

Conversation partners: Even if we disagree

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

These are difficult times for people who value the unity of the church. The Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes seems to be setting up as a rival structure to the Episcopal Church in preparation for a possible split of the denomination. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Presbyterian Lay Committee is proposing a “gracious separation.” The dividing issue for Episcopalians and Presbyterians is the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons, a step the Episcopalians took with the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson. Presbyterians are forbidden to take that step with the offices of minister, elder and deacon by way of a constitutional provision added to the Book of Order in 1996. The Lutherans are currently talking about the issue and so are the United Methodists.

The issue of homosexuality has the potential to split these churches, not only because of the volatility of any question about sexuality and sexual practice, but also because there seems to be so little room to negotiate and compromise on this issue. Advocates of a more open and inclusive position and proponents of a more restrictive position both base their arguments on scripture and both claim the moral high ground.

In this context, it’s good to have the example of Barbara Wheeler and Richard Mouw—the example of Christians who profoundly disagree with each other on the issue of homosexuality but can talk with each other and stay in the same church together. Wheeler proposes a bracing image of the church as “tense, edgy, difficult—made up of strangers who cling to each other for dear life.” After four decades of parish ministry and a decade or so of involvement with the national church as it has struggled with this issue, I like that ecclesiology a lot. And Mouw gets my attention, and moves me deeply, by calling all of us to lay our individual and collective sins at the foot of the cross.

One of the best resources for congregations struggling with this issue is *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, a collection of essays by members of the

Princeton Theological Seminary faculty, who write from different points of view. These readable essays provide another model of how Christians who disagree with one another can still work, in the words of the Presbyterian ordination vows, to “further the peace, unity and purity of the church.”