Strange company: Why liberals need conservatives

by Barbara G. Wheeler in the January 13, 2004 issue

I'm uncomfortably aware that this room contains two very different groups of Presbyterians—both of which have ministered to me. One is made up of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. The church has developed the bad habit of talking about this group as if it is a problem for the denomination. Let me address you directly: You have not been a problem for me. Quite the opposite: you have provided me with luminous examples of how to live a Christian life under very adverse conditions.

This denomination's policies toward its GLBT members are restrictive to the point of cruelty. It tells many of you who want to offer sacrifices for the good of the church—countless hours of volunteer service as elders and deacons or a lifetime in demanding and low-paid pastoral ministries—that your life choices are so much more sinful than the rest of ours that we've had to erect special barriers to keep you from laying your gifts at the altar.

Our church's teaching that all same-sex acts are wrong, no distinctions, has downright perverse effects. The more you conform to the practices the church blesses and honors for heterosexuals—public pledges of fidelity to another person, family commitment to the nurture of children—the less likely that you can be ordained and that you will be welcomed to work out your discipleship in most Presbyterian congregations.

Yet here you are in this denomination, or eager to be, if only we had a place for you. You keep on witnessing to the truth of Christ in your lives. You keep on offering help that the church desperately needs but is too proud and stubborn to accept. You show us your anger—I take that as a compliment, a sign of trust. You keep on ministering, with tender compassion, to me and to many others who have the approval and privileges that have been denied to you. Your unselfishness lifts my sights. It makes it difficult, however, for me to lecture you about the future, because

many of you live your lives better in the present, under far more difficult conditions, than I do.

The other group in this room is made up of evangelical and conservative Presbyterians. Richard Mouw is here as their chief proxy, but others are present as well. I stumbled into the evangelical world by a kind of accident 15 years ago when some colleagues and I wanted to understand how the culture of a seminary shapes the ministers who are formed there. I could not have been more of an outsider if I had gone to do my research in Bali. I grew up in a home so liberal that when Dwight Eisenhower was elected president, I couldn't believe it. In my eight years of life I'd never met a self-identified Republican. How could a party with no members elect a president? My liberal Catholic girlhood and liberal Protestant adult life were similarly sheltered.

I had definite expectations for what I would find in the evangelical world. I believed that the only reason anyone would choose to become or remain a religious conservative is lack of the psychological strength to confront the ambiguity and uncertainty of the world. (I have since learned that evangelicals harbor a corresponding theory about liberals: liberals lack the moral fortitude to confront the truth and live by it.) I also expected evangelical conservatives to be theological dinosaurs, mired in precritical questions long ago settled and forgotten by the rest of us.

I discovered that you evangelicals—I will also address you directly—are no more fearful and unstable than the rest of us. Some of you are much better than I at looking at yourselves and the world with unsparing honesty and at changing your minds and behavior when warranted. I also learned that theology in your world is diverse. Some of it indeed concerns fossilized debates that most Christians, even many evangelicals, don't care about any more. But there is also lively theological conversation in the evangelical world, and it has reminded me how much gold is to be found in the classic Christian tradition and how it still enriches all of us, including liberals.

The biggest surprise was that my experience in the evangelical culture strengthened my faith. Despite your best efforts, you have not changed my opinions. But early on in my relationships with evangelicals there was a moment when I knew, and knew that the other knew, that we were hearing the same gospel. I am not proud of the fact that my evangelical friends spoke first, affirming my faith before I affirmed

theirs. I'm not proud that I failed to take the initiative, but I'm grateful that they did.

The two groups I have named, which have been the church in a powerful way to me in recent years, are also two groups that generally can't stand each other Each is deeply fearful that it and the wider church will suffer if the other gains any more power or prominence.

What can I possibly say about the church in the presence of these two groups? How about this: "They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:13-16).

What if we not only acknowledge the fact that we are strangers to others in our own denomination, but even give thanks for it? Instead of denying our estrangement or bemoaning it, why not embrace it as a gift from God? How's this for a model of the church: a company of strangers, who like Abraham and Sarah set out for a new place because "from a distance" all of us, in our own weird ways, "have glimpsed the promises of God and greeted them"? (Heb. 11:13).

This image of the church as a band of strangers who accept discomfort with one another as God's way of moving us forward may seem grimly Calvinistic. It certainly flies in the face of the best marketing advice about how to increase membership in a church or denomination: create a warm, friendly enclave where like-minded people can find refuge from the tensions of contemporary life. A church something like that is what the proponents of a cool, clean division of the denomination claim to have in view. (They are dreaming. Having just studied the bloody split of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1837 under circumstances not all that different from our own, I am certain that peaceful or gracious schisms are not possible.)

I suspect that even those of us who hate the idea of an outright split have a secret hankering for a church in which the most irritating of the others won't be around to make our lives miserable. If we can hammer the other side long enough, perhaps it will be cowed into silence, give up or go away, and then we will have an improved if not purified church.

I want to advocate an alternative: a tense, edgy, difficult church made up of *zenoi*, strangers, who cling to each other for dear life in the same chilly, rocky baptismal

boat because we are headed toward the same destination: a better country. I think I could make the full-blown ecclesiological case for a church of strangers. For now I'll focus on three practical advantages: strangeness is better for us, better for the church, and better for the world than the warmer and cuddlier options.

A church that contains members whom we think are strange, *even barbaric*, *is a healthier setting for Christian formation*. Familiarity and affinity breed bad habits as well as virtues. As Richard Mouw points out, conservatives are contentious enough among themselves. If this denomination splits, within minutes the new conservative church will be organized into warring factions. Aggressiveness is part of conservative religious culture; it's both the secret of its effectiveness and its downfall.

As for liberals' bad family habits: We are often smug. We are pretty sure that our views are advanced and others' views are outmoded. When everyone else grows up, we believe, they will look and think like us. You could say that our progressive openness to the world, which is where this sense of being ahead of the curve comes from, is the secret of our effectiveness and also our downfall. In my experience, we are less likely to slide over into snobbishness when "they"—those we have defined as inferior—are in the room with us, thinking as clearly and acting as maturely as we are.

The strange members in our midst make us self-conscious. They make us less likely to display some of the uglier traits of our subgroup and perhaps more aware that if we want greater righteousness for the church and all of us in it, we may have to fix ourselves as well as those others.

The church is better off—more productive and more faithful—when the strangers in it hold on to one another. This denomination has a lot of important work to do; and though we would like to see all of it accomplished our way, the fact is that none of the factions, including our own, has the capacity or the skills to do it alone. Questions about Christology, for example, are ones that estranged groups in the church could profitably work on together. The most audible version of christological debate often takes place at the level of bumper stickers: "Jesus Is the Only Way" or "Many, Many Paths to God." We can do better than that.

Our various parties and caucuses have different kinds of specialized knowledge: liberals are practiced in learning from other faith traditions; evangelicals have expertise in nurturing and sustaining intense personal relationships with Jesus

Christ. There are some in the church—women, gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities—who have experienced what it is like to suffer at the hands of the civic and religious establishment. That also is valuable insight into what it means to be the body of Christ. Instead of battering each other with our different perspectives on Jesus Christ, we might listen for what complements and corrects our own view in what others have to say about their knowledge and love of him. Perhaps, if we did that, we could represent him more fully and accurately to a world that doesn't know him very well. I think that he would be honored if we pooled our efforts in his behalf.

Discussing the issue of homosexuality will be enormously difficult. On this matter, we really are strangers, far apart and mystified about each other's outlook and convictions. I believe God invites GLBT persons into full membership, committed partnerships and church leadership on the same basis as everyone else. But those who make this case tend to leave it at that, to give the impression that inclusion is the end of the story. Of course it is not. God incorporates us into Christ's body for a reason: transformation.

Evangelical theology and culture place heavy emphasis on that next step. Our side doesn't have to agree with conservatives about what God is seeking to change or redirect or squelch—namely, all same-sex impulses—or about who is first in line for change. (I suspect that God's priority is the privileged and powerful, including in the present instance those of us self-indulgent heterosexuals who have full church and society support for the promises we make, yet still don't keep very well.) But we can stand our ground on these points and still let the evangelicals help us balance our word to the church: inclusion and acceptance, but also metanoia and new life.

Who knows? If evangelicals listen intently to the testimony of faithful GLBT persons, and if our side accepts evangelicals' prompting to admit our need and desire to be renewed, maybe we can strive together for a church as just and generous—and holy—as God's grace.

In struggling through their disagreements, *Presbyterian strangers show the world that there are alternatives to killing each other over differences*. As long as we continue to club the other Presbyterians into submission with constitutional amendments, judicial cases and economic boycotts, we have no word for a world full of murderous divisions, most of them cloaked in religion.

In 1869, the two Presbyterian denominations that formed in the bitter split 40 years before came back together. Seeking, said their reunion plan, to create a church marked by “diversity and harmony, liberty and love,” both assemblies met in Pittsburgh in separate halls from which their members marched to opposite sides of a broad avenue. Their moderators and clerks then stepped into the street and met in the middle. They “clasped hands,” according to one account, “and amidst welcomes, thanksgivings and tears, they locked arms and stood together in their reformed relations.”

It was a powerful moment, but I can imagine a more powerful witness: we could skip the split. We Presbyterians, who share so much—a confession of faith, a rich theological heritage, the advantages and the burdens of wealth and social power—could covenant to stay together, to labor with each other, in love, for justice and truth. It would be very arduous and painful, much more so than splitting or drifting apart. It would be worth it. The world would take note of what the gospel makes possible for those who confess their dis-ease with each other but still keep going, strangers locked in covenant, toward the better country of diversity and harmony, liberty and love.

It is, of course, a long trip. We have only glimpsed what that better country might be like. But God, says the Letter to the Hebrews, was not ashamed to be called the God of those who stepped out in faith. Indeed, God has prepared a city for them. God has prepared a city for us strange Presbyterians and for all the other foreigners God loves. I pray that with God’s help, we will get there together.

This article is adapted from a talk Barbara Wheeler gave in November 2003 at a meeting of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.