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9-2021

### Fitting In

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# Fitting In

Belonging is a fundamental human need, according to God's design. Humans are created to be social beings, and family is one of the first ways in which we experience belonging and learn to value it.

Going to college can be a very scary transition, in part because we wonder if we will fit in and be accepted. However, God is always with us and can show us we belong in the smallest of ways, if we are open to His leading. For me, I came to Andrews University as a potential faculty member, but I was ready to run away at the first sign that I didn't belong. I am a Hispanic woman who studies violence against women among religious groups, and I had experienced enough to know that my work was not always welcomed with open arms. But I had to trust that if God wanted me here, He would make sure I knew. Somehow, He would let me know whether I would be accepted and if I could belong.

When I was invited for an interview, we had just unexpectedly lost our cousin and two close church members within the past week. I had a funny feeling about everything and was very edgy. At the time, my department was all male faculty members, and I wondered about whether I would "fit in." I had very different training than most of them, and did not know if they would be supportive of the work I did. I asked God for a sign. "Just one," I told Him. Honestly though, I was asking for a sign to leave, not one that would make me consider an offer to work here.

As we were walking to lunch, I heard a piece of a conversation about how women's IQ is, on average, lower than men's, which is why women aren't as qualified. "Aha!" I thought, "that's my sign. I'll eat lunch with these people, then run away and never come back!" God must have smiled. Someone else then said, "Yes. And on average, IQs for Asian Americans are higher than

any other ethnic group, so we should only hire male Asian Americans." That's when I figured out they were talking about how people misinterpret statistics, and how dangerous it can be to draw conclusions when you don't know the context. These men were looking to change misconceptions. Maybe this was another kind of sign. Was God really trying to tell me I could belong at Andrews?

It's been 11 years, and I am still here, so I think I read the "signs" correctly. I found my work family, my people with whom I "belong." When deciding where to study or work, it's important to feel like you belong, or you won't enjoy it and your health will suffer. However, don't judge a book by its cover. At first glance, AU did not seem like a place where I could belong. I did not see eye-to-eye with some people, and I still don't. But God has opened doors for my work to continue and grow, raising awareness of violence against women and families, and creating projects to effect change in our religious community.

When you think about where God is leading you, look for the signs, be careful of rushing to judgment, and be open to God's directions. May you be blessed and be a blessing wherever you go. May you feel like you belong, so you can grow and thrive and, in your own way, work to change this world. ■

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*Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of Psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband, Segundo, have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolve around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.*



▲ Melissa Ponce-Rodas

