

Institutional ties

by [William L. Sachs](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities*, by Robert Wuthnow

Has the fabric of community broken down in America? That question, implicit in Robert Wuthnow's earlier books, is explicit here. At first, Wuthnow's answer seems to be yes. Compared to the close-knit world of his parents, Wuthnow writes, "my own ties have been more long distance and ephemeral. Some observers would argue that these changes are symptomatic of a large-scale breakdown" in our ability to be cohesive and to generate effective civic commitment.

But Wuthnow does not endorse that thesis. "My own view is that our involvement in our communities is changing rather than simply declining," he states. "But this raises important questions of how and why it is changing."

Wuthnow examines shifts in community groups and service organizations since the 1950s. Then people considered it important to belong to a chapter of a national organization. They wanted to feel involved in something larger and more important than their local community, though they were committed to that community. Now loyalty to elaborate organizations has given way to fluid ties based on personal need and interpersonal affect. Wuthnow views this as a process of social adaptation. Institutions may give way, but their purposes adapt to changing realities. Today's connections may be loose, but they are real.

How do these changes affect social institutions? Do today's looser connections allow the nonprofit sector to become significantly involved in civic affairs? What sorts of adaptive strategies will permit service groups both to be effective in their new environment and authentic in expressing their historic sense of purpose? Wuthnow realizes that such questions are important for religious groups. His chapter on religion in the inner city suggests that when social forces sweep other groups aside, churches continue to play a key role in their communities. Though not immune to change, they find creative new ways to express their mission.

Churches face intractable social problems with depleted reservoirs of institutional purpose. The fragility of community accentuates the difficulty of nurturing civic commitment. But religion's public role is not declining. Wuthnow is not optimistic about preserving institutional form, but he believes that social purposes endure. The forms of community and of civic involvement may vary, but their intentions survive.

Wuthnow measures community and commitment by the trust they generate. He worries that "loose connections make it hard to establish trust even when people take part in community organizations." Yet he affirms that people can build trust even with those who differ significantly from them. Today's loose connections still link people "in a community of interest."

The implications of *Loose Connections* for religious life, though not explicated, loom large. Wuthnow suggests why mainline religion's elaborate, historic institutions are declining. But the new initiatives in congregations and in forms of spirituality seem more significant. It remains to be seen whether religious groups can sustain their sense of tradition and civic influence while preserving their ability to generate community. That will be a true measure of the process of social adaptation Wuthnow describes.