

CONTAGIOUS COMMUNITY*

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:42-47, NRSV)

Over the past 30 years participation in bowling leagues has drastically declined. So what? With the exception of those among us who buck the trend and continue to bowl together, why should we care? Because according to Harvard researcher Robert Putnam, "...this apparently minor phenomenon [symbolizes] a much broader and vitally significant social change" (<http://www.bowlingalone.com/media.php3>). In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam asserts that, "Over the past thirty years we have become ever more alienated from one another and from our social and political institutions, and that this disengagement poses a critical threat to our personal health, local communities, and national well-being" (Ibid.).

Churches are experiencing a similar decline. While it's true that evangelical and fundamentalist religion has been on an upswing, mainline Protestants like us and Roman

Catholics have been in decline. The decline in participation in our churches reflects the decline in personal and public connectedness throughout American society.

The statistics are alarming. According to Putnam, “Americans today are increasingly disengaged, not only from the public sphere, but from informal and private social relations. For example, we spend about 35% less time visiting with friends than we did thirty years ago, and American families have dinner together only two-thirds as often as they did a generation ago”

(<http://www.bowlingalone.com/media.php3>). Many of you are involved in clubs of various sorts and some are faring no better. “In the mid-1970s the average American attended some club meeting every month, but by 1998 that rate of attendance had been cut by nearly 60%” (Ibid.). On the level of politics and public policy, most Americans vote less, sign fewer petitions, are less involved with grassroots activism, and are less informed than in previous years. Yes, we may be fully informed about Brittany Spears’ pregnancy or Brad Pitt and Jennifer Anniston’s divorce, but how much do we know about the causes of teen suicide on Long Island or the treatment of senior citizens in city nursing homes? Even our recreational life has been affected. “Virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining” (Ibid.).

So what does it matter if present-day Americans are less interested in bowling leagues or signing petitions? It’s not just about the number of people involved. It’s about the positive influence, both personal and public, that we’re losing.

Putnam uses the term, “social capital,” to describe what we experience when we invest ourselves in organizations like the church. “The central premise of

social capital is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all ‘social networks’...and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other...Social capital emphasizes not just warm and cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and - at least sometimes - for bystanders as well” (<http://www.bowlingalone.com/socialcapital.php3>).

When citizens disengage from the public sphere higher crime rates result because neighbor is not looking out for neighbor, children’s educational performance drops because schools decline, there are less positive activities for youth so teen pregnancy rises, and a baby born to a teenage mother will likely weigh less, thus infant mortality rises (Ibid).

That’s the bad news. So what’s the good news? Neighborhoods with higher social capital have healthier children, better schools, less crime, more blood donations, less road rage, and better networking for the flow of information about everything from jobs to the health of the neighbor down the street (Ibid).

Also, if you want to live a more fulfilling and happy life, increase your community involvement and interpersonal interaction. It’s a well know fact that social connections and bonds are a powerful predictor of life satisfaction. From a social capital perspective, “Attending a [church or] club meeting regularly is the equivalent of doubling your income” and “getting married is the equivalent of quadrupling your income” (Ibid.). Just think if you get married in a church you regularly attend you’ll be a social capital millionaire!

One cannot overemphasize the importance of community and a sense of belonging.

My family loves to go camping. Once the temperature begins to rise we look for the perfect weekend to drag the tent up from the basement and head out. No camping trip would be complete without a campfire and the chance to roast hotdogs and marshmallows. As soon as the fire is lit my seven year old, Matthew, is ready to start roasting. He pops a hotdog on a coat hanger and sticks it right in the middle of the flames until the dog itself bursts into flames. The dog chars as I once again remind him that better roasting happens in the hottest part of the fire, the coals, not the flames.

Coals develop slowly after the wood burns for a while. Long after the flames subside, heat continues to generate from the coals as long as they stay together. However, when one glowing ember is removed from the hot group of coals it quickly cools. Our church family reflects the same principle. Together we share warm community that provides light and heat for a world that is too often dark and cold. When we drift away from our faith community, we as individuals lose the warm sense of togetherness and connectedness we experience here. Our family of faith becomes less vibrant and warm, less able to be a positive, effective change agent in the world. But when we stick together and bring others into our congregation, it benefits everyone—the light and warmth grow.

Today's scripture lesson is an amazing example of the sense of community shared by the early church in Jerusalem. "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone [who] had [a] need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere

hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:44-47, NRSV). The early church had a contagious community of caring and sharing that attracted seekers every day. They loved and cared for one another in big ways and small. Granted they thought that Jesus was coming back at any minute to take them to heaven and that their grand communal experiment didn’t last long, the sense of belonging, dedication, and joy that emanates from this story inspires me.

What kind of significant social capital could we create in this church family of ours because we have spiritual capital as well? What kind of community of faith might we become as we look to the teachings of Christ and the story of the early church? What kind of impact might we make on individual lives and the world at large if we put our hearts and minds to it? In next Sunday’s sermon we’ll continue this discussion and I’ll tell you about Putnam’s follow-up book entitled, *Better Together*.

For now let me encourage you to dream of a church and a world where such things are possible, as Judy Chicago wrote:

*And then all that has divided us will merge
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both women and men will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another’s will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth’s abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old*

*And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life's creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the
Earth
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again*
(Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim, p. 27). **Amen.**

**The sermon title was inspired by Rev. Mike Slaughter's sermon
of the same name.*

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we thank you for your personal love and care for this world and its billions of people. We thank you for Jesus and his compassionate commitment to the lost and broken humanity around him; for hands that healed, words that uplifted, and courage that confronted evil. We are inspired by the unswerving love that took him through rejection, and execution; and for the Easter miracle you worked through him that we might never lose hope.

We pray for the end of injustice, neglect, discrimination, and the apathy of those who look on yet do nothing. We pray for the removal of hurt, resentment, and misunderstanding; and for the rescue of those who once had faith but have fallen into empty cynicism.

We say thank you for your commitment to each of us, how you see through all our disguises and failings and always love us with an unconditional love. We thank you for our church family and ask that you would inspire and sustain us to effectively continue the work you've entrusted to us...through our loving Shepherd Jesus Christ we pray.
AMEN.

This prayer was adapted from a prayer by Rev. Bruce Prewer (<http://www.alphalink.com.au/~nigel/doc/20050417.htm>).