

Done conferencing: Democracy's downside

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

Among the means of grace John Wesley lists “Christian conferencing.” Summer is always a popular time for Christians to congregate at denominational meetings, and this summer has been particularly so for me. After two weeks in Cleveland as a delegate at the United Methodist General Conference, a week at my area’s United Methodist Annual Conference, and another week at the church’s Jurisdictional Conference, I’m questioning Father John’s high theology of church meetings. On this issue, he could be wrong.

I should have expected trouble when I saw that the first event at General Conference was a reception for our bishops at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Bishops and James Brown memorabilia just don’t go together. This was followed by a week of sometimes contentious but often just uneventful legislative committee hearings. Hunkered down in metal folding chairs, we plowed through petitions from fellow United Methodists beseeching the church to outlaw everything from Styrofoam cups and narrow toilet stalls, to homosexuality, to unorthodox theology in our seminaries. (“How the heck would we know that it’s unorthodox? We’re Methodists,” quipped one delegate.)

During the second week’s plenary sessions, we took courageous stands condemning the Cleveland Indians’ mascot, “Chief Wahoo”; Methodists who tote firearms; and Methodists who don’t have sex the same way the majority of us do. “You mean to tell me,” raged a lay delegate at the microphone during the firearms debate, “that if my wife is being violated I’ve got nothing better to protect her with than a copy of the United Methodist Book of Discipline?” I wanted to assure him that I had frequently used the Book of Discipline to defend myself against people like him. A blow to the nose, sharply given by an experienced pastor during a congregational debate, can put a contentious layperson into a stupor. The only thing deadlier may be *Robert’s Rules of Order*.

Here are a few of the insights I gained in Cleveland. First, democracy is not all it's cracked up to be. Some folks really have nothing worthwhile to say on certain issues and should be ignored by the presiding bishop no matter how loudly they shout for recognition. Second, *Robert's Rules of Order* is not a Christian book and ought to be banned from church meetings. Third, Christians—or at least United Methodists—ought to stop thinking about sex. And, finally, maybe Methodists could find a better way to spend some \$5 million than by holding a quadrennial love feast and giving out free tote bags. We should, perhaps, remember Will Rogers's dictum that "Methodist preachers are like manure. Spread them around, they do a lot of good. Pile 'em all together in one place, they get to stinking."

I've talked to enough delegates to other denominational assemblies to know that we Methodists aren't the only ones failing to make these big church meetings matter. What does it mean to conference as Christians? A recent conversation I had with a congregational leader at my former parish might provide a clue. "You know, we haven't taken a vote in this church in the last two years, not since Jane became our pastor," he told me.

"What?" I asked. "How can you run a church without having a vote?"

"Jane says that putting things to a vote messes up the church. Somebody's got to win and somebody's got to lose. Besides, lots of times you're asked to vote on something you haven't tried yet, so how do you know whether you're in favor of it?"

"What we do is just to talk about things, letting everyone have a say. Then we try to go with the sense of the meeting. Sometimes Jane says, 'Sounds like we're ready to give this a try. Let's go for it,' and we do. At other times she says, 'Don't think we're there yet. We'll have to pray about it and see,' and that's what we do."

We need more experiments in Christian discernment like this one. Christian conferences must be more than some sanctimonious form of the United Nations. To make our meetings matter we must ask ourselves what it means to be people who believe in God, who are led by the Holy Spirit, and who have a Savior named Jesus who brings us together in the first place.

That's what I'll think about as I recover from my postconference depression. But for now, if you're a United Methodist, give me some room. Lay down your Book of Discipline and back off real slow.