

“Seriously Desiring to Join”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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When the book *Bowling Alone* came out in 2000, it sounded an alarm bell for the erosion of civic engagement. Pointing to shrinking numbers in bowling leagues, regular card games, and sharing meals in one another’s homes, Robert Putnam argued that Americans were connecting less and less frequently with each other. The book spurred a conversation about the idea of “social capital.” According to Putnam, social capital is “a term that social scientists use as shorthand for social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust to which those networks give rise. No democracy, and indeed no society, can be healthy without at least a modicum of this resource.”¹

In other words, social capital is the relational stuff of good will, of trust, of willingness to reach out and help each other. By describing these social relations in terms of *capital*, I understand Putnam and others to be saying that these kinds of social relationships are important resources to draw upon, to invest in, and if we’re not careful, to find ourselves in short supply of when we need some help. By tracing and arguing that U.S. culture has fewer and fewer civic associations, *Bowling Alone* raises concerns not about declining interest in bowling or card games, but about the loss of social capital. In short, *Bowling Alone* is concerned that we’re not connecting to each other in regular, sustained ways.

When I first heard about the book *Bowling Alone*, the basic premise made sense to me because of my experience of my maternal grandparents.

My mom’s parents, Harold and Betty, lived in a small post-World War II bungalow on Sylvan Lane in Pontiac, Michigan. Watching the popular tv show *Mad Men* about ad executives in the 1950’s and 60’s has made me nostalgic for my grandparents house. Built in the same era, the finishes of the home had a stylish mid-century modern feel to them. In the living room, a long, low couch sat opposite a fireplace with clean, simple lines. On either side of the fireplace were small alcoves. In the right-side alcove was a fabulous black vinyl club chair which turned a full 360°. (As you might imagine, my 2 brothers and I spent endless hours spinning ourselves and each other on this chair!) On the left-side of the fireplace stood a built-in cabinet and shelf upon shelf of colorful, shiny bowling trophies.

¹ Thomas H. Sandar and Robert Putnam, “Still Bowling Alone”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 21.1, (January 2010): 9-16.

My grandparents loved to bowl. Both enjoyed the game aspect—my grandmother Betty being extraordinarily competitive in all that she did. But, they also enjoyed the social life of bowling leagues. Harold and Betty had a *robust* social life. There were the bowling leagues and the bridge clubs, the organized travel all over the world with the same group of 8; and, there was their ongoing, decades long commitment to their Methodist church. My grandfather was a frequent usher—a white carnation in his lapel—and my grandmother somehow had her hand in a bit of everything. Rarely a year would go by when I didn't receive some find of my grandmother's from their church Rummage Sale. (I suspect that sounds familiar to a lot of you here!)

So when I first heard Putnam's phrase "bowling alone", it made a lot of sense to me. I thought of those shelves of trophies in my grandparent's house and was keenly aware of the absence of its equivalent in either my house or my parents' house. Something *does* seem to have changed in how and how often we connect with others.

Since the 2000 publication of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam and many other scholars, pundits, and columnists have pondered the question of why there has been such a decline in so many voluntary associations such as bowling leagues or weekly card games. Putnam's research pointed to a cultural shift away from joining organizations and groups, a shift away from membership models and identifying as a member of a group.

As an organization long-defined by models of committed membership, where does this leave churches and other religious organizations? As you may know, church membership has also been in decline for several decades—ever since peaking in the mid-twentieth century decades of bowling leagues and card games. There are a lot of people asking why attendance is declining and how to change this trend of decline. It's a complex and contested discussion that we can't solve here today, but what I do want to point out today is that it's not a new discussion.

Indeed, the Rev. Edmund H. Sears, former minister of this church led a meeting in the mid-19th century of local ministers to discuss renewing congregational life. He and others were concerned about the impact of certain strains of Unitarianism that seemed to emphasize individual spiritual experience over congregational life. They were afraid of a rising sense of individualism that threatened to undermine commitment to being in relationship with others on a shared religious expression and quest. Sears wanted to make sure that congregations—in essence, *groups*—still had a vital role to play in religious life. Like Putnam, I hear Rev. Sears and his colleagues wrestling with how to insure strong structures of support for people to connect to each other in regular, sustained ways.

Aware of this long-standing argument for the importance of groups, I want us to recognize the significance of this day—both as a day when we welcome new members and as a day when we as a congregational body affirm our relationship to one another in this afternoon’s Installation Service. In a society that can too often tilt towards individualism, today we affirm the importance of being a part of a group, this group, the First Parish in Wayland.

By signing the book today and by my participation in this afternoon’s service, I am choosing you, to be a part of this group as your minister. To me, membership—whether my own or yours—is mostly about making an intentional commitment to be a part of this community—to show up willing to participate, to listen, and to contribute to sustaining and nurturing the community as you can. There is no “test” of religious beliefs, but as the church bylaws say, a person should be “in sympathy with the spirit and purpose of the Parish and seriously desiring to join.” To glean the spirit and purpose of the church, we can look to the covenant that we recite in services on Sunday as well as to the [mission](#) statement of the church. As a congregation affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association, we might also consider the [seven principles and six sources](#) as reflective of the spirit and purpose of the church. Of course both the mission statement and the principles are somewhat broad. Wrestling with what these mean in our everyday lives as individuals, families, and a church community is a big part of our journey as a congregation. I see membership as commitment to join in this wrestling and this journey with this group of people.

Practically, membership means that you can participate in the democratic processes that govern this church—such as voting in the annual meeting or serving in leadership. In this way, becoming a member gives you a voice in the future of this congregation. For example, as members, you hold the right to choose your own minister . . . by vote last May and again by verbal affirmation in today’s Installation Service. But moments of formal votes are not the only times when we are called upon to be a part of considering and shaping the nature of this congregation. Indeed, as minister, I’m not a voting member, but I do pledge to be a part of sustaining, nurturing, and building community here. I believe that being a member means that you’re willing to engage in the ongoing discussions of what we do and how we do what we do. Yes, sometimes, we have formal votes about budgets, ministers, and other proposals. But many times we simply talk with one another, listen to each other, and seek to imagine and discern what is best for this congregation, for this group to which we belong.

Significantly, what membership does *not* mean is that we all have to agree on whether there is a God or not; or whether the term “God” refers to a divine person or an impersonal force or a delusion; or any other numerous religious beliefs. Nor does membership mean

that you have to show up every week or that you only have 3 absences a year. However, don't be surprised if I do reach out to you if I've not seen you around—as I'll just want to make sure you're ok.

Membership also does *not* mean that there is a requirement that you must contribute financially at any general or specific amount. Yes, First Parish *does need* money to support many of its aims. We need money for the building, the staff, sheet music for the choir, curriculum for religious education, and, of course, coffee for coffee hour. Aware of these financial needs, most people do commit to financially supporting the church. Having chosen to sign the book today, I also have begun making a monthly financial contribution to the church.

Yet, money is just one way that we can contribute to the needs and mission of the church. My hope is that we all contribute in whatever ways we are able with our time, our money, and our energy. My hope is that we all ask what can *I* do for this community? Can I teach a religious education class for kids or adults? Can I usher, make coffee, sing in the choir? Can I add my voice, ideas, or time to Social Action? Could I use my professional skills or particular talents in service of the congregation? What we each can give varies—our stage in life, our finances, our interests will shape what we have to offer. That's ok. We need a lot of different contributions to sustain the work and mission of this congregation.

Just as Putnam is not in fact calling us all to go out and join bowling leagues, my sense is that it is not the particularities of what we do that matters as much as our willingness to join. Our church bylaws require that a person be “seriously desiring to join.” I love the poetry and depth of this simple phrase. It is no small thing to join a group that requires you to give something of yourself in order to help sustain something more than your own individual life. As Putnam reminds us, joining groups is a serious thing that helps foster connections between people, that builds “social capital”, and that directs an individual life to purposes beyond itself.

What matters most is not whether we give the smallest or the largest donation of time or money. Rather what matters is our serious desire to be a part . . . to do *our* part in fostering a religious community committed to promoting the values that we hold to be important to the fulfillment of a meaningful life. Whether you are a choir member, a teacher, or an archivist, whether you are a decades-old member or newly joined today; whether you are a member of five committees or none, may we all feel that we belong because we have chosen to be a part, that we belong because we seriously want to join in the spirit and purposes of this group.

So may it be. Amen.

