

Diverse Disciples

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

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There was a lot to celebrate at the recent Pride parades, from the [legalization of same-sex marriage](#) in New York State to the [reframing of ordination standards](#) in the PCUSA. The LGBT rights movement has hit its share of bumps; for many, the shock of California's [Prop 8](#) winning a majority vote hasn't worn off. Still, the rapid shift in public opinion about gay rights seems to confirm that the trajectory of the universe remains long but justice-leaning. (I'm pretty sure *that* MLK quote isn't [fabricated](#).)

While I support gay rights, I find myself oddly unenthusiastic about the prospect of my own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, eventually considering a resolution to become open and affirming. Our fiercely congregational polity means that, while a General Assembly vote might have symbolic power, practically speaking it cannot coerce dissenting regions to change. In 1997 the General Assembly voted to enter a period of discernment about the participation of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. In the

meantime, various congregations and regions continued to operate according to their own convictions. Some Disciple clergy openly perform same-sex weddings; some don't. Openly gay candidates who are gifted and called to ministry may be ordained in some regions but not in others.

But there's a more important reason that I'm reluctant to join the push for another vote: I appreciate how this season of discernment has allowed for Christians of diverse opinions to coexist--to *commune*--in a manner that is rare in our polarized culture. Despite the absolutism of many on both sides, among Disciples there has been room for a whole spectrum of opinion at the proverbial and sacramental table.

The situation is far from perfect. Many pastors have been forced to choose whether to conceal their sexual orientation, relocate or serve a congregation without the benefit of ordination or standing. On the other hand, some theologically diverse ministry commissions have unanimously recommended openly gay candidates for ordination--not because of a policy that forbids discrimination, but because, like the circumcised believers who were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured on on the Gentiles, they could not deny the evidence.

I doubt these commissions would have reached the same result if their votes centered on an abstract issue instead of a person.