

Changing the subject: Unity in the midst of strife

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This is the season when church bodies convene and contend over the issue of homosexuality. It is usually a wearisome struggle for all parties, and the struggle usually generates questions about whether there is a better way for Christians to deal with their differences.

In this issue, [O. Wesley Allen Jr. considers](#) the possibility that irreconcilable differences can and perhaps should lead a denomination to arrange an amicable split. But if such a schism happens, Allen suggests, it should be because discussions have uncovered profound theological differences, differences that go deeper than the issue of homosexuality.

Allen also notes that if it comes to a split, the pressure will be on the “moderates.” Although many in the middle are as weary of the conflict as are the activists on the left and right, they will face the greater predicament: with which side do they go? They are probably wary of people who are absolutely certain about their own positions. And they’d rather not be part of a church defined by its stance on homosexuality.

Rather than splitting, perhaps denominations should change the subject, and examine their deepest convictions about God, humanity, sin and salvation, the church and its mission. What images of God do they have, and how do they understand God’s attributes? How do they understand God’s grace? Is it primarily an atoning and forgiving reality? Or is grace also transformative and re-creative?

Rather than seeing such a theological conversation as a struggle between potential winners and losers, this conversation should be approached with genuine respect for differences and a readiness to listen. It would help if people shared not only their convictions but their stories, and the experiences that shaped their convictions.

Of course, any such theological conversation needs ultimately to address concrete issues such as homosexuality. But it would be a means of determining whether there is a fundamental unity between the contending parties or a deeper theological chasm beneath the surface.

Divided denominations might heed the example of Fay Vincent, who as commissioner of Major League Baseball had to decide whether to cancel or postpone the World Series after an earthquake hit the San Francisco area in 1989. As a lawyer and manager, he said later, he had learned never to make a decision that can reasonably be avoided. So he held off making a decision for a few days—by which time it was clear that playing the games was not only possible, but a source of healing for the region.

Postponing a separation is not necessarily a form of indecisiveness or conflict avoidance. It can be a way of keeping options open—to see if there might be some means of healing the breach in the community and avoiding the all-too-human tendency toward contentious fight or escapist flight. Seeking unity in the midst of strife is central to the mission of the church too.