

Contending with the saints: Discerning God's will, not imposing our own

From the Editors in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

The season of denominational assemblies is upon us. Which calls to mind the old doggerel “Living above with saints we love / that will be grace and glory; / living below with saints we know / that is a different story.” Many gatherings of the mainline saints have not been experiences of grace and glory, mainly because of pitched battles over church positions on contested issues, especially homosexuality. If we have to fight, some wonder, why can’t we struggle over something else for a change? It is not surprising that sexuality is at the forefront of debate. Sexuality is about intimacy, about human belonging, about valuing another and being valued. Alongside our God-relationship, nothing is more foundational in human experience.

Still, the way we struggle over these issues is often dismaying. The tactics are the same as those used in the political sphere—caucuses, ad and letter-writing campaigns, the manipulation of parliamentary procedures, the use of publicists, protests and demonstrations. Church business should be conducted with decency and in order, as the Presbyterians love to say. Sometimes, however, the processes and parliamentary procedures become ends in themselves. As a wit once asked: “Who is this guy Robert? Who invited him to our churches? Was he a Christian?”

There is a movement afoot in churches to dispense with Robert’s Rules of Order and use instead a discernment process which joins discussion, prayer, silence and listening to the Spirit. Rather than a parliamentarian overseeing the process, a “discernmentarian” helps keep the process on track (see Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, Alban Publications).

This is not an argument against arguments. God knows that we need more, not less, genuine discussion and debate, rather than manipulation of procedures and outcomes. But what if instead of trying to win an argument we were to think that

being the church means discerning the will and way of God, not imposing our own wills? What if we were to think that somehow God's will is revealed to us in prayerful, respectful conversation with one another?

An entire academic discipline has emerged in recent years in conflict mediation. These skills are even being introduced to children in elementary schools to help them resolve their differences in peaceful ways. Should we not expect this much of adults?

Then, of course, there are spiritual disciplines of prayer, silence, meditation and worship. Rowan Williams suggested recently in this magazine that in times of conflict opponents should read the Bible together. There's a radical idea. These disciplines, of course, should inculcate in us virtues of humility, patience, imagination and respect: the humility to believe that we might just not have a corner on the truth; the patience to live with the messiness of unresolved issues and not to force premature outcomes; the imagination to conceive of ways of resolving our differences in other than win-lose strategies; and the respect to treat with dignity others who hold contrary opinions.

The world may not be closely watching to see how Christian churches resolve their conflicts over sexual ethics or other issues. But if Christians can't peacefully and respectfully contend with one another on moral issues about which we feel strongly, then how can we hope for—indeed, how can we even pray for—peace in the Middle East?