Bowling Together: Congregations and the American Civic Order

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In a highly influential article published in 1995 in the *Journal of Democracy*, political scientist Robert Putnam added fuel to recent conversations about this country’s civic order. Giving his article the provocative title “Bowling Alone,” Putnam traces over the last generation both a substantial decline in U.S. political participation and a persistent, sometimes precipitous, decline in membership and participation in various voluntary organizations. The League of Women Voters and the PTA are losing membership, as are the Elks and the Shriners. “The most whimsical yet discomfiting bit of evidence of social disengagement in contemporary America,” he says, is that “more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so.” At the same time, fewer people are voting and otherwise participating in the American political process. Putnam thinks the two are related. Voluntary organizations of all sorts--civic clubs, bowling leagues, charitable organizations, and congregations--are places where we meet our neighbors, think about the common good, and build up the store of trust and relationships that other theorists have called “social capital.” If we have less of that, we trust the larger political system less and are less likely to participate. Those people who are bowling alone are thereby missing out on the social interaction and occasional civic conversations that coincided with the Tuesday night bowling league and have become less effective citizens as a result.

Is Putnam right to be worried about the associational health of the U.S.? Perhaps. But his central example is a telling one. Knowing that people are not bowling in leagues does not tell us that they are necessarily bowling alone. They may be bowling with informal friendship groups, their families, or their Sunday School classes. The decline in one form of associational participation--while disconcerting to those with an economic investment in that form--does not necessarily signal a decline in association, as such.

After spending much of the last four years gathering and analyzing data on congregations in rapidly changing communities--exactly the sorts of places where social capital ought to be and is strained to the limit--I have become convinced that the American civic order has remarkable recuperative powers and that congregations are a significant part of that story. Americans may not be bowling in leagues like they used to, but they are spending remarkable associative energy in constructing and reconstructing other spaces of sociability in a shifting urban ecology.
The project that took me on this odyssey began in conversations with Peter Berger, whose Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University oversaw the research, and with Arthur Farnsley, who was my Associate Director at the Center for Religious Research at Emory University. With funding from the Lilly Endowment, our work began in April, 1992. The communities we selected for study could have been almost anywhere. Change is no stranger to any of us. The communities we settled on gave us a sampling of different parts of the country and different kinds of change. We studied immigration in Boston and Los Angeles, the emergence of gay and lesbian communities in Atlanta and Long Beach, suburbanization on the edges of Indianapolis and Atlanta, economic decline in Chicago and in Anderson, Indiana, and growing economic disparities among African Americans in Atlanta.

The first stage of our research began with an effort to document the magnitude and types of change that had affected each community. We looked at census data and took neighborhood walks. We talked to school principals and social workers, community activists and long-time residents. This mapping of the community was an attempt to delineate the changing resource and demographic base to which congregations are related, as well as the range of congregations present in the community. We counted 449 congregations in our nine communities and gathered data on the recent histories of about 300 of them.

Having done that initial mapping of congregations, we selected a small group for more intensive study. Eighteen of these congregations got full ethnographic scrutiny. Our researchers went to services, committee meetings, barbeques, sewing circles, and anything else the church could come up with. They interviewed staff members, long-time members and key leaders, as well as a sampling of ordinary members and less involved (and in some cases disaffected) participants. In addition, they conducted a written survey of Sunday morning attenders. An additional five congregations were what we called "mini-studies." They are mostly small, declining congregations where we did a more narrow range of observation and interviewing, attempting to discover the key turning points in the congregation's history that have placed it in some jeopardy today.

In all nine communities, the responses of existing congregations to the change they faced included maintaining the status quo, active resistance to change, relocation to more hospitable neighborhoods, and various forms of internal and external alterations in programming. Equally striking, however, is the fact that nearly a quarter of the congregations we found had been organized since 1980. Levels of organizational founding seem to be especially high--over one third--in growing suburban communities and in communities where immigrants are arriving. But even in economically and socially distressed communities, some new congregations are being created (about twenty percent). In addition, about 15 percent of the existing congregations have undergone enough adaptive change to be growing in membership. While over half the congregations in most of these changing communities have maintained existing
programming and are either stable or in decline, the other half show strong signs of adaptation and vitality. There are enough new and adapted congregations to respond to the changing needs of the population.

In every case, the social changes experienced by the community have meant shifts in the array of congregations. In most cases that array has become more varied. In many cases one kind of religious group has lost strength, while others have gained. New populations have founded congregations that fit their cultures, while older establishment congregations are in decline.

While the ratio of congregations to population has declined in some instances, that seems more a matter of increased congregational size than of declining overall participation. It appears that new congregations are being founded at a pace likely to offset the slow deaths of old congregations and likely to reflect the shifts of populations from declining neighborhoods to growing ones. Both suburban growth and the influx of non-U.S. immigrants has resulted in congregational growth, adaptation, and--especially--entrepreneurship. While we found many congregations in the throes of decline and many others biding their time, we also found tremendous organizational vitality. When we consider the religious ecology as a whole, adaptation and innovation are at least as visible as decline and death. As older forms of congregational life are suffering, new forms are thriving. Putnam is right to be concerned for the continued vitality of face-to-face voluntary organizations. Our evidence would simply suggest that he should look more closely for the new spaces of sociability that may be replacing old ones.

Congregations as Generators of Social Capital

And what might he see if he looked more closely at congregational life? Just what sort of social capital is being generated in congregations, and how do congregations differ--if they do--from other voluntary organizations.4

Much of what congregations contribute to the social order is not especially unique. From one perspective, they can be seen as simply a large and pervasive subset of all voluntary organizations. As such, one of their primary functions is to provide points of identification and belonging in modern society.

Modern society has long been touted as the nemesis of "community"--usually defined as face-to-face associations of caring and trust that transcend utilitarian needs. While it is certainly the case that much of modern life is characterized by relatively anonymous and segmented interaction, that is not the only story. Urban life has not weakened kinship bonds,5 and religious participation is higher in cities than in small towns.6 City people may have fewer close relationships with their immediate neighbors, but that does not mean that they have fewer relationships--only that those relationships are more dispersed.7 Dozens of case studies have demonstrated the persistence of ethnicity and neighborhood, as well. Somehow the communal life that was supposed to disappear in the face of the modern urban world has simply not--sociological
theories to the contrary--gone away. The primary difference between modern urban life and earlier folk society is not the presence of community in one and its absence in the other. Urban life is not best characterized by a decline in the number and closeness of a person’s ties, but by the fact of their chosenness and their embeddedness in a larger matrix of the very sorts of segmented relationships that are indeed a new feature of life in modern cities. It is not that community has disappeared, only that it now exists alongside other types of relations and can be (indeed must be) constructed by the persons involved.  

Putnam is right; voluntary organizations--from choirs to PTAs to ethnic heritage societies to congregations--continue to be among the places where relationships of trust are formed, where a sense of identity is nurtured. These relationships of trust are social capital in its most basic form. They facilitate communication and coordination of activities in society, and they provide basic well-being to their participants. Both individuals and society as a whole benefit from the sheer fact of belonging. The wide variety of organizations to which we can belong gives expression to the vast diversity present in our society.

Some organizations, however, are especially important gateways to participation in the larger social order. Belonging some places simply counts more, and congregations are one of those places. Warner speaks of congregations as being "presumptively legitimate." Groups recognized as congregations are given, by definition, a measure of acceptance, and the social identities enshrined in those congregations are therefore recognized. For First Congregational in Long Beach--a respected downtown church--to openly incorporate gay and lesbian persons into its membership, further sanctioning their presence with a church entry in the Gay Pride Parade, is to lend the church’s legitimacy to a new social group, helping to bring them into the civic arena. Congregations are places of belonging, but belonging to a religious community has a moral weight not always granted to other memberships.

In addition to the basic social capital generated in the associative arenas of congregations and other voluntary organizations, such groups bear the special responsibility of being the places where otherwise voiceless people have a voice, where those denied leadership in other social arenas learn to lead. Before granted participation in the social arenas dominated by elites, non-elite populations often create their own social organizations--what Nancy Fraser has called “subaltern counterpublics.” This has long been true for women, and immigrant groups often create whole parallel societies in the midst of an alien culture. It has most emphatically been the case for African Americans, especially as they have gathered in black churches. When no one else seemed to hear the voices of pain, black churches were communities of solidarity and comfort. When no other public spaces were available, church sanctuaries became organizing halls. Here the music and stories and art and language of a people have been preserved and celebrated.
Among the many things accomplished within such subaltern counterpublics—as in all voluntary organizations—is the creation and enhancement of civic skills. If social capital is the basic stuff of organization and connection, civic capital is the repertoire of skills and connections necessary for political life. Beyond association and trust, civic skills involve especially the arts of communication, planning and decision-making. In recent research, civic skills are measured in terms of the concrete activities of letter-writing, participating in decision-making meetings, planning and chairing meetings, and giving presentations or speeches. These skills are often learned in school and on the job, but they are also skills that can be learned through participation in voluntary organizations. Every club that plans a special event, every society that needs officers, and every congregation that asks its members to teach classes and chair committees provides opportunities for the development and exercise of civic skills.

In his study of Latin American pentecostalism, David Martin argued that such processes also work in societies not yet fully democratic. The pentecostal emphasis on the “gift of tongues” means that everyone is given a voice, anyone can participate. Even the custom of testifying, Martin speculated, provided a kind of school for democracy. By establishing “lay and unmediated channels of communication,” evangelicals in these repressive societies effect a “revolutionary reversal of all social order.” In the sheltered space of the sect, each person can be remade and can “give ‘tongue’ to [both] frustrations and aspirations.” The practices established in such communities then lay down a cultural pattern that can gradually “leak” out into the rest of society.

Martin’s hunches are, in fact, confirmed by recent research done by political scientist Sydney Verba and his colleagues. Civic skills are not specific to the organizations in which they are developed and used. Over and above background characteristics like income and education—civic skills contribute to participation in the political process, especially to activities beyond voting. While advantaged people are more likely to have jobs that give them skills and more likely to join voluntary organizations, anyone who joins an organization gains the advantage of membership and participation. People who are relatively disadvantaged in background and job characteristics gain proportionately more from participation in voluntary associations. Because people of all economic and educational levels belong nearly equally to congregations (whereas other voluntary organizations are disproportionately middle and upper class), congregations are the single most widespread and egalitarian providers of civic opportunity in the U.S.

The centrality of congregations in the civic and political process is not, of course, new. The first congregations of European settlers on these shores were church and government rolled into one, and the “meeting house” saw debates about both doctrine and civic duty. On the U.S. frontier, churches often provided the first social anchor for a community, instilling necessary skills and providing
structure for the growth of a stable civilization. Some congregations still have a keen sense of their “meeting house” role, hosting community gatherings and political debates. The larger denominational bodies to which they belong also provide arenas for civic debate around important issues of the day. But the research on civic skills suggests that even when congregations are at their most “private” and “sectarian,” they may be facilitating the political process. The same person who learns to write letters to missionaries and collect money for new hymnals can use those skills to participate in local and national political life. Just ask Pat Robertson or Pat Buchanan.

Congregations and other voluntary organizations, then, generate the basic social capital of association, along with the civic capital of communication and organizational skills. They do this especially well for those least advantaged in other sectors of the society, acting as subaltern counterpublics.

Voluntary organizations also benefit their communities in more tangible ways. Not only do they provide human resources for the work of sustaining modern social life, they provide material resources to those efforts, as well. They provide meeting space and transportation, bulletin boards and public address systems, copying machines and paper. The material resources of congregations and other voluntary organizations provide an infrastructure for doing the work of the community, an infrastructure often made most visible in times of crisis. In the days after the 1992 uprising in south central Los Angeles, for instance, the normal flow of food into the area was seriously disrupted. Supermarkets had been burned and looted, but the churches were still standing, and nascent distribution systems swung into action. Everyone from the Episcopal diocese to the Salvation Army to Catholic Charities activated their food and clothing networks, and soon eighteen-wheelers were arriving at church doors, and neighborhoods were getting food. As researcher John Orr and his associates note, “Inventories were already in place. Volunteers were already recruited. The distribution mechanism had already been charted. The distribution sites were already identified--religious institutions, located on almost every square mile of the affected area.” The material infrastructure of gymnasiums and kitchens and telephones and vans is a critical part of the social capital contributed to the rest of society by voluntary organizations, especially by congregations. Robert Wuthnow reports in his study of how Americans use their money that “religious organizations tell people of opportunities to serve, both within and beyond the congregation itself, and provide personal contacts, committees, phone numbers, meeting space, transportation, or whatever it may take to help turn good intentions into action.”

As the Los Angeles example illustrates, voluntary organizations often contribute quite directly to the well-being of society by channelling resources and volunteer energies toward arenas of need. Nearly all congregations report providing some sort of human service activities; over sixty percent report social benefit programs, such as promoting civil rights; half report educational programs that reach beyond their own congregation; and nearly that many support arts and
cultural programs. In many cases this is support given through coalitions, rather than directly provided, but the extent to which congregations are involved in the provision of social services is broad indeed.\textsuperscript{20} From affordable housing to shelters for abused women, from food pantries to refugee resettlement, congregations are often the organizational vehicles for the ameliorative work that needs to be done in a community. Our culture sees helping the needy as a religious virtue and expects religious organizations to be engaged in service activities.\textsuperscript{21} The people in the congregations we studied were no exception. Eighty-eight percent said that helping the needy is very important or essential to living the Christian life, and ninety-two percent said that service to the needy is very important or essential to the ministry of their congregation. Part of the cultural definition that surrounds religious institutions is that they will provide direct services to people who need their help. That same cultural definition makes it likely that people in need will seek out congregations as sources of help.

That same constellation of cultural expectations also makes congregations a likely vehicle for the volunteer energies of those who want to help. Even people who are not members may join in a congregation’s tutoring program or help out at the shelter once a week. Like other voluntary organizations, congregations create helping roles. They construct opportunities for doing good that allow for a bounded exercise of compassion—one that is recognized as legitimate and honorable, but one that allows us to do good without being absorbed by the effort.\textsuperscript{22} Congregations are able to expend social capital in service to the community because they are recognized as legitimate places for investment by people with social capital to spend.

In this, as in many other civic functions, congregations take their place alongside other voluntary organizations as providers of services, arenas of public discourse, supporters of civic well-being, and the like. In each of these functions, the work of congregations is similar in kind to the work of other groups, although congregations often have a certain edge. They are more egalitarian in membership, taken as a whole, and therefore more accessible to disadvantaged groups than are other voluntary organizations. They carry more moral weight in legitimizing the community membership of new populations. They have the most pervasive infrastructure for the meeting of community needs, and they enjoy high levels of trust. Put simply, the recognized moral character of congregations sets them apart from other civic organizations, giving them a place of special honor and responsibility.

The Moral and Spiritual Capital of Congregational Life

Congregations create some kinds of social capital, then, that are different in kind from the contributions of other associations. More than any other organizations, congregations are expected to represent the community’s moral order, to hold up the best human values, while condemning human fault. This
becomes especially important in the upbringing of children. The tie between congregational membership and family formation is still very strong in U.S. culture. Those who “sow wild oats” as young adults often return to the fold when their children reach school age. At least since the Halfway Covenant, in the 17th century, parents have sought the protection of faith and the good graces of the Church for their children—even when they themselves were less than enthusiastic believers. Many adults see religious training for their children as part of their obligation to the world. They would not be doing good or making the world a better place if their children were denied the training provided by the church. While other institutions may participate in the moral upbringing of children, none takes on this task quite so explicitly as do religious bodies.

This concern for inculcating moral standards does not end with children. Congregations also want their adult members to live by the principles of the faith. Even members who are less than orthodox in their beliefs are encouraged by congregations to practice the faith by living the Golden Rule. In the twenty-three congregations we studied, many of the adults we interviewed said they especially valued worship each week as a time for reflection and priority-setting. Almost no matter what the preacher may have said, the set-aside time, the sacred space of the church, perhaps the inspiration of the music, reminded them of what should be most important in their lives. Congregational membership had been consciously sought out as a way to support their own virtuous living. There may be other community organizations concerned with upholding moral virtues, but congregations retain a central role in that task.

One of the reasons for that must surely be the linking, in congregations, of moral virtue with sacred presence. Congregations are not just places to be reminded of what one ought to do. They are spaces where “ought” is put in cosmic perspective. While people may encounter transcendent realities in all sorts of places, the spaces and rituals of congregational life invite transcendence. We expect to meet God—at least on occasion—when we go to church or synagogue or mosque.

This linking of moral instruction with transcendent presence is often powerfully conservative, resulting in “bad faith” (to use Sartre’s term). Peter Berger describes the way in which religious legitimation can prevent human action. People “live in the world they themselves have made as if they were fated to do so by powers that are quite independent of their own world-constructing enterprises....By means of the ‘otherness’ of the sacred the alienation of the humanly constructed world is ultimately ratified.” God’s stamp of approval can be an alienating force, convincing us that the world is as God would have it to be, out of the reach of mere mortals. In that sense, congregations are often seen as bastions of status-quo conservatism.

Yet such is not always the case. This same sense of transcendence can de-alienate as surely as it can alienate. It can reveal the world to be “merely” human
constructions, susceptible to human intervention. This accounts, Berger notes, for the recurrent use of the biblical tradition in opposition to those who would use religion for oppressive ends. “False consciousness and bad faith, widely legitimated by means of religion, may thus also be revealed as such by means of religion.” The perspective experienced in extraordinary encounters with divine forces—whether from one’s direct experience or mediated through sacred stories and rituals—is a perspective that makes critique and action possible. In the cosmic conversation that takes place in worship, divine actors can enter the human drama as partners for change.

As places of religious ritual, congregations are potential sites for social and personal transformation. Victor Turner captured the transformative power of ritual in his notions of “anti-structure” and “communitas.” Ritual intentionally alters the usual social arrangements and allows the envisioning and experiencing of a different state of being (communitas). Durkheim called the ritual state “collective effervescence” to denote its volatile potential. More recently, a number of researchers have noted the power of religious experiences as motivation for individual and collective action in the world. And anthropologists and historians have chronicled the ways in which colonial peoples have appropriated the symbols and stories of their colonizers as their own tools of transcendence and resistance. Whether candlelight vigils in East Germany or the strains of “We Shall Overcome” or the sight of a sinner repenting at the altar, it is clear that the gestures and sights and sounds of religious ritual are experienced as powerful by the participants. Warner and others have emphasized the sense of power often generated by religious experience, and theorists since Weber have noted the power of religious ideas to motivate action in the secular world.

What happens in congregations is different from what happens in other social gatherings, then. Because they are religious, transcendent experiences and ideas about God are central to the values congregations protect and disseminate among their members. Describing the Latin American Catholics he studied, political scientist Daniel Levine wrote, “religious motives and values undergird other aspects of group life and keep them going in the face of possible adversity.” Congregations are both sacred places, making claims for the power of a transcendent Other in the midst of this world, and civic places, mobilizing all sorts of resources for the sake of the community. The ideas and ways of life nurtured in congregations can shape other aspects of everyday life in both direct and indirect ways.

In congregations, collective grievances are voiced, solutions envisioned, divine sanction sought, material goods gathered, networks built, time and energy invested. As an on-going institutional presence in the community, they provide the stability within which cultural traditions are preserved and sometimes created anew.

That modern urban Americans are expending considerable organizational
energy in the creation and transformation of local religious collectivities is testimony to the centrality of these collectivities in the larger social system. In the midst of places where social capital is being strained to the limits, people are gathering to worship and to pray, to eat together and to debate, to distribute aid to the community and to organize protests. Each congregation gives expression to the yearnings of very particular people in a very particular place and in so doing congregations collectively reflect the enormous diversity present in American society and in any community. They represent a vital element in the civic culture. They are public forums to which individuals choose to commit some portion of their time and energy. No one religious institution stands at the center of any community, and proportionately few stand at the center of individual lives. Still, taken together, they play a role both in providing a sense of transcendence and integration for their members and a similar point of transcendence and human concern for the community. As people construct and reconstruct urban neighborhoods, they have not neglected the construction of religious institutions that will sustain them. The religious associational energy we have seen expended in nine communities is a window on the continuing importance of religious gathering places in the American cultural landscape.

While we cannot offer definitive numbers, our research casts a different light on the questions raised by Robert Putnam. Yes, fewer people are joining the Elks Club and bowling in leagues. I have sought to argue, however, that the civic culture taken as a whole is perhaps not in the dire difficulties Putnam sees. We have no particular reason to believe that Americans are bowling alone. If our research on congregations is any indicator, the decline in league bowling may simply be an indicator that other forms of communal bowling are emerging. We found many congregations in distress, but we also found new congregations being born and old congregations expending considerable energy to reorganize or relocate. The overall ecology of congregational institutions shifted, often dramatically, but Americans seem not to have given up on gathering into worshipping communities. We may be individualists, but our individualism is demonstrated as much in where we choose to join as in launching out on our own. If there is no bowling league that expresses our commitments, we will still find a way to bowl together. And whether bowling together or worshipping together, we are continuing to create the social capital and nurture the civil skills necessary for a healthy society.
1. This lecture draws on material from chapters 1 and 9 from my forthcoming book *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press).


4. Thanks to both Jay Demerath and Rhys Williams for persisting in asking this question and thereby pushing me to think about these issues.


11. Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25/26:56-80. This is not to ignore the fact that subaltern counterpublics can silence their own dissenters as easily as they themselves are silenced by the larger society.


19. Wuthnow, Robert. 1994. *God and Mammon in America*. New York: Free Press, Pp. 242-243. This mobilization of religious people into voluntary efforts in behalf of the larger community may not be universally the case, however. Wilson, John and Thomas Janoski. ("The Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work." *Sociology of Religion* 56(2, Summer):137-52) show that active conservative Protestants are actually less likely to be involved in secular volunteering. Their energy seems to go into their own congregations, rather than into the community at large.


