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A View from Melrose

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Amazing grace

At a recent conference, I encountered Robert D. Putnam, author of the landmark study on the dissolution of community, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam has continued his research, and his latest book, *Amazing Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, will likely attract as much attention as *Bowling Alone* did.

Co-written by David Campbell, Putnam's new work portrays the patterns of behavior and belief in American society, focusing especially on church membership over the last 20 years. The book reports that membership rolls of mainstream Protestant church organizations have hemorrhaged; that Catholic church membership has remained relatively stable but the churchgoers' primary language is now Spanish; and that the greatest growth has occurred in two groups: evangelical Christians during the 1990s, and then nonbelievers in the 21st century. He points out that most young people now check "none of the above" when asked for religious preference – a significant shift from 20 years ago.

Putnam goes on to explain that the political divide between the evangelicals and the "nones" is dramatic, with very few in the middle. And people who attend religious services – be they Christian, Jew, Muslim or Buddhist – are much more likely to perform community service, vote, seek community leadership positions or support nonprofit groups, religious or secular. He worries about implications for the future: If we have fewer churchgoers, will we no longer have volunteers, donors, voters and effective civic leaders?

I believe the volunteers, the donors, the voters and the leaders will come from colleges like Linfield, just as they have done for many years. Founded by Baptists 153 years ago, Linfield now boasts students with many religious backgrounds, some Christian and some not. And yes, we have those who would likely check "none of the above" when asked about church affiliation. But because we are a small college, our students have an opportunity to create and participate in an authentic community; because we have a liberal arts curriculum, our students address ultimate questions about meaning and justice; and because our culture has been formed by generations of committed students and faculty, our students are imbued with a sense of service.

In January 2011, 95 Linfield students participated in community service in impoverished neighborhoods in North Portland. Meanwhile another group of students, alumni and friends worked on a Habitat for Humanity project during a service-learning course in Guatemala. The Yamhill County Action Partnership relied on our sociology students to provide research and data for multimillion-dollar grant proposals. The director of the Kids on the Block after-school program publicly recognized Linfield students (and our work study program) for many years of service and support.

The president of the University of Puget Sound commended our football team for holding a fundraiser to support a UPS player who was injured in a swimming accident. Our faculty and students continue work with local schools to eliminate suicide attempts among teens. And our new Latinos Adelante student group has held a series of popular "going-to-college" workshops for Hispanic students and families in the McMinnville Public Schools.

Amazing grace is manifested again and again by the Linfield students, faculty and staff. We are a college, not a church, but we embody the values of community citizenship and civil society, and we prepare our students to bring those values into the world. Putnam's worries may be well-founded but if so, our colleges are more important than ever. Certainly at Linfield, a small but powerful college that links learning, life and community, our mission is clear: to educate tomorrow's servants and leaders. 🍇

“...we embody the values of community citizenship and civil society...”

Thomas L. Hellie
President