

Family squabbles: Denominational reunions

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

When I pack my suitcase for the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I often think of the words of 2 Samuel 11:1: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him.” We Presbyterians decided recently to gather every other year instead of every year, partly in the hope that with an extra year to cool off, delegates (officially called commissioners) would feel a little less like Joab and his officers going off to war.

Once when I returned from a bruising assembly, I asked two close clergy friends, a Methodist and a Roman Catholic, why the conflicts among Presbyterians seemed much more bitter than the ones in their churches, even though they were just as divided over issues of sexuality and biblical authority as the Presbyterians were. My Methodist friend explained that his denomination gathers only every four years, which allows people time to simmer down and mostly forget what the fuss was about, whereas Presbyterians are always choosing up sides and preparing to fight the next battle. My Roman Catholic brother smiled and said that Catholics don’t get steamed up mostly because they have a thousand-year history of ignoring headquarters.

Sometimes we think of denominations as families. When we see our old friends, hug and shake hands at the denominational gathering, we say, “We’re just a big family after all.” When he heard that metaphor, the late Jack Stotts, a distinguished Presbyterian theologian and seminary president, used to point out that families in the Bible tend to be dysfunctional—family members lie, cheat and steal from one another, abandon one another, perpetrate acts of violence and even kill one another. Don’t be sentimental about the church as family, he used to say.

Still, I’ve always liked the metaphor. I recall how Martin Marty once explained American denominations to some pastors from Switzerland. He said that if you want

to understand what an American denomination is, you should attend a big family reunion in west Texas. People will come from miles away, hug and kiss and catch up on what everyone has been doing in the last year. Everybody goes to church in the morning, where long prayers are said and beloved hymns are sung. Then there is a big picnic with lots of food, and the children head for the playground. An occasional fight breaks out, but no one is seriously hurt. A few siblings get into an argument about inheritance and who has a claim to what. The day comes to an end and a date is set for next year's reunion.

Denominations, Marty said, would do well to stick to that model: don't take votes except to elect officers, approve the budget—and decide when the next reunion will be.