

Building bridges amid disagreement

By [Janet Edwards](#)

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Recently I was asked a thought-provoking question, “How can someone who is set in their convictions build a bridge with those they disagree with?”

This question is an important one to dwell on. As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) enters 2012, we watch as the threat of schism jeopardizes our unity as a community of faith, together, proclaiming the Gospel. Yet, unity is a part of our ordination vows. It’s part of our shared statements of faith and it is evident in our charge to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world. Building bridges is an important part of talking with each other and sustaining our unity.

I recognize that I am firmly planted on “one side of the bridge,” with convictions that some disagree with. Yet, for thirty years I’ve also concentrated on being in dialogue and collegial fellowship with those who disagree with me. In that dialogue I often encounter an assumption that the purpose of my reaching out to those who disagree with me is to tip the bridge between us so that all the people on the other side eventually slide towards me. And many point to the middle as the most likely place from which to build a bridge reaching both sides.

I happen to live in the city [with the most bridges](#) in the entire world. We here in Pittsburgh know that bridges are what bring us across valleys and hollows, very like the chasms that have separated parts of our Presbyterian Church family for decades. We also know that good bridges are built from a sturdy pylon on one side of the ravine out to another sturdy pylon built on the other side. They are not built from the middle out.

And when the bridge is completed, it allows people on opposite sides to move back and forth freely – to be in communication with one another.

Building the bridge doesn't mean you have to move to the other side; it just gives you the ability to be together.

What this means is that it is up to us, those who are firmly planted in their convictions, to help be the bridge builders for the whole church. Wow!

So how can we do this?

I have seen the sturdiest bridges built when those who disagree with each other can find a shared value and activity – such as breaking bread together, volunteering, or joining in mission work. In [dialogue](#), I have seen that it is important to find our common ground and to speak from the heart by using “I” statements and avoid statements or assumptions that begin with “You.” And most of all, it is important to keep the bridge of communication open. Without the bridge between us, not only do we cut each other off, but we also cut off the possibility that God, by giving us neighbors who disagree with us, is truly giving us a gift. How else are we to check for our own blind spots?

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