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Social Capital

We often hear people lament that our communities just aren't what they used to be. People have moved in, or away, the old community spirit has disappeared, our priorities and activities are changed. Things aren't the same. Is this perception accurate?

Social scientists would say, "yes," and their statistics are actually alarming. According to one national study, all the ways we interact with one another in groups have declined over the past thirty years or so. This study claims that across the nation, P.T.A. membership is down 50 percent, participation in town and school board meetings is down 40 percent, men's clubs down 20 percent, women's clubs down more, youth participation in extra-curricular activities has declined, and church attendance has dropped. We're far more likely to listen to a CD at home alone than join a local choral group, more likely to watch TV sports than join a softball team, more likely to be intrigued by the Internet than volunteer with others at the local food bank.

Well, do these changes matter? Does this trend away from group involvement have any impact on our lives? Again, the theorists say, "yes." After all, face-to-face participation in groups requires commitment. It encourages responsibility because group members must be accountable to one another in their lasting relationship. Group interaction makes for a social fabric of connectedness in which people learn to cooperate and trust one another.

A society which is well-linked by group involvement is more tolerant and patient and responsive to its members. Or, as some have said, groups such as churches, synagogues, scouting, and fraternal organizations are capable of both *bonding* and *bridging*. By *bonding*, they mean that deep and powerful ties develop which support people through tough times. By *bridging*, they mean that wide-reaching webs of relationships form which link people in many helpful ways beyond the small circle of their most intimate acquaintances.

Organizations and small groups that draw us together in these ways develop what social scientists term, "social capital." In other words, all our healthy interactions reap benefits, and make living in our community a richer experience. So while it is true that our communities may change over time, our deepest needs really do not. We still need one another to make our lives whole and stable and rooted. We need to connect to one another in responsible, lasting, personal ways. And when we do, we all benefit.

We happen to believe that the vitality of the places of worship in our community is an especially hopeful sign that social capital is building here. Each week thousands upon thousands of people gather to serve and be served, to encourage, to uplift, to welcome, and to inspire. Bonding and bridging is happening here!

So let's say, "Thank you!" to all the houses of worship in our communities, for all the ways they collectively contribute to our lives.