyond in California.

“No matter what space I step into, I hold your story and your experiences, and who you are has become a part of me.”

Action Toward Bridging

BELONG CIRCLES WERE CAREFULLY DESIGNED by PICO California to be easily implemented and create bridging opportunities across diverse participants.”The organization developed an open source curriculum in both English and Spanish; additionally, they continue to provide on going support in the form of facilitator training as well as sitting-in on sessions to ensure that people interested in implementing Belong Circles feel supported.

Each circle consists of approximately ten participants from a community — such as a congregation or school — and is led by a facilitator. It is important for facilitators to be intentional about who they invite to the Belong Circle, guided by the purpose of deepening the relationships among the participants. Facilitators often organize Belong Circles to bridge across acknowledged identity lines such as language, religion, or race. A common example is bringing people from different congregational communities or different organizing groups together.

The curriculum consists of four ninety-minute sessions, each held approximately a week apart. Each of these four Belong Circles has a unique purpose, but together the series includes these essential elements:

- 1) an opening exercise that allows participants to reflect
- 2) popular education to help people gain an analysis of structural drivers of exclusion in California
- 3) reflection questions on what participants are learning
- 4) opportunity for action
- 5) fellowship, which is unstructured time used to depend relationships and trust.

Together the sessions help participants move from ‘I’ and ‘me’ to ‘we’ and ‘us.’

The first two gatherings are focused on developing

Members of *La Asociación Latino-Musulmana de Norte América* (part of the LA Voice network) participate in a Belong Circle to bridge folks in their community as well as members of the Indonesian Muslim community whom they invited.



trust and building relationships among participants across acknowledged differences. Participants reflect on their own identities and experiences, and then share aloud with the rest of the group with the hope that participants will find connections with one another's stories. People establish shared agreements; oftentimes one of the agreements is to approach others' comments with curiosity and wonder rather than suspicion. In addition to personal reflection, participants watch "[Bridging: Towards A Society Built on Belonging](#)," a video developed by the Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI), to ground them in a shared analysis of how breaking and othering exist in society, and what true belonging means.

The second gathering allows participants to reflect on the local sources of divisions, and challenges them to reflect on pervasive individualism. Ashlin says that this disruption helps some participants realize that the way they've experienced the world may not totally be true. There is space for self- and group reflection to discuss how we consciously or unconsciously break, and who benefits when breaking occurs. Another video by OBI introduces the idea of "[widening the circle of human concern](#)." Participants see how structures — including

the built environment — can systematically exclude groups with different characteristics, for example, when lack of attention to people with disabilities ends up denying them access to physical spaces.

The third and fourth sessions focus on thinking about the future, imagining who we need to become, articulating shared values, and planning how participants can move forward to create a state of belonging. Participants are asked to imagine what society should look like and how it should operate — a critical exercise for developing a plan of action that is proactive rather than reactive. Participants are introduced to the idea of targeted universalism through [a primer video by OBI](#) which offers a different approach to creating equitable systems and policies. All of this is meant to strengthen participants' analysis of how to move toward structural change that can create a state of belonging. Finally, Belong Circles use "commitment cards" to prompt participants to explicitly name the commitments they are willing to make toward belonging, typically involving a group action together. Past actions include registering people to vote, organizing protests, and supporting communities impacted by ICE raids.

BRIDGING is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines. It addresses a breaking dynamic in order to develop a ***cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive "we"*** that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice.

To "bridge" involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines (such as race and/or power dynamics inherent within those social structures) of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive "we" identity. The new "we" that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a ***shared empathy*** and ***lasting stake in one another***. All its members should also experience an authentic sense of belonging. Bridging rejects all strict "us versus them" framings, but without erasing what is different and unique in each party.

In this case we see bridging as successful when participants of Belong Circles begin to see and recognize other participants as part of a ***larger "we"*** while acknowledging everyone's distinct identities.

Outcome — Moving Towards Belonging

RESearchers from Vanderbilt University are studying the outcomes of the Belong Circles over the course of three years. While the study is not complete, there are a few preliminary indicators of success. First, PICO California has trained over one thousand facilitators, and thousands more have participated in Belong Circles all over the state. Focus group interviews have revealed changes that people have experienced by participating in Belong Circles.

One type of change is internal to individuals such as when participants say that Belong Circles helped them find their own voice and agency. A woman in Los Angeles said:

My voice, I never really heard my voice, been able to speak up or defend myself. To hear my voice, it's different. Who is that voice? Where do I hear it?

So I am learning and this has helped [me] to learn to use my voice, to express myself. I always used to be quiet before [and let my husband talk for us].

This sentiment was also observed by Aleena Gonzalez, a seventeen year old from Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles. She explained that attending a Belong Circle with the youth in her congregation, and reflecting on herself and her family, allowed her to understand how important it is to feel belonging. Through participation in the circles, she began to feel that she is part of a bigger “we.” She shared that even though she felt shy to share at first, she found the

confidence to voice her opinion and perspectives. She is now facilitating Belong Circles among youth across other congregations in Los Angeles.

While some are learning to voice their opinions, other participants learned to take a step back, listen, and re-think what they know. A white participant described this process:

There was some vulnerability of conversations of racism, their story of them being profiled, like the Black woman who was saying they were pulled over by the police ... [For] some of the women ... these are the first times that they opened up candidly about these issues with my wife and I... I can't really identify with that even though I empathize. I can open up about the ways that I have been privileged, because I don't have to fear for my children's lives when they are walking down the street. My son can carry a water gun outside; so I don't have the same fears.

Sharing experiences and reflecting on one's positionality in relation to privilege can be powerful steps in the process of becoming more engaged in civic life and in the name of a larger “we” than previously imagined.

In Dolores Mission Church, a largely Latinx Catholic parish, there was no prior connection between those who attend the Spanish-language mass and the mostly third- and fourth-generation congregants

BELONGING describes values and practices where no person is left out of *our circle of concern*. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen, or feeling included. It means that every member has a *meaningful voice*, that their *well-being is considered*, and that they have the *opportunity to participate* in the design of political, social, and cultural structures. Belonging includes the right to both *contribute* and *make demands* upon society and political institutions.

In Belong Circles, belonging is achieved when participants form *deep relationships* with each other. No matter what space a participant steps into, they carry other's stories, experiences as a new part of themselves.

who attend the English-language mass. These two groups came together for the first time through Belong Circles, helping lead to a more diverse church organizing committee. Most importantly, the circles allowed participants to see one another as well as learn about and understand each other's unique needs. Attendees of the English mass signed commitment cards to support housing policy reform when they learned — through the circle — that these reform would benefit the recent immigrants who attend the Spanish mass.

Belong Circles call on participants to recognize the ways in which everyone's issues are connected through related systemic failures, such as structural racism. "For example if we look at mass incarceration," Ashlin elaborated, "it is the same [system] incarcerating immigrants at the border." Both function to profit from violence against Black and brown people, but in order identify that shared analysis, "we had to get people in the same room," she explained. Without intentional conversations, these issues are often seen as separate. Combining personal stories with shared analysis facilitates trust and a sense of shared fate.

Ashlin said that organizers and community members want to know "if I show up for you at the border, are you going to show up for me at a protest?" When the answer is 'yes,' bridging has begun. Belong Circles recognize the importance of forming relationships so that when urgent needs arise, it is easier to mobilize.

PICO California sees its Belong Circles as a successful approach and continues to support their facilitation across the state. At the same time, the organization is reflecting on how it should adapt to best serve Californians, as well as how to continue innovating and centering the practices of bridging and belonging in its ten-year plan.

Through the circles, PICO California has seen that while strong political analysis and profound personal stories are critical to organizing for social change, these must be wed to emotional intelligence and commitment to self growth. Bridging to belonging is work of both heart and mind, and an ongoing process of reflection and learning.

“ Together the sessions help participants move from / and me to we and us. ”



Top: Jabbar (left) and Billy (right) role-play inviting participants to a Belong Circle during a facilitator training session.

Bottom: Members of Ceasefire and API Rise join at a Belong Circle to bridge Black and Asian/Pacific Islander communities. These sessions lead to continued solidarity and engagement following the murder of George Floyd as well as the rise of anti-Asian violence.

Further readings and resources

- If you are interested in facilitating a Belong Circle of your own, please read “**Belong Circle Leader Guide**” from the **Belong Movement**. Please visit picocalifornia.org or reach out to info@picocalifornia.org for the guide and other information.
- You can watch the videos referenced in this case study at the **Othering & Belonging Institute website**. “**Bridging: Towards a Society Built on Belonging**” provides a shared analysis on how *us versus them* narratives are created and how bridging can address them. “**The Circle of Human Concern**” outlines how structures including the built environment can systematically exclude groups with along lines of social difference. “**Targeted Universalism**” highlights how universal goals can be achieved through targeted approaches for different groups.

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Photo collage stitched together from various demonstrations and gatherings held by PICO California in solidarity with immigrant communities and against the detention of migrant families.

Photo courtesy of PICO California.

