

Test run

reviewed by [Arthur E. Farnsley II](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying To Bridge America's Divisions

Paul Lichterman
Princeton University Press

The faith-based initiative asks religious organizations to carry a heavy load. Providing a social safety net is the relatively easy part. Religious groups are also being asked—and are asking themselves—to build the social bridges that strengthen America's civil society.

Elusive Togetherness explores several bridge-building attempts in the pseudonymous mid-sized city of Lakeburg. The faith-based groups that Paul Lichterman observed all hoped to provide a social service and to do so with a difference. They very self-consciously pictured themselves as religious pioneers in the context of President Clinton's then-new welfare reforms. "We need to look for new solutions," they said, "to find new ways to link the public and private sector . . . to reconnect the caring community."

Anyone involved in urban or community ministry already knows the punch line: it's not that easy. Where strong social bridges have not been built in the past, it's not because no one has thought of it. It's not even that no one can afford it. It turns out that people fail to merge into "a solidary and just society" because people have very different ideas and interests embedded in very different cultural assumptions.

Lichterman pays special attention to these ideas. In many ways his book is one more version of a very old tale about American civil society that begins with Tocqueville and runs through contemporary classics such as Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* and Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. But *Elusive Togetherness* makes a sobering contribution all its own. It recognizes that we place too much emphasis on the form of social interaction, as if civil society will surely emerge if people get together in voluntary groups and participate in something. Lichterman argues that content, not form, is the real and underappreciated key. That's why he takes the theological content of these groups' interactions so seriously:

To understand the conditions for solidary, empowering civic relationships, it is not enough to ask about rates of group participation or stocks of social capital. It is not enough to ask why those stocks have fallen in America since the early 1970s. It is not even enough to ask what makes people join civic groups. We should ask what group membership means to people. . . . We need to bring group meanings and group communications squarely into the debates about civic engagement instead of resting content with counting groups.

In the book's first chapter, Lichterman describes what he calls the social-spiral argument about civil society: "When individuals join a civic group, the meanings they develop by talking to one another encourage them to spiral outward, so that they create enduring relationships not only with other group members, but with individuals and groups outside the group." The social-spiral argument usually contains the even stronger claim that this process eventually empowers civil society by linking citizens across groups.

What Lichterman found is that most of the spirals were short-lived and that differences in meaning and in styles of interaction made it nearly impossible for faith-based efforts to move very far outward. Group members understood this clearly and were frustrated. They were failing to build lasting bridges, and they knew it.

Lichterman listened to his sources so intently because he is convinced that the content of the conversations—not just each group's ideals or ideology, but the actual dialogue within the group—is the key to understanding why each group succeeded or, much more often, failed by its own standards. He argues that groups must be more reflexive, that they must constantly evaluate and reevaluate what they are doing and why they are doing it in order to understand both their own cultural underpinnings and those of others toward whom they would build bridges.

The attention to detail and constant reflexivity with which Lichterman approached this project helps him paint a convincing picture of the groups he observed, but it also keeps the reader at a distance. The book is engaging when the author is straightforwardly observing, reporting and analyzing. But Lichterman spends considerable time thinking aloud about observing, reporting and analyzing—or thinking about thinking about them. One 30-page chapter has 18 subheadings, a half-dozen of which have subheadings of their own. Anyone looking for five quick bullet points to strengthen community ministry is likely to be disappointed.

Those more concerned with substance than form may have questions about power. Lichterman is personally committed to the model of a self-aware citizenry involved in ongoing dialogue and response. He explains the self-identified shortcomings of these groups' efforts by referring to cultural gaps, but others would argue that the shortcomings are really only reflections of underlying gaps in status, money and political clout. Lichterman can hardly be expected to resolve this age-old debate, but readers should be alert to where his bets are placed.

A professor of mine once told our class that if we were pressed for time and unable to read all the assigned books, we could get the gist of each by reading its first, last and middle chapters. *Elusive Togetherness* reveals the risks in such a strategy. You could learn this book's argument by reading the first and last 30 pages or so, but what you would learn is that you, like most observers, have missed the point. When it comes to building community, Lichterman believes, the key to success lies in the detailed content of our conversations, not in ideology or organizational structure. If we really want to know why the goal of creating togetherness is so elusive, we have to learn to read the middle chapters too. We have to pay attention to the trees, not just the forest.