



The Belonging Forum

2026 Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program

Partner Organization:

Synergos Institute – South Africa



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Synergos Institute is a global nonprofit organization founded in 1987 that works to reduce poverty and inequality by strengthening collaborative leadership and building trust across divides. In South Africa, Synergos focuses on social cohesion, inclusive leadership, and systems transformation in contexts shaped by inequality, historical trauma, and institutional fragmentation.

Our mission is to cultivate leaders and partnerships that can solve complex societal challenges through collaboration, empathy, and shared purpose. A distinctive aspect of Synergos' work is the integration of Inner Work for Outer Change— recognizing that sustainable transformation requires shifts in mindsets, relationships, and systems. Programs include Bridging Leadership development, the Spiritual Civilization initiative, community dialogues, and multi-stakeholder partnerships that bring together civil society, government, business, and community actors.

Synergos emphasizes culturally grounded approaches, reflective practice, and ethical leadership to foster belonging and dignity. Our work spans local, national, and global networks committed to inclusive and sustainable development.

Learn more at: Synergos Institute – www.synergos.org

Location of the Project: Johannesburg, South Africa (Hybrid – remote participation possible)

The Fellow may be based remotely or on site in Johannesburg. Physical presence can enrich the research experience through participation in dialogues, workshops, and community engagements, but it is not strictly required. Synergos staff will provide mentorship and regular engagement regardless of location. The hybrid model supports accessibility while

ensuring the Fellow's sense of connection and belonging within the organization.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Section 1: Description of the Project

Synergos Institute – South Africa proposes to host a Fellow to conduct rigorous research on the intersections of belonging, spirituality, wellbeing, and inner work as foundations for collaborative leadership and social transformation. Grounded in Synergos' Bridging Leadership approach, the project will examine how inner dimensions of leadership – such as self-awareness, purpose, compassion, and meaning-making – influence the capacity of individuals and groups to build trust, navigate difference, and co-create solutions to complex societal challenges.

The participatory research will be situated in real-world contexts where leaders, practitioners, and communities are working across divides shaped by inequality, historical trauma, identity, or institutional distrust. Particular attention will be given to culturally rooted spiritual and reflective practices that foster connection, resilience, and ethical action, strengthening belonging for individuals and communities.

Spirituality will be understood inclusively, encompassing religious, indigenous, contemplative, and secular forms of meaning-making. Using qualitative or mixed methodologies such as interviews, focus groups, and case studies, the Fellow will document lived experiences of belonging and examine how inner work contributes to effective bridging across social, cultural, and political differences.

The project aims to generate publishable academic knowledge while remaining grounded in practice and respectful engagement with participants. Ultimately, it seeks to illuminate how personal transformation and collective wellbeing are interdependent, offering evidence for more holistic approaches to leadership and systems change.

Section 2: Goals of the Project

The primary goal of this project is to advance understanding of belonging as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped not only by social structures but also by inner life, spirituality, and wellbeing. By situating research within Synergos' Bridging Leadership practice, the project will explore how cultivating inner capacities can strengthen social connectedness and collaborative action in divided contexts.

The Fellow will engage with Synergos' [Spiritual Civilization initiative](#) and [Inner Work for Social Change](#) community, examining how reflective and meaning-centered practices contribute to trust-building, resilience, and ethical leadership. The Bridging Leadership framework – emphasizing Self, Others, and System – provides a practical lens for linking personal transformation to relational dynamics and structural change.

This work aligns closely with the Belonging Forum's focus on belonging as rooted in relationships (People), connection to context (Place), agency (Power), and shared meaning (Purpose). By foregrounding spirituality and meaning-making – dimensions often overlooked in conventional policy research – the project expands the understanding of what enables individuals and societies to experience connection, dignity, and participation.

For Synergos, the research will strengthen evidence for integrating inner work into leadership development and collective problem-solving. For the Belonging Forum, it contributes culturally grounded scholarship that bridges theory and practice. Ultimately, the project seeks to influence academic discourse, leadership practice, and public dialogue by demonstrating that belonging is essential for wellbeing, peacebuilding, and equitable development.

Section 3: Guiding Questions

Key guiding questions include:

- How do spirituality and inner work shape individuals' experiences of belonging, purpose, and wellbeing?
- In what ways do inner capacities influence leaders' ability to bridge divides and foster inclusive collaboration?

- What culturally grounded practices support connectedness in communities facing fragmentation or inequality?
- How can leadership development intentionally cultivate conditions for belonging across People, Place, Power, and Purpose?

The intended audience includes scholars in leadership, social sciences, psychology, and development studies; practitioners working in social cohesion and community development; civil society organizations; and institutions seeking holistic approaches to leadership and transformation.

Section 4: Research Methods & Dissemination Approach: The 3 Streams

Within the Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program, we propose three research streams:

- **Creative**
- **Advocacy**
- **Academic**

The tracks are designed to articulate the possibilities of diverse scholarship on belonging. The program recognizes that creative methods, advocacy-focused research, and academic research are all scholarly. All three tracks have the potential to address similar topics. We encourage Fellows and Partners to explore different ways of asking questions and sharing knowledge that instills belonging for the researcher and participants.

The primary deliverable will be an **academic research output** suitable for initial publication, such as an article or comprehensive scholarly paper examining the relationship between belonging, spirituality, inner work, and bridging leadership.

Additional deliverables may include a conference presentation, an academic or practitioner-oriented summary to enhance accessibility, and contributions to knowledge platforms associated with the Belonging Forum. Where appropriate, insights may inform leadership development materials. These methods will document lived experiences of belonging and examine the role of spirituality and inner work in leadership and community resilience.

All outputs will uphold ethical research standards and reflect the voices and experiences of participants while contributing to broader academic and public understanding of belonging as a critical dimension of social transformation.

Research Methodologies

Rationale for Academic Research

Despite growing recognition of these dimensions, academic literature often treats leadership, development, and policy as primarily technical or structural processes. Research on belonging and spirituality is frequently siloed within psychology or religious studies, with limited integration into leadership and social transformation scholarship.

This fellowship aims to contribute rigorous academic research that bridges these fields and foregrounds perspectives from the Global South. The research will also be foregrounded with the Imbeleko Research which was done at the onset of understanding Indigenous Knowledge Systems and our levels of connectedness.

Research Objectives

The hosted Fellow(s) will be supported to pursue research that:

- Examines how spirituality and inner work shape experiences of belonging.
- Investigates the relationship between inner transformation and collaborative leadership capacity.
- Explores culturally grounded practices that foster wellbeing and social cohesion.
- Documents lived experiences of leaders and communities working across divides.
- Produces scholarly work – draft form towards suitability for mini-publication and academic presentation and dissemination.

Possible Research Questions (Illustrative)

- How do spiritual and cultural practices contribute to a sense of belonging in diverse communities?
- In what ways does inner work influence leaders' ability to bridge social, political, or identity-based divides?
- How does belonging affect wellbeing and civic participation?
- What role do meaning and purpose play in sustaining leadership for social change?
- How can leadership development programs intentionally cultivate belonging?

Methodological Approach (Academic Stream)

Research will employ rigorous qualitative or mixed methods consistent with Academic Stream guidelines, such as:

- Semi-structured interviews with leaders, practitioners, and community members
- Focus groups exploring lived experiences of belonging
- Critical ethnography within collaborative initiatives
- Case study analysis of Bridging Leadership processes
- Archival and secondary research
- Reflexive practitioner research

Methodologies will prioritize ethical engagement, respect for local knowledge systems, and sensitivity to cultural and spiritual diversity.

Synergos is also flexible in terms of the research approach based on the guidance from the Belonging Forum and opportunities for cross collaboration linked to the aligned outcomes of the research.

Synergos also encourages interaction across its networks and also the networks of the Belonging Forum to get a broader perspective for the research.

Outputs

Primary outputs will be scholarly and suitable for academic dissemination:

- Publishable research paper or journal article

- Comprehensive research report or white paper – Abridged due to timeframe. A draft that can be used in future and built on over time.
- Conference presentations
- Contributions to academic discourse on belonging

Secondary outputs may include accessible summaries for practitioners and communities.

Synergos' Contribution as Host

Fellow may be exposed to some, not all, for the duration of the fellowship: Synergos will provide a supportive ecosystem that integrates the fellowship with real-world practice.

- **Intellectual Mentorship** – The fellow will receive guidance from experienced practitioners in collaborative leadership, social cohesion, and systems change.
- **Access to Practice Contexts** – Fellow may engage with leadership initiatives, community dialogues, and multi-stakeholder processes where belonging is actively cultivated.
- **Inner Work Learning Environment** – Fellow will have opportunities to observe or participate in reflective practices used in leadership development, enabling deeper understanding of inner dimensions of transformation.
- **Community Connection** – Synergos' networks include civil society leaders, community organizers, youth groups, and cross-sector partners, offering rich perspectives for research.
- **Ethical Support** – Guidance will be provided to ensure respectful engagement and reciprocity with participating communities.

Skills & Qualifications Required – Tailored for Master's Students

Educational Experience

- Currently enrolled in or recently completed a Master's degree in fields such as social sciences, development studies, psychology, leadership, public policy, theology/religious studies, peace and conflict studies, or related disciplines.

- Foundational training in qualitative or mixed-methods research
- Experience completing academic research papers or a thesis.

Background Knowledge / Areas of Study

- Demonstrated interest in belonging, social connectedness, wellbeing, or social cohesion.
- Coursework or exposure to leadership, systems change, community development, or social justice.
- Interest in spirituality, inner development, ethics, or meaning-making (religious or secular perspectives).
- Awareness of issues related to social justice, ecological belonging, inequality, diversity, and Global South contexts is beneficial

Additional Hard & Soft Skills

- Strong academic writing and analytical skills appropriate for graduate-level work
- Ability to conduct literature reviews and basic field research (interviews, focus groups, surveys)
- Good communication and active listening skills
- Cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse perspectives and identities
- Reflective capacity and openness to personal learning and inner work practices
- Ability to work independently with remote supervision while meeting deadlines
- Basic facilitation or group engagement skills are an asset

Lived Experience (Preferred, Not Required)

- Interest or experience in community engagement, social impact work, or volunteerism
- Exposure to culturally diverse environments or contexts of social inequality
- Personal interest in wellbeing, spirituality, or leadership for social change



Hosting Fellows in the Academic Stream aligns strongly with Synergos' mission to cultivate collaborative leadership for a just and inclusive world. By focusing on belonging, wellbeing, spirituality, and inner work, this fellowship will begin to generate knowledge that addresses root causes of fragmentation and unlocks new possibilities for transformative change.

Synergos is committed to providing a rigorous, supportive, and ethically grounded environment where the fellow can produce high-quality academic work while remaining connected to the communities and realities their research seeks to serve.

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