

## My stab at a pastoral response

by HEIDI HUSTED ARMSTRONG

I SUGGEST WE START BY COMPILING A LIST of things Christians have disagreed about through the centuries right on into today: God's sovereignty or human responsibility. Social action or evangelism. Charismatic or cessationist. The list goes on; it's a long list — often resulting in a polarized church — and a whole bunch of denominations to boot (though increasingly today the divide runs straight *through* denominations). Of course, getting it right is not unimportant. But to a church notorious for having knowledge, the Apostle Paul cautions: "Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). Like it's not enough to be in the know. Apparently you can be right in the wrong way — when you gloat or give up on others. So the challenge remains: how do we live with our differences — how do we disagree — without demonizing or dismissing our opponents? And not simply tolerating them, but building them up in love?

The thing is, love is not merely the *will* of God, it's the very *nature* of God.

In Jesus Christ the rain of God's grace falls on the just and the unjust, including the person I think is wrong and want to write off. God just loves people. Certainly love can be tough, but it's never mean. It is generous, gracious, kind — which doesn't mean we can't argue. Rather it informs how we argue. David Augsburger suggests mature disciples refuse "to join in the pitched battles over abortion, 'family values' and rights for those who are either straight or gay, recognizing that these battles are pernicious, exaggerated in rhetoric and reductionistic in their simplified positions, and that they end in denying the humanity, worth and preciousness of those viewed as opponents." Mature disciples know "there are legitimate concerns on both sides that must be listened to, respected, confronted, honored."

So, to my theologically conservative friends who've jumped ship believing the PC(USA) is adrift, my initial response was: Ouch! Your giving up on "them" included *me*, but not everyone who disagrees with you embodies your definition of apostate. And even though I still believe the witness of the larger church is hindered by your departure, now the challenge is not to demonize you, but to let you go, to bless you, to wish you well, even to celebrate

any "success" you have.

To my theologically conservative friends who are saddened by the recent actions of the GA, may I say: We will get through this theologically challenging time — all of us *together* — if we refuse to become what amounts to practical atheists. Because God's got this. Jesus is with us. This *is* church. So, no whining or pining. As much as our job is discerning truth, more importantly we must not turn away from those disagreeing and even disagreeable others. Let's commit to build up others in love early and often.

To my theologically progressive friends celebrating the actions of the 221st GA to redefine marriage, may I say: Not everyone who disagrees with you is homophobic or exclusivist. (Ironically, I have never felt more excluded than when, some years ago, a leftward leaning LGBTQ proponent arguing for inclusivity had no room for me.) Remember how you felt every time your resolutions got voted down? Now there's a whole bunch of other people feeling like that. Can you

love and respect your opponents as much as those whose cause you've been championing?

And to all of us all across the spectrum, may I say: Beware the coalition. The dynamic African American activist and gospel singer, Bernice Johnson Reagon, says: "If you're in a coalition and you're comfortable, you know it's not a broad enough coalition." God's covenant is not just with people like us. So let's eschew the echo chamber, get a little more comfortable with being uncomfortable and remember there's nothing quite so troubling as thinking you know it all.

HEIDI HUSTED ARMSTRONG serves as an interim pastor in the Pacific Northwest.

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