

Nation of joiners still suffers loneliness

Small groups offer little help

Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community, by Robert Wuthnow; The Free Press (New York, N.Y., 1994); 463 pp.; \$24.95.

Catholic News Service
Reviewed by William Droel

Jacques Maritain, the renowned French philosopher, in his *Reflections on America* (1958) expressed agreement with the observation about America by his countryman, Alexis de Tocqueville.

The United States, de Tocqueville said, is a "swarming multiplicity of particular communities — self-organized groupings, associations, unions, sodalities, vocational or religious (groups), in which (people) join forces with one another at the elementary level of their everyday concerns and interests." However, Maritain also found "that in the midst of ... the busiest social life, it is not rare to find in individuals a feeling of loneliness."

Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University, in *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, confirms what has intrigued Maritain, de Tocqueville and other students of the American character: we are, paradoxically, both great joiners and ex-



treme individualists.

Wuthnow reached this conclusion after he and a team of researchers posed 84 questions to nearly 2,000 people, after he conducted follow-up interviews with some respondents; after he compiled a bibliography on small groups; and after he discussed the findings with experts. Fortunately, while this book makes use of all that research, the graphs and charts are not in the driver's seat. Wuthnow uses the survey results to support his well-written narrative.

"At present," Wuthnow informs us, "four out of every 10 Americans belong to a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members." About two-thirds of the groups are Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, or prayer groups. The bulk of the remainder are Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups. Then there are youth groups, singles groups and the like. But all this joining, Wuthnow convincingly argues, only fosters a culture in which "the individual (is) the measure of all things."

Take the spirituality area. Churches have embraced the small-group movement as an antidote to impersonal con-

gregations. Small groups do indeed, Wuthnow finds, help preserve "sacred traditions that might otherwise be lost entirely." But what is "preserved may remain quite superficial" and the spirituality that is promoted can be quite "domesticated."

For example, even though the majority of small groups use the Bible in some way, biblical knowledge is not being advanced. More than 40 percent of those in Bible groups did not know the birthplace of Jesus, to mention only one example. Nor is there evidence that participants have any "overall sense of larger themes in the Bible."

Scriptural education is not — for the most part — occurring in small groups. Instead, the Bible is used as a backdrop for telling personal stories. Thus the God of salvation history is too easily rendered trivial. A small-group member, for example, might compare a day when things come unglued to the Crucifixion, a bad day for Jesus.

The support-group movement is not, Wuthnow concludes, countercultural. It is growing so quickly precisely because it "reinforces cultural developments." The small-group movement, as Maritain and de Tocqueville could appreciate, is a bedrock for America's unique notion of individualistic community.

This book is not an expose nor an attempt to discredit the small-group movement. In fact, Wuthnow has "a generally positive view of small groups." It is, however, a needed report on a pervasive movement that continues to mushroom largely unexamined.

Droel is an instructor and the campus minister at Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, Ill.

Available at your bookstore or order prepaid from the Free Press, 465 S. Lincoln Drive, Troy, Mo. 63379; Add \$2 for shipping and handling.

'Cop' flops; 'Fred' flies

NEW YORK (GNS) — The following are capsule reviews of movies recently reviewed by the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'Beverly Hills Cop III'

(Paramount) Mindlessly violent sequel in which the resourceful Detroit cop (Eddie Murphy) tracks a killer to a Los Angeles theme park, where almost singlehandedly he takes on its murderous security force and their counterfeiting operation. Murphy's slack performance fails to carry director John Landis' poorly plotted shoot-'em-up, which adds insult to injury in feeble attempts at hip humor. Excessive violence and much rough language. The USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'The Flintstones'

(Universal) Live-action version of the cartoon series in which Fred Flintstone (John Goodman) is the patsy in an embezzlement scheme at the quarry, which nearly wrecks his marriage to Wilma (Elizabeth Perkins) and threatens his friendship with neighbors Barney and Betty (Rick Moranis and Rosie O'Donnell, respectively). Director Brian Levant's comedy offers moderately enjoyable nostalgia for adult fans of the TV series and, despite some mild sexual innuendo, fun for children. The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

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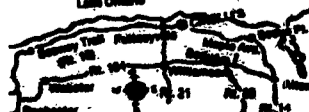
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