

Open season: Surviving church conferences

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Here is a recommended summer reading list: *Robert's Rules of Disorder*, *Extreme Boxing*, *No-Rules Gladiatorial Games*, *Cockfighting*, *The Laws of Rugby Football*, *Professional Wrestling: Anything Goes*, and *Taking My Bat and Ball and Going Home*. That is the recommended list—if you are participating in, attending, reading about or hoping to survive church conventions. When the people who show they are Christians by their love gather to attend to business and wage war, it helps to be aware of how other extreme sports operate. These books will help.

Four-plus decades ago when I did cub reporting for this magazine I sometimes covered denominational, synodical and diocesan gatherings. Since then reports on them have been the main source for my *World Book Yearbook* entries on “Protestantism.” I soon learned I needed help from philosophers and anthropologists to understand the warfare at these exemplifications of the body of Christ in action. Most helpful were John Dewey (“Men do not shoot because targets exist, but they set up targets in order that throwing and shooting may be more effective and significant”) and Bronislaw Malinowski (“Aggression like charity begins at home”).

No matter whether it is a high-church or low-church, congregational or episcopal or connectional or presbyterial or synodical or confessional polity at work, the plot of a five-day convention always goes something like this:

Sunday night participants arrive and celebrate with a Eucharist or gala or hymn-sing. “We are not divided, all one body we.” Monday one gets a glimpse of the Lord’s work through the agencies of mercy, justice and education, and the mood stays up. Tuesday committee reports arrive, to mixed receptions. Wednesday features open hearings and then floor debate as factions and fronts vie for position. Thursday the participants vote. Most votes break on a 51-49 margin, and the losers sulk as they plot next year’s revenge. Friday everyone goes home mad.

There are some delightful exceptions—I've heard of some and seen some. As for the others, one wonders why Christian fellowship and understanding and love give out at conventions. The answer is simple: because the credentialed participants vote. The solution: Don't vote.

Oh, I can be realistic. Some kinds of voting have to go on, since these bodies are stewards of funds. They need to elect officers. But most of what they do is not settleable by vote and not settled because of the vote.

If they did not have to vote, the hugs, hymns, shared Lord's Table, plus reports on acts of mercy and justice could be continued and celebrated all week. We don't vote at family reunions, and we do not settle things. We find ways to renew acquaintances, tell stories, affirm missions and commit ourselves to coming back together again next year.

Decades ago we would watch committees of denominations calculate how they could get a headline in at least the convention city's newspaper. "Let's pass a resolution condemning nonunion lettuce growers. . . ." Today church bodies have no trouble getting attention. That's because media know how to cover wars, conflict, quakes and devastation.

It would be great if some year we could give the reporters something different to write about or to catch in their cameras. Provide them with a sample of the acts of love, the signs of compassion, the expressions of generosity often seen back home. The headlines then might not be "the same old thing" but "news." As in Good News.