

Why Church Is Good For Us (And Good For The World)

Rich Nathan

October 25-26, 2003

John: Building A Community of Hope in a World of Despair

John 17:21, 23, and 26

I recently read a profound, deeply disturbing book that surveys American life over the last half century. Robert Putnam titles the book *Bowling Alone*. Dr. Putnam is a professor of public policy at Harvard University and was the president of the American Political Science Association. There are very few books that I've read in recent years that have caused me to be more depressed about the state of affairs in the US and also more convinced that the church is the only hope for our country and our world than the book, *Bowling Alone*.

I will say at the front end that I have no idea what Dr. Putnam's religious perspectives are. He certainly does not write from a distinctively Christian point of view. He writes as a trained social scientist. But if you pick up the book in our bookstore, don't expect to find lots of Bible quotations or lots of inspirational thoughts that you would find in standard Christian literature.

The title of the book, *Bowling Alone*, is borrowed from the fact that bowling leagues in America are virtually extinct. Back in the 1960's nearly 8% of American men and 5% of American women belonged to a bowling league. Now the number of individuals who bowl has gone up, but bowling leagues have virtually vanished from the scene.

Now you might ask why is that in any way significant? Who cares whether people bowl or play softball, volleyball, tennis, camp or fish – all of which, by the way, have suffered major declines in participation since the 1960's. In fact, the only sports that have shown any increase in participation are snowboarding and things like fitness walking. There has been a massive increase in the buying of "in-home" sports equipment – things like treadmills, steppers, weight benches and bow-flex machines.

Tangentially, do you think you really can get a body like the one they advertise on TV simply by using a bow-flex machine? I suspect that most of the in-home sports equipment is buried under piles of laundry or is used as a stand for cutting wood.

But in getting back to our point, it really isn't terribly significant if Americans shift from one athletic activity to another over the decades. What is significant is that the shift has taken place almost entirely away from team sports to individual sports, and from the public sphere to people's own homes. What is signaled by the fact that more and more people are "bowling alone" is that in every

measurable way people in America are becoming massively more disconnected from one another, more isolated, more lonely, more detached.

Let me share with you some statistics of the attendance of the various Civic Associations, most of which hit their high point in the 1960's and how these Civic Associations are doing 35 years later.

- The American Association of University Women – women with college degrees, membership is down 84%
- The American Legion – for wartime veterans down 47%
- Boy Scout and Girl Scout leaders, membership is down 18%
- The Jaycees down 58%
- The League of Women Voters down 61%
- The Masons down 71%
- The NAACP down 46%
- The PTA down 60%
- Red Cross Volunteers down 61%
- The Rotary down 25%

SLIDES

- The American Association of University Women ↓ 84%
- The American Legion ↓ 47%
- Boy Scout and Girl Scout Leaders ↓ 18%
- The Jaycees ↓ 58%
- The League of Women Voters ↓ 61%
- The Masons ↓ 71%
- The NAACP ↓ 46%
- The PTA ↓ 60%
- Red Cross Volunteers ↓ 61%
- The Rotary ↓ 25%

Virtually every Civic Association in America has suffered a massive decline in membership in the last 3½ decades.

The same trend lines apply to professional organizations – the percentage of doctors in the AMA, the percentage of lawyers in the American Bar Association, the percentage of nurses in the American Nursing Association, or accountants in the American Institute of CPA's, architects, engineers – participation in virtually every professional organization is down, sometimes massively so.

Union membership is down from a peak of nearly 35% in the mid-1950's to less than 15% today. Now there are lots of reasons for the decline in union membership. Certainly there has been a shifting economy. But the main reason cited by sociologists is people simply do not want to join.

In fact, the only organizations, which have increased their so-called membership

in the last few decades, are those that have no face-to-face meetings, and only require “members” to send in a check once a year. So the Washington-based associations, which are really just lobbying groups, environmental organizations like The Environmental Defense Fund, The Sierra Club, The National Wildlife Federation; groups like the NRA, or NARAL - these groups have grown by savvy direct mail marketing techniques, and more sophisticated computer tracking of sales. But these groups have absolutely no long-term stability when they move away from their direct mail techniques.

Greenpeace became the largest environmental organization in America. It accounted for more than one-third of all members of national environmental groups in the early 1990’s through an extremely aggressive direct mail campaign. At that point, Greenpeace leaders became concerned about the environmental effect of all the junk mail they were sending out. So they temporarily cut back on their direct mail solicitation. Membership hemorrhaged. It went down by 85% in just a few years.

When you read about these Washington-based groups that claim half a million members, they aren’t real civic associations any more than the readers of Sports Illustrated are a group or club. They are simply direct mail generated, once-a-year solicitation campaigns.

It’s not just civic groups that have seen a massive decline in participation. Religious participation in America is way down in the last 40 years. More and more Catholics are becoming nominal, while more and more Jews and mainline Protestants are abandoning their religion entirely. Overall, church attendance rates have fallen from a high of about 48% of all Americans attending church on any given week in the late 1950’s to today’s rates, which are something about a third of Americans attending church on any given week. That figure varies in different parts of the country, and it may be somewhat inflated. People tend to over-report their church attendance. But what is clear is that church attendance rates are falling. The only denominations that are picking up members are those who ask for a higher commitment from their members – groups like the Mormons, or some evangelical denominations, groups like the Vineyard.

America is becoming more polarized religiously. Nominal church members are disappearing more and more from church and the only ones remaining are the highly committed. Even among churchgoers, there is far more church surfing. A growing percentage of people are hopping from church to church on any given Sunday. But they are not rooted in any particular church. We experience some of that here at Vineyard as do every church in town. We all experience church surfing. People channel surf more and they also church surf more.

By the way, do you know that the only groups in America that are growing are church small groups and recovery groups? While every other form of club meeting and civic association is withering away, the only groups in America that

are growing are church small groups – Bible studies, home fellowship groups like what we have here at Vineyard, women's groups, men's groups, and recovery groups.

It is also the case that not only has civic and religious participation gone way down in American in the last 40 years, but private connections between people, connections of friendship, family, informal get-togethers have gone way down in the last 40 years. People get together with friends much less frequently in their homes than they did 40 years ago. There are far fewer dinner parties, or people visiting other friends. Because of scheduling conflicts in families, families are eating together much less than they did 30 years ago. Vacationing together as a family has fallen. Attending religious services as a family has fallen. Just sitting and talking together as a family has fallen.

How many of you who are married and have kids, eat together as a family less than your family did growing up? The percentage of people who have been on a picnic in the last year is way down. The number of people who play cards with one another is way down.

People say they are eating out in restaurants more. Actually, the number of full-service restaurants has fallen by a quarter in the last 20 years. To replace them are fast-food places, places where individuals can quickly refuel. There are fewer and fewer places to connect, to build relationships.

Do you know what has gone up in recent years? Watching. In place of doing and participating and relating, more and more Americans spend more and more time watching. We no longer have friends, we watch Friends on TV. And Americans no longer engage in the real world, they watch the Real World on TV. We play fewer sports, but sports viewing is way up. Attendance at major sporting events has nearly doubled since the 1960's. Attendance at rock concerts and pop concerts up; museum going is up too.

We visit less. We connect less. We know our neighbors less well. We see old friends less often. But we watch. We watch much more. In fact, a major reason all connections are down is because TV watching is up.

One of the best things you could even do for yourself or your family is unplug the set. Let me ask you an honest question. How much is the TV on in your home? TV dulls us psychologically and emotionally, so we don't want to connect socially. We just want to veg out. The stats are clear: the more TV, the fewer number of friends, the more TV, the less family time. In fact, the more TV, the worse people feel—depression, headaches, insomnia, indigestion are all connected to high levels of TV watching. What if you limited yourself to two shows a week?

Now, why do these trends matter? They matter for the simple reason that community is good for us. Simply put, community is good for us. Community is

good for our health. It's good for our mental health. It's good for our economy. It's good for our kids.

Let's just consider this together. Whenever people get isolated from one another, whenever we get increasingly detached and disconnected, our trust in our fellow man goes down. Pollsters have been measuring the level of trust American have in other Americans for decades. And that statistic has been going down, down, down.

Now, do you know what we do when we don't trust each other? We hire lawyers. Lawyers give us artificial trust. I don't really need to trust you, if I can get it in writing. There has been a massive growth in the numbers of lawyers in America compared to the growth of the population. In 1970 there were more doctors in America than lawyers. Today there are nearly 50% more lawyers than doctors. And those lawyers are mostly going into preventive lawyering. We no longer work out our differences relationally because our relationships have become strained and frayed.

Let me make this more personal. How many of you have been sued, or have been threatened with a lawsuit? How many have you been sued or threatened with a lawsuit in the last year?

Do you know, I've been pastoring this church full time now for 16 years? In the first 10 years I don't believe that I ever heard anyone at any time threaten the church with a lawsuit. In the last six years, somewhere between 6-12 times a year someone will write me a letter threatening a lawsuit. Because of counseling they received from the counseling center, or being disgruntled about being asked to leave a small group or not participate in a recovery ministry.

The breakdown of our community with each other has led to this massive increase in litigation and all the associated costs of preventing lawsuits. It's been an enormous burden on the economy.

The breakdown of community has affected our children. And of course, do you know there is a direct relationship between the number and quality of relationships that exist in a community and kids' performance in school? If you were to graph out state-by-state how kids are performing in school, the biggest issue is not wealth or poverty. The biggest issue is not the dollars spent on schools or even class size. The biggest issue affecting student performance is the level of relational connectedness. How many times people have others over for dinner, family togetherness, and parental involvement in the school – PTA, that kind of thing. Do you want schools to perform better? The evidence is pretty clear. Get families working together. Get families connected with each other. Get families connected with the school.

Community is good for us. It's good for us economically. It's good for us educationally. It's good for us mentally and medically. In any given year, about 10% of Americans suffer from major depression. And what is clear about depression is that it is absolutely linked to being disconnected socially, feeling like you have no one who is really close to you. You have no support network. No one who will listen to you.

Isolation is also linked to addiction. The more isolated you are, the more likely it is that you are addicted to something—food, sex, alcohol, self-abuse. You have no one to encourage you.

The most disconnected people in America are young people. And do you know that young people, those under age 30, are significantly less happy than older people, those over age 55? What's going on? Young people have more stuff than older people did at their age. But they have less community, less family, less networking, and less support.

Community is good for you. It is even good for your health. Let me tell you a story about a little Italian community named Roseto, PA. They've been studying this little Italian American community for over 40 years. These Italian immigrants settled there and medical experts couldn't understand why, compared to neighbors in other towns, these Rosetans simply didn't have many heart attacks. The researchers looked at obvious causes – diet, exercise, smoking and weight. But the Italians living in Roseto didn't have very much difference in those practices than people living in other areas. In fact, in some cases, they smoked more and were a little more overweight.

What they did discover, however, is that these folks had deeper community with each other than people in neighboring towns. You see, their ancestors came from the same little village in southern Italy and settled in Pennsylvania. They had a mutual aid society. They set up their churches, sports clubs, labor unions, and Boy Scout troops together. They were able to rely on each other emotionally and financially. They gave jobs to each other.

The researchers began to expect that maybe the issue in these folks' health was the amount of support they had. In fact, that proved to be true as families began moving apart and the divorce rate rose. Now the health statistics in Roseto are the same as in other surrounding towns.

Have you seen this in your own life? Depression or poor health connected to becoming increasingly isolated? Have you seen this principle, friends, in the lives of parents or family members, or friends in the church?

You know, community is not only good for us, community is necessary for us. We read in John 17:20-21,

SLIDE

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

And in verse 23,

SLIDE

I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

And then down in verse 26,

SLIDE

I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself might be in them.

We desperately need relationship with each other. Jesus prays in John 17 for a deep quality of relationship among his followers, that we would be one, that we would be unified, that we would be together, and that we would connect with each other deeply. He prays for our unity over and over again in John 17 because community is not only good for us, it is necessary for us. We cannot exist without deep relationship. Infants need deep relationship. Teens need deep relationship. Singles need deep relationships. Parents need deep relationships. Old people need deep relationships. And we need deep relationships not only with Jesus, but also with each other.

And Jesus gives us a hint regarding why we can't. In verse 21 he says:

SLIDE

That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us...

He compares the kind of oneness that he enjoys with the Father to the oneness and unity that he is praying for for his followers with each other.

Likewise, in verse 26,

SLIDE

I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love that you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

See, here is the idea. Human beings are created in the image of God. In other words, these human beings are to reflect out into our world something of the

very nature and being of God. God intended that what he is like might be reflected out to all of the world through human beings.

What is God like? Well, God is in his essence, in his essential being, relational. From all of eternity, God has existed as a Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One essential being existing forever in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, three persons from eternity, mutually loving, mutually supporting, mutually indwelling with each other.

When God created human beings, he created us male and female because the essential way that we get an image of God in the world is through loving relationships. We need relationship to live as much as we need food and water. That's why one of the worst things you can ever do to a human being as punishment is to place them in solitary confinement. It's worse than beatings. When you cut people off entirely from all human contact, we mentally break down. It is dehumanizing to sit alone in an apartment or a house and sit and stare at the TV or a computer screen. It tears at your created image.

You see, people in our day of broken community will do anything to find relationship with each other. Just open up any newspaper and notice how many people are advertising for a date. What are people saying when they advertise for a date? I say this with all affection, but a person advertising might be saying something like: "I will go out even with a stranger that I know nothing about (he or she could be violent or completely untrusting) because I have no network, no way of connecting with someone I might want to develop a romantic relationship with."

Look at the number of people who sit around at night surfing the Internet. I was talking with a friend not too long ago. He loves to surf the net in the evening. He told me that he regularly communicates with strangers on the net. He types in a conversation starter and then carries on these conversations with total strangers.

I said, "Friend, without any malice at all, forgive me for being such a Neanderthal, but why would you want to do that?"

He said, "What do you mean why would I want to do that?"

I said, "Well, when I want to have a conversation, I just talk to a friend."

I know that you might be used by God and share your faith someone who is a stranger, but I find it profoundly sad that so many of us are so disconnected that in order to establish necessary relationship, we sit at our computers and have conversations with people that we can't see, we don't know, and we can't hear their tone of voice, or look at their facial expressions. Talk about ice-cold communication.

If you go to any bookstore, as I regularly do, you are going to see hundreds and hundreds of titles of books telling us how to have relationships with each other. All of the daytime talk shows center on relationships, perhaps bizarre relationships, but relationships nevertheless. All of these survivor shows and reality TV shows are all about watching people having relationships. As I said before, unfortunately, we don't have friends. We watch Friends on TV

Relationships are necessary for us. And when people don't have connection with each other, the kind of connection God designed and desires for us, we substitute other things to fill our relational void. Especially in America today we substitute promiscuous sex. At least my body will be connected with another body, even if I don't have very many people with whom I can completely trust or rely on. How many of you have dulled the pain of feelings of disconnect by connecting your body to another body?

You know, this book that I've been quoting, *Bowling Alone*, has very interesting facts about the effect of church and church going, and church connectedness on us. In all the ways that the breakdowns of social relationships affect us economically, educationally, mentally and medically, relationships in church have exactly the opposite effect. In the inner city, one of the best predictors of whether a young adult is going to have a good full-time job when they grow up is whether they regularly go to church in their teen years. It's better than an employment program. The best predictor of whether an inner city young adult is going to have a good job when they grow up is whether they attend church regularly during their teen years.

The author of *Bowling Alone* said that if a state wanted to dramatically improve the performance of students in school, one of the best things they could do would be to get kids to go to church at least twice a month.

Here's a fact for you. In terms of your physical health, it is a medical toss up whether you either a) choose to stop smoking; or b) join a church. Smoking is bad, but the health improvements of getting connected in a church is about the same health improvement as stopping smoking.

Or try this one on. They've been measuring people's sense of happiness and well-being for the last century or so in America. And people's sense of happiness is going down. As a general rule, if you massively increase your income you will be happy. And here is the fact, you can get the same happiness boost by either doubling your income, or getting deeply connected to church.

In fact, and I want to read this to you, Robert Putnam, this Harvard public policy professor said, "Concerning happiness and churchgoing, the statistics are clear, the more church-going, the merrier." Church makes you happy. At least the relationships that you can develop in church, the connections.

But what is most important, of course, is that this connectedness in church is necessary for your spiritual well-being. Again, Jesus says in verse 26,

SLIDE

I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

How do you experience Jesus? How do you get connected to the risen Christ in this world? Yes, you can connect with Christ on a spiritual retreat alone. Yes, you can connect with Christ in prayer and devotions. That's why I suggest it to you and I hope some of you picked up the Bible study guide, *Search the Scriptures* that I recommended few weeks ago. If you don't have a good Bible reading plan, go to the bookstore and pick up *Search the Scriptures*.

Jesus is letting us in on a spiritual secret. The secret is this. We experience the love that the Father has for the Son through our relationships with other people. Let me retranslate it. It is impossible to grow spiritually in our love relationship with God apart from our love relationship with each other. Do you want to grow as a Christian? Do you want to get to know God better and love him more? Listen to what the apostle John tells us, in 1 John 4:12,

SLIDE

No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

You cannot, in other words, have a complete experience of God, you cannot have the experience of John 17:23, "I in them and you in me," unless you are personally, relationally, and spiritually connected with other followers of Jesus in the fellowship of the local church.

Let me ask you a personal question right now. Are you in one of our church's small groups? Do you have deep relationship and continual connection with other people in this congregation? Not just showing up here on the weekends or in surfing churches. But with deep relationship in this church developed through our small group life.

As pastors we recognize that there are many of you who have not ever been in a small group in your church experience in the past. So perhaps you are a newer Christian and may feel a bit intimidated to just show up to someone's house. You don't know what to expect. This is a shift in terms of time commitments. You have to stop and clean the house or watch TV or whatever you do in the evening on different nights. So we've decided to provide an opportunity for you to experience small group life on a short-term basis, to check it out and see if you like it, to see if you are really being helped spiritually, to experience small group life here at the church. Here's what we are doing.

Beginning November 5th here at the church we are starting something that we call “New Communities.” Stephen Van Dop and some of the other pastors and leaders will be teaching this series. You’ll have an opportunity to get together with other believers here at the church to worship and to discuss the scriptures and to fellowship. There will be coffee and snacks. The meeting will start at 7:30 p.m. and end sharply at 9:30 p.m. You can sign up for the New Communities series in the bulletin. There is an insert. It doesn’t matter if you’ve been here 10 years and used to go to a group or you’ve been here 1 week and know absolutely nothing about small group life. I want you to take it out now and put it on your lap. In a few minutes, you can fill out that insert and drop it in the clear plastic boxes on your way out, or you can sign up through our website.

Why do we urge deep connection? Why does Jesus urge deep relational connection with each other? Because it is necessary for us and also because it is necessary for the world. Look at what Jesus says again in verses 20-21,

SLIDE

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

See, community is not just all about us. In fact, when church just becomes all about us, how connected we feel, we are no better than the typical American consumers saying, “What about us?” It’s like worship where people say, “I didn’t get much out of worship.” I say this with all affection, but have you considered that we didn’t gather to worship you? We gathered to worship God. The relative question is not were you pleased with worship today, but was God pleased? Likewise, the relevant question regarding community is not just what is a church doing for you, but what is church doing for the world?

The relationship of Christians with one another will prove to the world that the Father sent the Son.

Likewise, in verse 23,

SLIDE

I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

How will the world know that God the Father sent his Son into the world to die for us? By looking at the quality of relationships between Christians.

A number of years ago, Francis Schaeffer called Christian’s love for one another the final apologetic. In other words, Schaeffer said what Jesus meant here is that the way the world will judge whether or not you are a Christian, and indeed will

judge whether or not there is any reality to this thing called Christianity, is by observing the love that exists or doesn't exist among Christians.

The world doesn't care anything about doctrinal disputes. It sort of looks on the disputes in churches with amusement and bemusement. Oh, look at that. Those Christians are fighting again. They never agree with each other. They're splitting. They can't get along. The world doesn't care about doctrinal disputes. The world is asking one question of Christians. What is the quality of your love? Is there something compelling about your community in a world of radical disconnect?

Do you understand, friends, how absolutely attractive and compelling a place would be where people really do love each other? You can't go to any civic association any more and see it. There are no longer any bowling leagues. You aren't going to find love in any neighborhood associations. The final ultimate defense of Christianity, as one of the church fathers said, the sign of the Christian is "look at how they love one another."

I remember when I was not yet a Christian, and I began hanging around with Christians, what really struck me was not their religious conversations. It was that these young men and women related to each other. It was so remarkable for me coming from an utterly unchurched context. For the first time in my life, I saw a group of men and women relate to one another kindly, speak words of encouragement, people who didn't tear each other down. I watched these folks embrace each other as brothers and sisters very naturally. The final apologetic, the great defense of Christianity, look at how they love each other—new Christians and those not yet Christian.

So, where do you fit in, friend, in all of this? Would the love you have for other people in this church make the world stand up and take notice? Would they say, "My, look at how they love one another?" Again, the reason we have small groups here is that it is impossible to get your arms around 5000-6000 people. But you can deeply connect with and love 8 other people, or 6 other couples. In our culture today, along with, of course, a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the great gift that the church can offer to our disconnected society is the opportunity to form loving, deep, committed relationships with another in the context of a church.

Church is good for us. And its good for the world. Let's pray.

Why Church Is Good For Us (And Good For The World)

Rich Nathan

October 25-26, 2003

John: Building A Community of Hope in a World of Despair

John 17:21, 23, and 26

I. Community Is Disappearing Around Us

II. Community Is Good For Us

III. Community Is Necessary For Us

IV. Community Is Necessary For The World

A. The Ultimate Apologetic

B. The Absolute Requirement