

# Where Do You Belong?

by Irene Tibbenham

**A**t primary school I was called racially derogatory names by fellow pupils. Once an influential youth leader said publicly to several hundred impressionable teenagers, including me, that “If all races were free to inter-marry, the world would be full of coffee-coloured children”. At 12 years of age and clearly a “coffee-coloured” child, this fact of biology<sup>1</sup> was impossible to hide from those around me. Why didn’t the ground swallow me up there and then?

The English teachers at my all-white grammar high school humiliated me regularly in blatantly racist terms. Strangers would think nothing of staring (rudely) at me, or demand to know “what I had got in me”. Their real question was: why did I look different from those around me? Consider that this was 40 years ago when England was a rather different place to what it is now!

As time went on, increasing travel, immigration and cross-fertilisation between countries increased; curry became England’s favourite dish; laws were introduced to make racial discrimination illegal. Now, just the occasional stranger will

tell me to go back to where I came from—wherever that is supposed to be! Born in the Himalayas to racially different parents who were living there temporarily, and influenced by three distinct cultures, where exactly did I belong? Personal identity is not simply racial taxonomy; it’s tied in to belonging; but where exactly is that?

“Identity” is from a Latin word meaning “same”. Besides the sense of who or what a person is and belongs to, identity is about “sameness”. Just think of the word “identical”. Being human, it is natural to focus on physical sameness, such as male/female,

*Where does a “coffee-coloured child” with no identifiable community belong?*





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skin-colour, hair, race, stature, age, and other aspects we have no control over. However, our identity is also made up of aspects we do have choice over, such as what we wear, our political leanings, our faith, how we spend our time, and so on. This sameness naturally draws us together: just think of hobbies, interests, lifestyles, and outlooks. Most of us are comfortable with people most like ourselves. We all instinctively want to belong somewhere, and this is tied in with our wellbeing.

Belonging to a community gives a group resilience and confidence, and strength, through engagement and friendship—perhaps, even love. People who don't feel they belong may become isolated, suffer loneliness, in some cases anxiety and depression. Young people who don't feel they belong anywhere may be targeted prey for the sex trade, violent gangs,

or radicalisation into extremist groups. Belonging is good, conceivably life-saving.

So, where did a “coffee-coloured child” with no identifiable community belong, you may well ask? As a child who attended church regularly, I was taught that I belonged to God. Actually, my view is still that we all do! Perhaps some of us exist in a form society may look down on: physically disabled, mentally ill, “special needs”, or even someone with a criminal record. Yet no matter who (or how) you are, God made each of us to be like him, to have his identity. How can this happen?

Well, at church I came to understand that God became human,<sup>2</sup> in the person of Jesus Christ, simply so he could identify with me and with you in every possible way. This Jesus died for us, too. Why? So that we could become permanent

members of that ultimate community, the diverse children of the wonderful God who made each of us uniquely different. This community is one that will always love me and to which I will always belong.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever you are, you're invited, so why not connect with the church community, too? After all...you already belong!

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Race identity is socially derived from a person's physical features such as white or black skin tone. [www.livescience.com/33903-difference-race-ethnicity.html](http://www.livescience.com/33903-difference-race-ethnicity.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:6–7 “Christ had completely the same nature as God....He [Christ] became like men.” (EasyEnglish Bible)
- <sup>3</sup> Romans 8:38–39 “Nothing can make us separate from God, who loves us... There is nothing else in the whole world that can stop God from loving us.” (EasyEnglish Bible)