

## The Evangelical Mind

### Eating Alone

By Richard Mouw

Civil society is in big trouble. At least that is what social commentators have been telling us lately.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor who studies the role of voluntary associations in promoting healthy society, is one scholar who worries about our loss of service clubs, churches, PTAs, and veterans' organizations. We are living off inherited "social capital," a fund from the past of community values and social reinforcements that is now in danger of being depleted, Putnam argues. In his recent book, "Bowling Alone," Putnam offers evidence that people are not getting together in the ways that once flourished. Membership in bowling leagues, for instance, has been in a serious decline in recent years. At the same time, though, more people are bowling than ever before. The result is the "bowling alone" syndrome.

He makes another point, however, almost in passing. The decline in bowling leagues, he observes, has caused problems for bowling alleys. When people bowl in teams they tend to sit around and eat together. But people who don't socialize when they bowl also don't buy much food at bowling alleys. Bowling alone means eating alone.

However else we might want to evaluate the debates about civil society, I am convinced of this much: Eating alone is a big problem. We ought to be especially worried about the virtual disappearance of the daily family meal. The companies that operate college cafeterias tell us that present-day students don't dine--they "graze." They seldom relax for a whole meal eaten in the presence of a group of friends. They grab a sandwich here, a salad there, a yogurt cone there, with a minimum of socializing.

And this in turn is a pattern they learned at home. Individual family members eat at different times. Some do most of their eating standing up. And even when people do happen to eat in the same room, they often are watching television or chewing their food while listening to music on their headphones.

This is a major social loss. The family meal is our earliest classroom in civility. It is the best place for our first lessons in manners. When we eat together without distractions, we often talk about important things that are happening in our lives. At the dinner table, we even learn how to sit peacefully for a half-hour or so with people we are momentarily not getting along with very well. If we do not take advantage of the educational opportunities associated with the family meal, we will forever be playing catch-up after that--and not very successfully, I am convinced. I am not privy to any inside information about the dining patterns in the homes of the high school students who have killed their classmates in recent years, but my strong hunch is that the family dinner was not a common occurrence in their lives.

I'm not always clear what people mean when they talk about "family values," but here is something that they ought to mean: The family meal is an important training ground for citizenship.

Christians have special reasons to worry about an eating-alone culture. The Bible pays a lot of attention to communal meals. The Twenty-third Psalm, one of the most familiar of biblical passages, says that one of the ways that the divine Shepherd takes care of our needs is that he "prepares a table." The prophet Isaiah prophesies that some day "the Lord of hosts will prepare for all peoples a feast of fat things"--which sounds for all the world like a risk-free cholesterol binge! And several of Jesus' most prominent miracles were aimed at providing groups of people with enough to eat and drink.

The meal is an important part of the Christian community's worshiping life. Just before Jesus died, he ate with his disciples, and he told them to keep having that kind of meal together "in remembrance of me." The book of Revelation even tells us that we can expect a major banquet when we get to heaven, "the wedding feast of the Lamb." Church meals--both our formal Communion services and our informal pot-luck suppers--are a good way, then, of getting ready for the after-life. And family dinners may serve the same function. But even if they don't have that kind of eternal significance, they are certainly important to a healthy culture in the here-and-now.

Christians are having some important debates these days about how faith can best influence the social order. As we consider many options for political activism, we ought not to ignore a strategy that is not only close to home--it can happen right in our homes. One of the best contributions we can make to civil society is to promote the cause of communal dining.

We are probably safe to let the operators of bowling alleys do the worrying about all the folks who are bowling alone these days. But the habit of eating alone is one that ought to concern all of us.