

Makeshift communities: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

## **When two or more are gathered, factions lurk.**

by [Barbara Lemmel](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "*that* was the tradition."

When two or more are gathered, factions lurk in the midst of them, as Paul discovered. As a result, countless workshops and publications offer advice on how to manage congregational conflict. There are steps to follow, profiles to complete, interviews to take, goals to establish. It's a serious business.

Jesus didn't seem to worry about any of it. When he said, "Follow me," he apparently wasn't concerned that these followers might not turn out to be model disciples. Indeed, they were often dense and hard to teach, and on the rare occasions when they did understand him they would usually try to talk him out of his ideas. They

squabbled about who was greatest. One of them betrayed him. And no one stuck around when the going got tough.

Jesus simply said, "Follow me," and something in the way he said it pointed to God so clearly that two, then four, then 12 decided that whatever Jesus had to offer was worth leaving their old lives for. And as far as Jesus was concerned, their willingness to get up and follow was credentials enough. He would make his community out of this diverse, contentious dozen.

Of course, Jesus had to live with this makeshift community of disciples for only three years. And whenever they wandered off course, he was right there to set them straight. The real problems began when he was gone and they had to make decisions for the long haul. How do we admit the gentiles? What about those who teach a different gospel? Who is really in charge? Do we have to make a break with Judaism? The apostles held meetings, drew lots and trusted in the Holy Spirit's lead. The infant church grew.

Corinth was caught in the middle of it all. The congregation quarreled about class divisions, ethical issues and the qualifications for spiritual leadership, not to mention such daily concerns as what foods to eat. Paul struggled to get them back in agreement, offering specific advice when necessary. Most of all, though, he tried to knit them back together into a whole. They didn't have Jesus' physical presence with them. They themselves had to be the body of Christ now. The only way they could manage was to keep their eyes on the cross and love, love, love.

*You are the people who walked in darkness and have seen a great light! You are the saved, the ransomed, baptized in the Lord Jesus! Don't overshadow the glory of the gospel with divisions and quarrels!*

"You are the light of the world," Jesus told his followers. We don't always act like it. In the township where I pastor, there are five United Methodist churches. A hundred years ago, during the boom days of logging and tanning, the local population sustained those churches, one in each tiny hamlet. Now that nearly a century of economic recession has lowered the population by half, the churches struggle hard to stay afloat. Clearly, our best option is to work together to bring the good news to the outside community. But when we make an effort to come together, we have to pick our way through minefields of decades-old feuds and fears. Even one of the most successful collaborations--three congregations merged into one--stumbled

when divisions and concerns about rank threatened to overshadow the gospel.

But there are moments when all the fractures heal and the light shines through, times when together we accomplish far more than we could ever have managed alone. There are times, between and within our congregations, when we are truly more than the sum of our parts. The Spirit breaths through us and warms the darkening world. The light of Christ breaks forth like the dawn. We are caught up in some power beyond our individual selves, and we become the Body we are meant to be.

The last week of January is always a time of celebration in our home: it is the week we get the sun back. Our house is located just to the north of the church. As winter advances and the sun makes its ever more southerly trek from east to west, there inevitably comes a day in late November when it fails to rise above the church roof at all. From that day until the end of January, on even the brightest days, our house stands in perpetual shadow. The irony is not lost on us. At this darkest time of the year, the church blocks the light from our home.

We laugh about it every year, partly to keep our sense of humor when we're so hungry for sunlight we can practically taste it. We also laugh to help ourselves remember that the Light of the World has come. It does not always shine perfectly through our churches, but we pray that we cast more light than shadow onto the world around us.