

# A Community of Belonging through Inclusive Metadata

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**ABSTRACT:** The Brigham Young University (BYU) Library has long held a strong desire to foster a thriving environment of belonging. This desire to cultivate and embody the principles of belonging has impacted all areas of the library, inspired increased advocacy for the value of cultural humility, and served as the driving force behind the creation of the Inclusive Metadata Policy, a policy to help ensure that descriptions of library materials are inclusive and respectful of all peoples and cultures. Major gospel-centric principles used to guide the development of this policy were structured around the six guiding principles of belonging developed by BYU's Office of Belonging. Throughout this paper, we examine these principles and consider the positive changes that have already resulted from our desire for belonging in the library and future description improvements due to the Inclusive Metadata Policy.

## INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, Brigham Young University's (BYU) newly created Office of Belonging released a Statement on Belonging, which declared, "We are united by our common primary identity as children of God," and "we value and embrace the variety of individual characteristics . . . of the [BYU] community" (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-c). With a desire to support an environment of belonging, the BYU Library developed an Inclusive Metadata Policy and established a method for library patrons to submit feedback if they find potentially offensive or harmful language within library metadata.

In librarianship, metadata is descriptive information that helps people find, identify, select, and obtain library resources (Tillett 2004). Examples of metadata include a book's title, author, call number, and subjects. Metadata records are commonly found in systems such as the online catalog or archival finding aid repository and describe the library's physical and digital collection materials. For most library patrons, the online catalog is the first point of contact with these library materials. Drabinski (2019) notes, "As the tools that order things, our catalogs and classification structures are themselves technologies of power, facilitating some ways of knowing and not others, representing certain ideological ways of seeing the world, and, crucially, not others" (5). These structures have the power to either exclude patrons or to "expand, humanize, and simplify access to library resources and information" (Berman and Gross 2017, 17). Ensuring that descriptions of library materials are inclusive and respectful of all peoples and cultures is an important responsibility and a means for cultivating belonging.

The application of metadata standards to promote inclusiveness and cultural humility has long posed a significant challenge for librarians. In response to this challenge, our library is committed to critically examining past practices and ensuring that our current metadata practices foster a

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sense of belonging. In doing so, we aim to “find sustainable ways to make our cataloging and classification systems more equitable in the long term” (Fox and Gross 2024, 16). Bair’s (2005) proposed Code of Ethics for Cataloging emphasizes the essential role of catalogers in this process, explaining, “Catalogers recognize and accept the privilege and responsibility that is ours as gatekeepers of information and architects of the information infrastructure to provide fair and equitable access to relevant, appropriate, accurate, and uncensored information in a timely manner and free of personal or cultural bias” (15). By accepting this responsibility, catalogers also become responsible to thoughtfully articulate the policies that guide their practice.

In creating the Inclusive Metadata Policy, the library took inspiration from the BYU Mission and Aims, the BYU Statement on Belonging, and the library’s strategic objectives, as well as professional librarianship resources, industry standards, and gospel principles according to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The spiritual doctrine of belonging helped shape the secular application of inclusive metadata. By incorporating gospel methodology and professional best practices into the policy creation, the library worked towards facilitating a community of belonging through metadata.

Major gospel-centric principles used to guide the development of this policy were structured around the six guiding principles of belonging developed by BYU’s Office of Belonging, which are as follows: first, anchoring the policy “in eternal truths, and the teachings of Jesus Christ and living prophets”; second, focusing on our three enduring designations as outlined by Latter-day Saints (LDS) President Russell M. Nelson (“child of God,” “child of the covenant,” and “disciple of Jesus Christ”) (Nelson 2022); third, cultivating Christlike attributes; fourth, emphasizing belonging through “gathering the Lord’s covenant people,” the importance of “service and sacrifice” in belonging, and “the centrality of Jesus Christ”; fifth, avoiding “secular ideologies and concepts that divide, polarize, and victimize”; and sixth, inspiring others to “stand fast with love in proclaiming truth” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b).

### **ANCHOR IN ETERNAL TRUTHS**

The first principle is to “anchor [belonging] in eternal truths, and the teachings of Jesus Christ and living prophets.” Belonging is an eternal truth taught by the Savior and still taught by our living prophets today. The Savior’s ministry focused on all people, regardless of their station in society or the way they were perceived by others based on worldly standards (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). “During His mortal life, the Savior ministered to all: to the happy and accomplished, to the broken and lost, and to those without hope. Often, the people He served and ministered to were not individuals of prominence, beauty, or wealth. Often, the people He lifted up had little to offer in return but gratitude, a humble heart, and the desire to have faith” (Uchtdorf 2020). The Lord was able to look beyond the outward traits and trappings of an individual. “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7 KJV). This concept of ministering to all can lead our BYU community toward becoming a Zion people, “of one heart and one mind,” dwelling in righteousness, with “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18, The Pearl of Great Price). The parable of the Good Samaritan conveys the need to see ourselves as one: “His deliberate use of Jews and Samaritans clearly teaches that we are all neighbors and that we should love, esteem, respect, and serve one another despite our deepest differences—including religious, political, and cultural differences” (Ballard 2002). As we strive toward Zion, we can receive blessings. “To belong with God and to walk with each other on His covenant path is to be blessed by covenant belonging” (Gong 2019).

**FOCUS ON THE “THREE ENDURING DESIGNATIONS”**

The second principle is to “focus on the ‘three enduring designations: “child of God,” “child of the covenant,” and “disciple of Jesus Christ”” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). In recent years, BYU leadership has strived to help us recognize that we are all children of God, and this recognition should be reflected in our everyday interactions. Our interactions reflect our recognition of each individual’s worth. BYU President Shane Reese said, “There is a difference between helping someone feel welcome versus helping them belong. Welcomeness means one side feels like they’re doing all they can do, and yet the other side may still not feel it. Belonging is this two-sided, reciprocal relationship, and I think that’s where the covenantal belonging is so important. At BYU, the power of that reciprocal relationship comes through shared covenantal bonds with Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father” (Sorenson 2024). This reciprocal relationship of covenant belonging is further defined as follows: “Belonging is more than just being included. It is the embodiment of Christ-like love based on the belief that we are all children of God, with unique experiences, gifts, and talents. It means gathering as a covenant community, being committed to serving and sacrificing, and centering our lives on Jesus Christ. Through covenant belonging we are bound to God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ and each other. A sense of belonging is important to our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, and to achieving our shared objective of establishing Zion” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-a). As BYU strives to become a “community of belonging composed of students, faculty, and staff whose hearts are knit together in love” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-c), we can turn to our leaders for guidance. BYU President Shane Reese reminded us that recognizing we are children of our Heavenly Father can provide a framework to be “enlightened by inspiration about how our hearts can be ‘knit together in unity and in love one towards one another’” (Reese 2021). Lacking a sense of belonging can be a result of not understanding that we are “loved by our Heavenly Father and that we all belong to His eternal family” (Ballard 2021).

As the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becomes more diverse, that diversity will be reflected in the BYU community. This increased diversity makes it even more important to proactively root out discrimination among our members. Alma observed problematic attitudes toward those who differed among his people: “Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted” (Alma 4:12, The Book of Mormon). Elder D. Todd Christofferson has offered a more inclusive response to differences, stating, “As our Church population grows ever more diverse, our welcome must grow ever more spontaneous and warm. We need one another” (Christofferson 2022).

The scriptures invite us to recognize that we are all children of God, and all can receive the blessings of salvation: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28 KJV). It is important that we reflect our beliefs in describing peoples of the world with humility and kindness. Alma cautioned, “Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another; yea, will ye persist in the persecution of your brethren, who humble themselves and do walk after the holy order of God, wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and they do bring forth works which are meet for repentance” (Alma 5:54, The Book of Mormon). Approaching our descriptions with welcoming language helps to reflect this acceptance of all peoples and brings them closer to the Savior. John wrote, “But as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13 KJV).

## CULTIVATE CHRISTLIKE ATTRIBUTES

The third principle is to “cultivate Christlike attributes” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). Understanding that we are disciples of Christ leads us to develop his attributes. The scriptures can guide us in the development of Christlike traits. We are cautioned in the scriptures to “let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:3-4 KJV). Directing our thoughts and actions away from ourselves and toward others is an important step toward becoming more like Christ. “So where do we start? I think, first of all, with the wonder that we are already called into being as a beloved community: we are all beloved now. No exceptions. The Lord has called us together because He simply can’t take His eyes off us in love. So we need to reflect that wonder. We need to show that whoever somebody is—whatever their color, creed, background, gender, sexual orientation, you name it—the Lord loves them. That is the baseline. We don’t have to build that; that is the fact” (Teal 2021).

As we examine Christ’s life, we learn that he taught the gospel to everyone, regardless of their sins and their status in society. “He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him . . . and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33, The Book of Mormon). In the Church’s General Handbook we are told, “The Church calls on all people to abandon attitudes and actions of prejudice toward any group or individual. Members of the Church should lead out in promoting respect for all of God’s children. Members follow the Savior’s commandment to love others (see Matthew 22:35–39). They strive to be persons of goodwill toward all, rejecting prejudice of any kind” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2024, chap. 38). “Belonging summons the courage to confront our own prejudices and to challenge the assumptions we make about others. Belonging enlists those who are wise enough to just listen and humble enough to admit what they don’t fully understand” (Rash 2019).

LDS President Russell M. Nelson has encouraged us to let God prevail in our lives. “Anytime we do anything that helps anyone—on either side of the veil—to make and keep their covenants with God, we are helping to gather Israel” (Nelson 2020). Rooting out prejudice and becoming more like Christ is not easy. It is through humility that we can find the strength to look towards Him as an example. “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5 KJV).

Similarly, we must strive to develop a sense of cultural humility, which is “a continuous process of learning, critical self-reflection, and growth to identify and be aware of one’s personal biases towards people of different cultures, backgrounds, religions, etc., to be able to build relationships. Cultural humility is ultimately about engaging in the culture of God. Where ‘all are alike unto God,’ we are gifted the opportunity to learn, unlearn, and relearn more about ourselves to open our hearts to love more fully” (Lewis et al. 2024). Cultural humility begins with seeing all people as children of God and continues with developing a sense of self-awareness of your own cultural background and biases, as well as a sense of appreciation and love for the cultures of others.

## EMPHASIZE THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST

The fourth principle is to “emphasize ‘(1) the role of belonging in gathering the Lord’s covenant people, (2) the importance of service and sacrifice in belonging, and (3) the centrality of Jesus Christ to belonging’” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). The Savior has taught that all are invited to come

unto him to receive salvation and eternal life. “The Savior invites us to come unto Him—no matter our circumstances. We come to church to renew our covenants, to increase our faith, to find peace, and to do as He did perfectly in His life—minister to others who feel like they don’t belong” (King 2020). A revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith during a conference in 1831 taught, “Behold, this I have given unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27).

The invitation to come unto Christ is for all peoples. The Savior does not differentiate between people; instead, he “extends to all” (Uchtdorf 2020). John C. Pingree, Jr. (2023) wrote about how belonging can affect our divine identity: “When we make and strive to keep sacred covenants with God, we begin to experience a sense of belonging greater than can be achieved through affiliation with any earthly or temporal group.” This sense of community can allow us to be “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19 KJV).

Having a common goal to return to our Heavenly Father can help us to see that “we are already one in that each has spiritual gifts. We are already one in each having the capacity—whatever our circumstance—to grow. We are one already” (Kirkham 1994). President Reese has encouraged us to foster a sense of community at BYU: “We can do it in a way that is unique because of BYU and because of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Reese 2020).

## **AVOID SECULAR IDEOLOGIES**

The fifth principle is to “avoid secular ideologies and concepts that divide, polarize, and victimize” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). As part of the BYU community, we strive to “value and embrace the variety of individual characteristics, life experiences and circumstances, perspectives, talents, and gifts of each member of the community and the richness and strength they bring to our community” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-c). The apostle Paul encouraged us to come together in Christ when he said, “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Romans 12: 5 KJV). In an address to the BYU community, Professor Kate Kirkham explained, “‘We, being many, are one’ is a statement of both diversity and inclusion—a description with us from the beginning and about us as a people” (Kirkham 1994).

To understand what it means for the BYU community to come together as one, it is important to understand what a unified and inclusive society looks like. “Unity is also a broad, comprehensive term but most certainly exemplifies the first and second great commandments to love God and love our fellowmen. It denotes a Zion people whose hearts and minds are ‘knit together in unity’” (Cook 2020). President Kevin Worthen explained, “And on this topic at this university, the two points that most unite us may distinguish and differentiate us from many other universities. The BYU Statement on Belonging begins: ‘We are united by our common primary identity as children of God . . . and our commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.’ In other words, we share a common understanding of who we really are and why we are really here on earth” (Worthen 2021).

Focusing on the spiritual goals that unite us can help us to avoid the secular ideologies that separate us. “For example, too much focus on our genetic and environmental differences can be an obstacle to our connection with God. The adversary attempts to exploit these differences to divert us from our common divine parentage. We receive labels from others and sometimes even assume them ourselves. There is nothing inherently wrong in identifying with others based on earthly characteristics; in fact, many of us find joy and support from those with similar traits and experiences. However, when we forget our core identity as God’s children, we can begin to fear, distrust, or feel superior

to those different from us. These attitudes often lead to division, discrimination, and even destruction” (Pingree 2023). Focusing on earthly characteristics that separate us can replace our common identity as children of our Heavenly Father. “Faith in God is ultimately something we exercise our God-given agency to choose to accept. But that does not mean it is an ordinary choice or merely a preference in the sense that many secular thinkers understand it. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Once experienced and accepted, faith in God is life-altering. The fateful, life-changing choice to believe influences deeply one’s personal, familial, and cultural identity. It defines who and what we are, how we understand our purpose for being, how we relate to others, and how we deal with pain, suffering, and death” (Clayton 2019).

Remembering our common identity and avoiding ideologies that separate us helps us to understand that “we share a common understanding of who we really are and why we are really here on earth” (Worthen 2021). This knowledge of a common spiritual identity can help us to understand that “we cannot change nor take away the burdens of others, but we can include and belong to each other in love” (Parkin 2004). As we strive to avoid these secular ideologies, we can become like the Lamanites and Nephites after Christ visited the Americas: “And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:15, The Book of Mormon).

## **INSPIRE OTHERS**

Once we understand that we are all children of God and how important it is to come together as a community of Christ, we can apply the sixth principle, which is to “inspire others to individually and collectively ‘stand fast with love in proclaiming truth’” (BYU: The Office of Belonging, n.d.-b). Many of our efforts to inspire others are a result of recognizing that every individual has something to add and that we can help each other to grow. “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Corinthians 14:26 KJV). When we acknowledge the contributions of ourselves and others, we embrace the signs of belonging. With an open mind and an open heart, “we should be diligent in rooting prejudice and discrimination out of the Church, out of our homes, and, most of all, out of our hearts” (Christofferson 2022). In the New Testament, we learn about what an ideal community looks like: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Corinthians 12: 25–27 KJV). Coming together takes a change of mindset, and it takes action. “As we engage in God’s work, we do not just belong as members of a group; rather, we become real partners with God and His Son, Jesus Christ. There is no greater feeling than knowing that God trusts us sufficiently to work through us to bring eternal life to others” (Pingree Jr. 2023). As our mindset changes, “we will find ourselves by looking first for others and seeking to address their needs. Put differently, one of the best forms of self-care is to look first to care for the needs of others” (Reese 2024).

## **PRINCIPLES IN ACTION**

The desire to embody these principles of belonging has impacted all areas of the library and has inspired an increased advocacy for the value of cultural humility overall. Within the past few years, for example, the library has prepared well-received displays celebrating Día de los Muertos (i.e., the Day of the Dead); has curated exhibits in Special Collections highlighting the achievements of people

of color, such as BYU's first Black graduate, Norman Wilson; has developed research guides and exhibits to inform patrons about diverse influential figures, such as the Dakota writer and activist Zitkála-Šá; and has created book displays to commemorate events such as Women's History Month. This desire to anchor belonging in eternal truths was also the primary driving force behind the creation of the Inclusive Metadata Policy.

Our metadata should reflect that we invite all to come unto Christ. When harmful or antiquated language is used to describe others, that language invokes feelings of not being accepted as part of Christ's community instead of helping patrons discover rich and meaningful resources. We want our patrons to have positive experiences when using the library catalog. This desire to improve our metadata and to help ensure consistency led to the library creating an inclusive metadata policy and recommendations on how to apply the policy.

The library's Metadata Management Committee, responsible for investigating metadata standards, projects, and initiatives, was tasked with developing the Inclusive Metadata Policy. The committee conducted extensive background research to consider the impact of inclusive metadata on library patrons and staff from a professional and spiritual viewpoint (see Lewis et al. 2024 for more on cataloging ethics). This research resulted in the creation of two documents. The first document provides high-level guidance for metadata creators by outlining the purpose of inclusive metadata, providing definitions for key concepts used throughout the policy, and listing guiding principles for creating inclusive metadata, such as considering patron feedback and practicing cultural humility when revising outdated metadata. It outlines the overall spiritual principles that underpin library practices. For example, this first policy document affirms the value of the individual, including all of their diverse "characteristics, life experiences and circumstances, perspectives, talents, and gifts" (Lewis et al. 2024), encouraging librarians to use language that puts the person before their identities. It acknowledges the library's open invitation for all patrons to discover and understand collection materials. It explains the library's goal of promoting unity and belonging by creating more inclusive metadata using the respectful descriptors preferred by the described peoples and cultures. It highlights librarians' responsibilities as stewards of library collections and item descriptions. Finally, it encourages the library-wide practice of cultural humility and urges librarians to remediate harmful language wherever it may exist in the library's metadata.

The second document provides practical recommendations to aid metadata creators in applying the guiding principles in their day-to-day workflows and processes. For example, the recommendations document provides links to several online cultural humility trainings for metadata stewards, explains how to choose between different types of terminologies in various situations, and lists other professional standards and best practice guidelines for metadata stewards to consult in their work. The recommendation document's practical suggestions and resources assist librarians in understanding how to apply the primary policy document's overarching principles.

After these policy statements were initially drafted, the committee reviewed them over the course of about three months, workshopping policy content, language, and organization. After making revisions, the committee sent a draft of the policy documents to the library administration for review. The committee also sent the draft to the library's Cataloging & Metadata Department for feedback to ensure consistency with established industry standards. Additionally, the committee consulted the university's Office of Belonging to discuss the drafts, seek guidance on the definition and usage of "cultural humility," and schedule regular cultural humility training for library employees. After receiving feedback and clarifying questions about the drafts, the committee again reviewed and revised the policy documents to reflect the expressed concerns and considerations. The committee discussed and later codified in the policy documents how feedback from patrons would be accepted

and incorporated into library metadata to ensure that the voices of all library users would be heard and considered.

After incorporating feedback from all stakeholders, the committee made final revisions and sent the completed policy documents to the library administration for review. The committee chair attended the meeting with the library administration to discuss the documents and answer any remaining questions. After a few minor tweaks, the library administration accepted the final drafts. The committee then officially presented the policy documents to the Cataloging & Metadata Department and all other metadata stewards throughout the library so they could consider them before annual evaluations while setting their goals for the upcoming year.

Almost immediately, the institution of the Inclusive Metadata Policy led to other positive changes within the library. For example, many metadata stewards included an additional goal in their annual reports to learn more about inclusive metadata and find ways to apply the guiding principles from the policy documents to their work. Additionally, as a natural outgrowth of the Inclusive Metadata Policy, the library coordinated with the Office of Belonging to invite all library staff members to participate in cultural humility training. The training especially highlighted the profound impact cultural humility, or by contrast, cultural biases can have on library workers' day-to-day jobs, such as cataloging materials or interacting with patrons, as well as their relationships with their colleagues. Throughout the training, participants were encouraged to share their experiences with cultural humility and to listen to the experiences of others. By fostering an environment of curiosity, flexibility, vulnerability, and self-reflection, the training host enabled participants to practice cultural humility while simultaneously analyzing its effects. Additional trainings have focused on improving descriptive metadata by examining practical examples and working through difficult case studies in a team environment. These trainings and other collaborative meetings that focused on improving inclusivity in our descriptive practices have led to broader discussions about better handling sensitive materials and changing outdated language.

The Inclusive Metadata Policy has encouraged metadata stewards to examine library descriptions more closely to identify and improve instances of outdated terminology or to use more appropriate language. In particular, the Cataloging & Metadata department embarked on several reparative projects to address outdated language and practices. One recent project has involved working with the Library of Congress and other library entities to change subject heading records containing the terms Mormon or Mormons to Latter Day Saint or Latter Day Saints, respectively. We participated in this project to encourage the broader use of the Church's full, preferred name and the preferred names of other similarly impacted religious organizations within our faith tradition, like the Community of Christ. Another project involved changing outdated components of call numbers for materials referring to Black people to a more updated system. Lastly, stewards better reflect on and use the preferred terminologies of different Indigenous groups, ensuring their tribal preferences for identification are respected.

## CONCLUSION

The BYU Library has long held a strong desire to foster a thriving environment of belonging. This desire to cultivate and embody the principles of belonging has impacted all areas of the library, inspired increased advocacy for the value of cultural humility, and served as the driving force behind the creation of the Inclusive Metadata Policy. Major gospel-centric principles used to guide the development of this policy were structured around the six guiding principles of belonging developed by BYU's Office of Belonging. Throughout this paper, we have examined each of these principles and

considered the positive changes that have already resulted from our desire for belonging in the library and future description improvements due to the Inclusive Metadata Policy. We hope the Inclusive Metadata Policy will continue to spark change and a positive movement towards belonging within the library.

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