

Hanging out: Congregations are life-saving communities

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

References to Robert Putnam have turned up in many sermons in recent years, including my own, because of a timely observation he made, one that immediately resonated with pastors as both true and important. America, he said, was experiencing a sharp decline in “social capital,” by which he meant the tangible and intangible benefits of community involvement. (See our [interview with Putnam](#).)

Pastors understood exactly what Putnam was saying. We know that modern life seems almost to constitute a conspiracy against community. We know how many people live isolated lives, apart from family, friends and neighbors. When people are watching four hours of television per day, on top of an eight- or ten-hour work day, there is not much time left for relating to others or building community. And I know plenty of people who spend their nonworking hours online, which, though potentially a way to stay in touch with people, remains a solitary activity.

The late *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mike Royko used to quip that what destroyed community was air-conditioning. Before AC, Royko said, people would sit on their front porches or front stoops to enjoy the relative cool of the evening, and they inevitably talked to one another.

Royko’s theory evoked my own sweet memories of summer evenings, sitting in our backyard listening to my father and the next-door neighbor discuss an amazing variety of topics on which they both had opinions—from the progress of our tomato plants to the imminent threat of a Soviet nuclear attack to the wretched state of both political parties. (When I wasn’t doing that, I was sitting on the front porch with the Philco radio tuned to the Pittsburgh Pirates’ game—the broadcast eerily echoing from every other porch on the block.)

Putnam says that “the biggest task of pastors is to build connections”—build social capital. That’s a relatively new development. My father, who was so garrulous with our neighbors in their summer evening colloquies, never looked to the church for

community. Today, with the air-conditioning on, the house tightly shut and the TV on, the church would be almost all he would have in the way of a community.

Church connections are all that many people have. Congregations are often life-saving communities for people like that, especially in times of crisis. Putnam reminds us that creating and nurturing community is not only a relevant task, but one that is basic to our health and identity.