Let's meet: Rebuilding community

by David J. Wood in the February 10, 2004 issue

Robert D. Putnam became widely known in the 1990s for his influential article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (Journal of Democracy, January 1995) in which he explored the significance of "social capital"—the social networks that are formed by church groups, bowling leagues and service and fraternal organizations. Putnam, professor of public policy at Harvard, suggested that social capital had recently suffered a dramatic decline. Americans, who were once prolific creators and joiners of voluntary organizations, were now detaching themselves from their civic involvements. They were bowling alone.

Putnam's 2001 book Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community *offered further documentation of this trend, and also answered some critics who thought his assessment was too pessimistic. Last year Putnam and Lewis Feldstein published a follow-up volume,* Better Together: Restoring the American Community, *which goes beyond mapping the decline of social capital to telling the story, via 12 case studies, of the ways social capital is being revived.*

I recently met with Putnam at his home in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. We discussed his findings concerning social capital and the significance of those findings to religious congregations.

For the past several years your work has focused on the importance of social capital. Why is it so important?

Social networks have amazing powers. People who are more connected with other people live longer and are healthier. In communities where people are connected, the schools work better, the crime rate is lower, the economic growth rate is higher. The power of social networks is a remarkable discovery of social science over the past decade or two.

About a decade ago I began to wonder about the trends in social capital in America. Historically, Americans, compared to people in other places, have connected with one another a lot. As a result, we've had very high levels of social capital. But in the

last 30 years of the 20th century, for some reason or set of reasons, we began to be much less connected with our friends and neighbors and communities and churches.

For most of the 20th century, year by year, Americans were joining more groups. PTA membership was rising. Scouts membership was rising. And membership in the Kiwanis Club and church attendance was rising. The number of folks voting was going up. Then, without warning, in the late ’60s and early ’70s, all those trends turned around. There’s been a drop of about 25 or 30 percent in electoral turnout. There’s been a drop of about 40 to 50 percent in membership in all sorts of organizations—the PTA, the Elks Club, the Kiwanis Club, the League of Women Voters and the NAACP. Church attendance is down too. There is some dispute about that, but I see clear evidence that there’s been a decline since the ’60s of 20 or 25 percent in average church attendance. Obviously some individual congregations have seen growth in this period. But there has been a net decline.

The number of people who say that they belong to churches is also down. And philanthropy is down. Giving, as a fraction of our income, rose for most of the 20th century and then began to decline in the last decades of the century. The peak of our generosity as a fraction of our income nationwide was in 1965. By almost every measure, Americans have become much less connected.

Does this finding refer only to formal group membership, or does it also describe what’s happening to more informal ways of connecting?

Even informal ways are affected. For example, there’s been a 60 percent decline in the number of picnics, and we spend less time having dinner with our families. Also, we don’t trust other people as much.

I don’t think the statistical evidence is surprising. What I think is surprising is how sharp and pervasive this decline has been.

Did this finding take you by surprise?

I didn’t begin with the idea that there was this huge decline in social capital. Even after the initial analysis showed a decline in membership in the PTA and other groups, I knew that data didn’t prove that overall social capital had declined. Perhaps people had stopped joining the Elks Club but had started joining New Age poetry groups. And perhaps they had stopped joining groups altogether and instead were hanging out at bars more often or having friends over at the house more often

or going on more picnics.

Perhaps people were connecting below the statistical radar?

Right. And for a long time I couldn’t think of how to examine that problem because I couldn’t think of where the national picnic registry was kept. How would you know whether people were going on more or fewer picnics? The breakthrough came when my colleagues and I discovered a couple of massive data archives that had previously been unknown to academics. In these surveys people had been asked for 25 years questions such as: How many times last year did you go to church? How many times last year did you go on a picnic? How many times last year did you have friends over to your house? How many times last year did you volunteer?

People were not being asked to remember what things were like 25 years ago. These archives allowed us to compare what people today said about how many picnics they went on to what people like them had said 25 years ago. And the astonishing fact was: everything was down. I remember very vividly sitting in my study and seeing this picture of decline come into focus. And I was shocked.

It wasn’t just the Elks Club that was down, but meetings in general were down. If one compares what people said to these questions in 1975 to what they said in 2000, there was a decline of 45 percent, 50 percent in many of those activities.

What caused the decline of social capital?

There is no single cause. One of the culprits is television. Television watching is lethal for social connectiveness. Another part of the problem is the rise of two-career families. As women moved into the paid labor force, they have had less time for doing the things that build social capital. Men have not picked up the slack. And there’s been a real loss in the time that people have for family and community obligations.

I want to make it clear that women are not to blame in all this. The fault is with all of us who have not adjusted to that overdue change in gender equality.

Another part of the problem is urban sprawl. Every ten minutes more of additional commuting time cuts all forms of social connection by 10 percent. So 10 percent more commuting time means 10 percent less churchgoing, 10 percent fewer PTA meetings and so on.

Finally, there may have been a kind of a cultural change in the 1960s that caused people to value self-interests and self-concerns and to be less connected with their communities.

Is this kind of social change unprecedented?

No. It's important to remember that a similar change, also shaped by social, economic and technological developments, occurred in the late 19th century. Industrialization, urbanization and immigration caused people to move from the village to the city. They left behind one set of family and community institutions—like quilting bees and barn raisings—for the city. America, at the turn of last century, suffered from all of the symptoms of a social-capital deficit. Crime rates were high, and so was political corruption. The gap between rich and poor was rising. In fact, the only two times in American history when the gap between rich and poor grew were at the turn of the last century and in the past 30 years.

However, at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, within about ten or 20 years, new institutions were created. Most of the major civic institutions in American communities today—like the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Knights of Columbus, Rotary, Kiwanis, the Lions Club—were created in this period.

So the question is: Can we invent new institutions, or reinvent old ones, that will increase people's connectedness in our time, as was done a century ago?

Do you see indications that we are in a period of social recapitalization?

There are encouraging signs. I've spent much of the past three or four years going around the U.S. and to some extent abroad to see what some of the new ways are. It is not yet clear what will be the 21st-century equivalent of starting the Boy Scouts. Not that it will necessarily be an organization next time. Maybe it will involve the Internet. I am hopeful—there are more and more signs of inventiveness and innovation showing up across the American landscape. In *Better Together*, we highlight some of the best illustrations of the kind of social inventiveness that is renewing social capital across America. I don't think there's anything more urgent for Americans who care about their communities then to try to reweave the fabric of communities.

Doesn't religion figure prominently into any building of social capital?

That is certainly true in the U.S., where about half of all social capital is religious. About half of all volunteering is religious. About half of all philanthropy is religious. About half of all group memberships are religious. You can't talk about social capital in the U.S. without talking about religion. Religion is not only a large part of the connectivity; it is also an important motivation for getting people engaged with one another.

Things are quite different in Europe. Every time I talk about social capital to people in Britain or Sweden or France, and then talk about the role of religion, people start looking at me strangely. Religion is a much smaller part of community life there. And you have to explain to Europeans that you're not talking about kooks, or the Jim Joneses of the world. Anyway, in the U.S., religion is a source of connectivity. That doesn't mean it's *always* a source of connectivity.

In some circles people assume that involvement in religious communities detaches people from the larger society.

The main conclusion I draw from the data is that, other things being equal, the person who is involved in religious life is also likely to be more involved then his secular counterpart in the life of the community. That is, the people who go to church on Sunday are also the people who are more likely to be active in the PTA and to be giving to the United Way and to be volunteering for soup kitchens in secular settings.

This pattern is actually more true for some denominations than others. Broadly speaking, it's more true for the mainline Protestant denominations and less true for fundamentalist congregations. There is some evidence that this pattern has changed as the evangelical movement has expanded in America over the past 20 or 30 years.

How do you account for the remarkable attention given to your article "Bowling Alone" and the book that followed?

It's because I accidentally stumbled onto a problem that many Americans know about from their own lives. People have a sense that, "Oh, my Mom belonged to Hadassah, but I don't." Or they know that their Dad belonged to Rotary, or that their parents went to church, and they know they don't—and they feel a little bad about that. They thought it was just their problem. And then along comes this Harvard professor who says, "It isn't your problem, it's our problem." Suddenly my work was not just an academic study.

You mentioned television as one of the reasons for the decline in civic engagement. Would you make other connections between technology and the cultural change you've been mapping?

I wouldn't say that all technology has the same effect on social connections. The introduction of the telephone, for example, was probably on average an aid to social connectivity, although at the time people were less sure about that. Lots of technological changes don't have any effect on social networks. However, the one core social change that is directly related to technological innovation in the 20th century has to do with the privatization of our leisure time. By which I mean movies, radio, CDs, television, video games, the Internet and so on.

In 1900, you couldn't listen to music here in Jaffrey unless you did it in the company of other people. And within ten miles of Jaffrey there were five community bands. None exists anymore. Of course, I can now listen to the finest music in the world in the privacy of my own earphones and not see another person. That fact has a powerful, largely negative effect on social capital. This kind of privatization is not just about our disengagement from public life—it tends to foster disengagement from one another in the private spaces of our homes as well.

The average American now watches four hours of television a day. Most people are watching *Friends* rather than having friends. That's unquestionably bad from the point of view of social capital.

The Internet presents a more complicated story because the Internet is, after all, a network. In principle it could be supporting social networks. It's way too early to know for sure what it's doing. A lot depends on whether in practice the Internet turns out to be like a nifty telephone or a nifty television. In our work on *Better Together*, we discovered that computer-based communication contributed most to the building of social capital when it functioned as a supplement to face-to-face communication, not as an alternative to it.

What can be done to reverse the negative trends you've identified?

I think there are some large-scale social changes that could have an impact. For example, offering greater flexibility in work hours would help people better balance family, workplace and community obligations. But in general I think this is a problem that requires bottom-up, not top-down, solutions. That's why *Better Together* is mainly looking at local developments. In a very real sense, all social capital is local.

In *Better Together*, one of your case studies highlights two California churches not commonly linked—Saddleback Community Church and All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena. What's significant about those churches?

What they have in common is organizational innovation—chiefly in their capacity to act small in important ways. I think that the folks at Saddleback have done a remarkable job of combining three things that don't normally go together. First, they make very savvy use of marketing. Second, they present a consistent, theologically conservative set of views. They know what they believe. The third element, and in my view the most important, is their very thoughtful approach to building community. This church, with about 30,000 members, focuses on creating face-to-face relationships by forming small groups of eight, ten or 12 people.

At Saddelback the Sunday service is for attracting seekers. And the threshold for that service is really low. You can be anonymous, and if you want to sit in a place that looks like Starbucks and watch video screens while you sip your coffee or read your newspaper, you can do that.

But once you're past that threshold, there's a really steep slope of increasing commitment that's expected. And it's not a bait-and-switch strategy. It's not as if you go in for the Starbucks atmosphere and then are asked to buy all the religious stuff. They're upfront about what they're offering, and it's not religion lite.

But the leaders see the church in terms of the small groups. That's where the learning goes on, where the serious praying goes on, where the communion goes on. What interests me as a social scientist is this strategy of creating social capital.

In your work you make a distinction between "bonding social capital" (social connections based on affinity) and "bridging social capital" (social connections across genuine differences). How much of these different kinds of social capital did you find in these churches?

One question I'd raise about the Saddleback groups is: How homogenous are they? Are they connecting people who are just like one another or are they connecting people unlike one another? On this point I think All Saints offers a contrast, because its small groups are diverse by design. Whereas at Saddleback the small group will involve, say, all young couples or all young parents, at All Saints the groups will include some gays and some straights, some men and some women, some married

and some single, some black and some brown and some white. Those groups have more bridging social capital.

The Saddleback groups are much more durable. And they probably provide a deeper community. They provide a real sense of home when people find themselves in crisis. But if you think about social capital from a broader social perspective, you would conclude that the U.S. needs nothing more than it needs connectivity across lines of class, race and gender—that is, we need more bridging social capital.

Both bonding and bridging social capital are valuable. It's like vitamins. You need both vitamin A and vitamin C. But it's harder to build bridging social capital. People just feel more comfortable around people like themselves. The creation of bridging social capital is in a sense an unnatural act.

If you were speaking to a group of pastors about your work on social capital, what thoughts would you want to leave them with?

I would urge them to think about their congregations from the perspective of social capital, and with the realization that we are in a period when America as a whole, and not just the church, needs to build more connections. I wouldn't have said in the 1950s that the biggest task of pastors is to build connections. Now I would ask them to think about their congregations and their leadership in terms of building social capital—especially building bridging social capital.

The next thing I'd say is: Be willing to think outside the box with respect to strategies for building social capital. Not because your crazy, quirky new idea is necessarily going to be a success. It probably won't be. But the only way we're going to see progress is by trying lots of creative, innovative ideas. There will be mistakes along they way—but they will be excellent mistakes.

There are no quick fixes. Building social capital takes time. It takes a lot of "face time." But face time is never wasted time. Pastors need to remember this. They need to remind their congregations of this reality.

The last thing I'd say is: When you get a new idea that works let the rest of the country know about it.