



The Potluck Project: A Grassroots Approach for Social Impact Organizations

The Challenges We Face Together

Across the United States, communities are facing a wave of division and disconnection that threatens both individual well-being and our shared civic health. Key challenges include:

- The rise of political extremism that fuels polarization and erodes democratic norms.
- Widespread loneliness and isolation, made worse by social media and cultural fragmentation.
- Increasing wealth and income inequality.

These issues are deeply interconnected. Social isolation makes us more vulnerable to fear and manipulation. Polarization erodes our ability to collaborate across difference. According to the Rippel Foundation, **belonging and civic muscle are the foundation** of a society. Group-to-group and person-to-person relationships are not a nice to have, they create the possibility for everything else. The question is: how do we respond?

A Practical Strategy for Building Social Cohesion

We believe that one of the most effective tools for rebuilding civic trust is as old as humanity itself: **sharing a meal.**

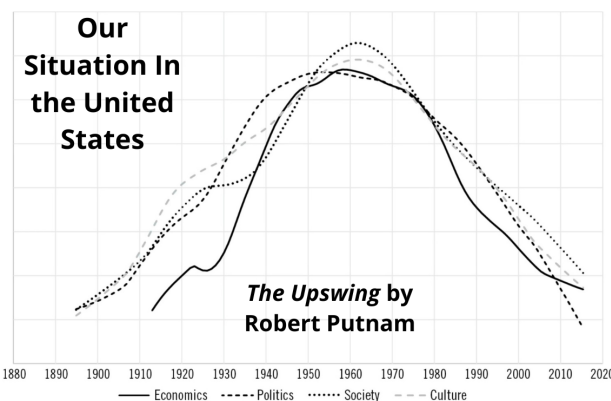
The Potluck Project offers a simple, powerful strategy: Bring diverse groups together around food and story.

Through shared meals and life experience conversations, people build relationships—not on opinions or ideologies—but on the human stories that shape their lives. These organic connections create a foundation for trust, collaboration, and shared action.

Why This Matters Now

In the last 60 years, social cohesion in the U.S. has sharply declined. Researcher Robert Putnam has shown that Americans are more divided and disconnected than we've been in over a century. Long before social media accelerated the problem, we

stopped joining clubs, sharing spaces, and forming friendships across difference.



Jonathan Haidt: Vibrant Democracies have Social capital | Strong institutions | Shared stories

Today, Americans are divided along many lines:

- Cultural background
- Economic situation
- Race and ethnicity
- Geography (rural, suburban, urban)
- Age and life experience
- Religious or non-religious identity
- Disability and neurodiversity

The Potluck Project isn't about agreement—it's about relationship. People grow at the pace of relationship, and trust grows through presence, not persuasion. Once these relationships are formed then people can take another step to identify shared values and create partnerships to build stronger communities.

What the Potluck Project Offers

In partnership with Seattle University's Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement, we are growing a national movement to foster community-based connection.

The Potluck Project includes:

- A **downloadable toolkit** with everything needed to plan a community potluck that encourages meaningful, experience-based dialogue.
- A **national tour** that models the process, builds capacity, and uplifts stories of local leadership.
- A growing network of nonprofit, civic, and grassroots organizations working to weave back the social fabric.

We've already hosted events in Louisville, KY and San Antonio, TX, Kirkland, WA and are expanding nationwide.

Why This Works

Potlucks are:

- Low-cost and familiar. Most communities already know how to host them.
- Culturally flexible. Every group has food and stories.
- Scalable. One event builds toward a network of organic relationships.
- Impactful. They build trust, reduce fear, and lay the groundwork for collaboration across sectors.

This isn't just about food—it's about belonging.

It also isn't just about one event. We are asking you to begin a sustained effort to create connections and increase trust within your community—knowing that others are doing it in their community.

What We're Asking From You

- Host or co-host a Potluck Project event tailored to your community's needs.
- **Use or share the toolkit** to help your networks create their own gatherings.
- **Partner with us** to bring The Potluck Project Tour to your region.
- **Help us build the movement** by connecting us with other organizations, funders, or civic leaders who care about social cohesion and democracy.
- **Share your stories** of successful gatherings to help inspire others.

A Path Toward Hope

When people gather face-to-face, listen to each other's stories, and share a meal, something powerful happens:

- Fear gives way to familiarity.
- Suspicion gives way to laughter.
- Distance gives way to connection.

We hope you'll join us in creating a stronger, more connected society—one potluck at a time.

About PTU:

Paths to Understanding is a 501c3 working for a world in which all belong and all can thrive. We do this work in partnership with local and regional organizations in Washington State and across the nation. Our partners include secular and religious bridge building organizations and networks.

THE potluck PROJECT	
Who can host a potluck?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals• Groups of Friends• Community Groups• Wisdom Communities or Interfaith Group
What do you need to get started?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 or more people ready to organize• A date and time for your potluck• A location to host your event• Courage to gather with others
What will you find in this toolkit?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sample invitation• Pre-event press release template• Event agenda & considerations for planning an intercultural event• Post-event press release template
QUESTIONS? Contact us via email Together@PathsToUnderstanding.org	



The Rev. Terry Kylo, ELCA

Executive Director,

Paths to Understanding

360-770-2774

terry@pathstounderstanding.org

www.pathstounderstanding.org