

Staying together

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue



Duccio di Buoninsegna, detail of *Christ's Farewell to His Apostles*, 1308-11.

When I first arrived in Chicago, the Church Federation of Greater Chicago was a visible and important part of the life of the city, with a broadcast ministry, hunger programs and advocacy efforts in civil rights, education and public policy. An annual banquet was held in a hotel ballroom, with all the seats at every table taken and greetings brought by the mayor.

Today, although the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches continue to be faithful expressions of unity, local conciliar efforts are mostly dormant. The only time I see brothers and sisters from other denominations is at the annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast and the Martin Luther King Day celebration.

What happened? For one thing, many denominations have been consumed by internal conflicts. One issue causing conflict for Presbyterians and others has been ordination standards with regard to gays and lesbians. After arguing for more than three decades, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has decided to alter the rule that has prohibited gays from being ordained unless they vowed to be chaste single. The new policy allows local congregations and presbyteries the possibility of deciding that a gay candidate is qualified to be a pastor. Some presbyteries and congregations will make use of this option, and some will not.

In response to the change, some 100 out of 11,000 PCUSA congregations have left the denomination; others are planning to leave. A significant number of congregations are trying to devise a way to stay but to distance themselves from the rest of the family by creating a jurisdiction that will abide by the old ordination

standards.

Does it matter if people leave or stay? Someone recently told me that there are 38,000 different Protestant denominations in the world and suggested that this number is a sign of energy and diversity. I'm not so sure. I don't idolize my denominational family, but I believe it is a good and faithful thing to remain together.

At the table of the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for his disciples, including all of us who, because of those disciples, have become believers too. May they "all be one . . . so that the world will know that you sent me," he prayed. For Jesus, unity among his disciples is an instrument of the evangel itself. I'm haunted by that claim.

Presbyterians have a great evangelical opportunity to show a fractured world that it is possible for people to disagree with one another and yet remain in fellowship. That possibility will also be exhibited at the *Christian Century's* annual lecture in September, which will feature a conversation between Barbara Wheeler and Richard Mouw, two Presbyterians who disagree on some significant issues but do so constructively and with civility. It's another sign that unity in diversity is not a mere slogan or an idealistic pipe dream but a real gift of the Christian life.