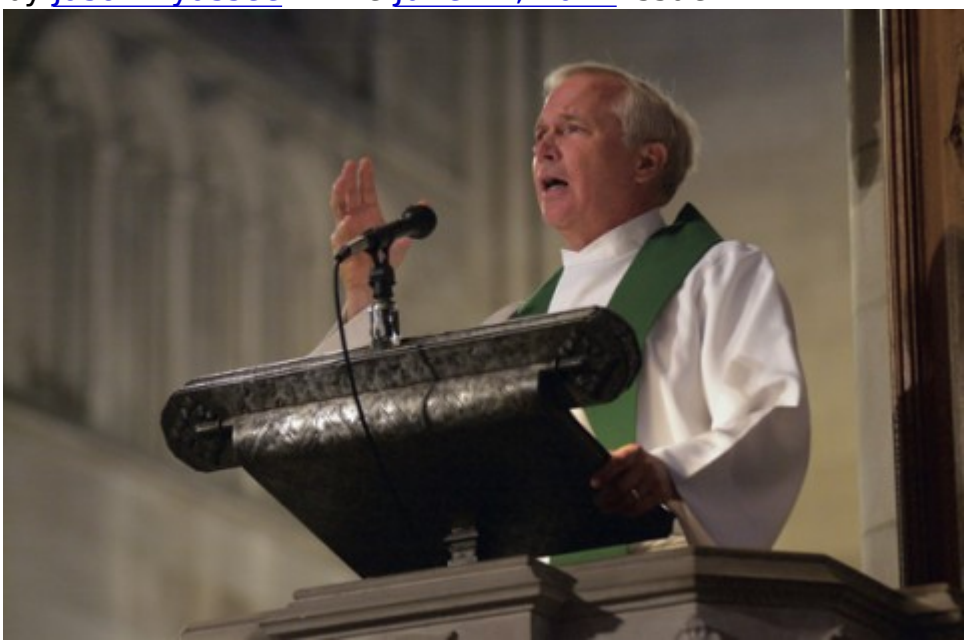
The bishop’s dashboard: William Willimon’s experiment in accountability

by Jason Byassee in the June 14, 2011 issue



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"My job now is to coordinate disaster relief," William Willimon said, reflecting on the storms in Alabama that destroyed 20 United Methodist churches, rendered 20 more unusable for months to come and killed more than 200 Alabamians. "We're trying to learn from our experience with Katrina to be more organized. People really need the church in a moment like this."

For Willimon, the bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, disaster relief is an unexpected addition to an already unconventional career.

When Willimon became a bishop in 2004, people who knew him and his work were curious. Why would the dean of Duke University Chapel want to leave a high-profile position to oversee congregations in Alabama? The joke in the world of theological

scholarship is that one must "publish or parish"—and here was Willimon, among the most prolific theological writers of his generation ("never an unpublished thought"), voluntarily choosing to occupy himself with hundreds of parishes.

The tenor of Willimon's own theological writings raised an even more significant question: Could an inveterate gadfly, the author of *Resident Aliens* and other forceful critiques of mainline Protestantism, oversee a unit of the mainline church without doing damage to himself or others?

With Willimon set to retire as bishop in 2012 (he plans to return to teaching at Duke Divinity School), it is appropriate to consider how the Willimon experiment in the episcopacy has turned out. As one might expect, it has not been business as usual.

Willimon has used his authority to "decimate the career ladder," as one pastor told me. In the process he has alienated many pastors in the North Alabama Conference. He has promoted younger clergy deemed to be more talented over those with more seniority. He has streamlined some meetings and eliminated others. "I got annual conference down to two days," he boasts (it had previously lasted four and a half days). And he has made *accountability* a hallmark term.

Accountability, in this case, mainly means that every congregation's weekly numbers for giving, attendance, hours of service, and professions of faith are posted online for all the world—and the rest of the conference—to see. They appear on a page on the conference website called the North Alabama Dashboard. These statistics become one source of input for decisions on pastoral appointments. What looks to some like a call for public accountability looks to others like an act of public shaming. For critics, the Dashboard seems to treat the dynamics of church life like so many hamburgers sold.

Willimon's main desire seems to be to see energy in ministry. "He wants us to be out there, doing something," one young pastor told me. "It's almost like he doesn't care what."

I met with a group of pastors that Willimon called the Brat Pack, made up of some of the younger pastors whom he had promoted above the usual rung on the career ladder. Having Willimon's support didn't stop them from criticizing him. One accused him of failing to promote women sufficiently (only one member of his cabinet is female). One accused him of unnecessarily alienating older clergy, perhaps even practicing ageism. Others voiced a common criticism: he travels and speaks a lot

outside the conference. "He's never here," they say. Willimon's travel schedule makes him an easy target—but he protests that he preaches in his conference's churches 35 Sundays a year.

Though Mike Holly, a pastor to students at Birmingham's Canterbury UMC, defended Willimon's initiatives, saying that "no institution will fix itself." He noted that Willimon came to Birmingham with a limited amount of time (Methodist bishops usually cannot serve another four-year term after they turn 65) and only one unchecked power: to move pastors to new churches. Why not use that power to put talented, energetic people in places where they and their churches can thrive?

Defending the Dashboard, these pastors said that a good pastor always pays attention to the numbers. "This goes all the way straight back to Wesley," said Wade Griffith, a pastor at Liberty Crossings UMC in Birmingham. Methodists in the 18th century scrupulously counted attenders, members, professions of faith, accounts of sanctification and financial gifts. Willimon is practicing what academics might call "traditioned innovation." The online Dashboard may be new, but it comes straight out of Methodist custom. One of the district superintendents who works under Willimon said, "Haven't you ever seen the pinup numbers on the plywood boards in front of little churches? Churches have always counted." With the Dashboard, "pastors can't lie to their buddies."

Surprisingly, the Dashboard can even build community. When pastors can see which of their peers are succeeding, they can (or should) call them up and ask them how they're doing it. "Using 'I don't know how' as an excuse is out the window," Griffith said.

Willimon said that the numbers on the Dashboard have been illuminating to him. "The first month we used it, the pastors showing the best growth were people I didn't know. I had to call them up: 'Hey, this is your bishop, what are you doing up there in Dismal Swamp?'"

With the Dashboard, Willimon "busted the closed shop," Griffith said. When appointments are made, both pastors and parishioners ask to see the numbers.

"The numbers take the appointment system out of the backroom," said Brandon Harris, pastor of Avondale UMC in Birmingham. "We all want to talk about performance."

But performance of what? As readers of *Resident Aliens* know, Willimon has eloquently argued that churches must above all be faithful to the demands of the gospel. A church that stands up for nonviolence or racial justice may post some poor numbers. Doesn't an emphasis on numbers serve to trim the wings of prophetic pastors—the very kind of pastor Willimon has encouraged in his writings and the kind of pastor that he was?

Several members of the Brat Pack noted this tension and said it is one that Willimon hasn't resolved. Like early Methodists, he wants to see evangelical energy and church growth. He wants clergy who don't live off the achievements of the past but who rally missional energy for God's future. Yet at the same time, said Wade Langer, who was assigned to plant a new church in Tuscaloosa, he encourages courageous action. "He's always saying, 'Don't be afraid to piss people off.'"

Several expressed confidence that Willimon would support the decisions they make as pastors. Griffith said Willimon's approach "has given me even more courage to lead my congregation when it comes to making difficult or unpopular decisions."

And these young pastors do show courage. One spoke at length about the ministry at his church, and only later did I discover his congregation carries a debt of more than $7 million. Another told of an innovative ministry to gay and lesbian families, another of a Theology on Tap program (which might be a tame idea elsewhere, but not in the Deep South).

I heard about a pastor whom Willimon sent to a rural church, where she was disappointed that few people turned out for church. The next week she went across the railroad tracks and got a crowd of folks from the tar paper shacks to come to church. She baptized six one Easter but also lost six of her most devoted members. Her Dashboard numbers didn't show any growth, because people left the church as the "wrong" kind of people entered it. Willimon may want growth, but not just in the way many church growth consultants suggest. Willimon likes the Dashboard, but he knows that it is only one potential indicator of faithfulness.

The pastors all had stories of Willimon reaching out to them personally. He telephones people out of the blue and, though he's on the road a lot, uses technology to stay in touch. "He's 21st-century accessible," one pastor said, amazed at how quickly he responds to e-mail and downloads new apps.

A key player in Willimon's episcopacy has been Bill Hamer, a former executive at Liberty Mutual insurance company. It's not uncommon these days for denominational administrators to hire executive coaches. Hamer, who had taught management and been an administrator in higher education, met Willimon when the two served on a board together. Hamer was pleasantly surprised that the church would ask him to do something that draws on his business skills. And Willimon appreciated an adviser who's not surprised by impious behavior from clergy.

Hamer advised Willimon on personnel matters and devised the Dashboard system. He told me that the way to read the Dashboard is to look for the odd numbers—like the percentage of people served per member, or the ratio of membership to attendance (which will reveal churches that have large but inaccurate membership rolls).

Part of Hamer's job was to interpret Willimon's manic energy to others ("Wait and see which of the ten things he mentioned today he'll mention again tomorrow. Then do those"). Hamer said his most important task was to get Willimon to focus not on the 25 things on his mind at any given moment, but the five things the church can actually accomplish.

Hamer was eventually let go after the conference cabinet and others concluded that he had too much power. Willimon remains unconvinced on that point, but he bowed to the cabinet's wishes.

About Willimon, Hamer said: "He's a big believer in conflict. He can't help being an agitator. He can't sit still because Jesus doesn't."

I saw this style in action. I heard Willimon casually tell the pastor of a large church that he might assign the talented young leader of the church's contemporary service to a different position. "That conversation would affect 3,000 people," the pastor told me, shaking his head over how a momentous move was brought up so breezily. I was with Willimon when he bumped into a young African-American pastor in his conference. "Do you like working with white people?" Willimon bluntly asked. It seems Willimon doesn't want anyone to feel settled in a job.

A pastor who has seen the pugilist side of Willimon is Reggie Holder, director of a series of ministries for the poor at Highlands UMC, a neo-Gothic church in Birmingham's trendy Five Points South neighborhood. The church's ministries feed more than 100 homeless people daily and provide them with access to washers,

dryers and post office boxes. The church has hired the homeless to run these ministries. One Highlands member, who lamented that her once-beautiful church looked like a city bus stop, stirred up some local merchants to oppose the church's ministries to the homeless. A front-page story in the *Birmingham News* detailed these complaints and quoted business owners who said that nothing was wrong with their area other than what was caused by Highlands.

Willimon weighed into the controversy with energy. He wrote an op-ed piece in the *Birmingham News* that said: "I love it when the United Methodist Church makes front-page news not for losing members or fighting over some social issue, but for being the church and doing what Jesus commanded us to do." He named the clergy leading the local ministries and thanked them personally. And rather than seeing any shame in the church hosting homeless people, he pointed to the shame of a state in which 23 percent of the children live in poverty. When other church executives might have been on the phone asking the church to stop stirring the waters, Willimon asked Highlands to churn them all the more. "I felt empowered," Holder said.

Yet Holder also mentions the time when Willimon publicly called out Highlands UMC for failing to pay its apportionments, the fees collected from congregations by the conference. "Here we'd been working to get back to paying them and he calls us out," Holder said.

Another pastor who has felt the bishop's support for his ministry is Mike Skelton. His church plant, Innerchange, is aimed at reaching unchurched and dechurched people, especially those familiar with tattoos, piercings and drug use. He organized a Christian rave, a nightclub-like dance party. Neighbors complained about the noise and the city eventually shut the service down—but not before Willimon himself attended a rave. Recalling that event, Willimon describes a kid who asked him, "Are you a narc?" To which he responded, "Kid, here's a dollar. I want hubcaps on my car when I get back."

He's a keen supporter of Skelton's ministry, which includes a ministry to strippers and one that makes space for those with car mechanic skills to serve those in need. "If Methodism loses the lower middle class, we're sunk," Willimon said.

Ron Schulz, a district superintendent in the North Alabama Conference, describes Willimon's vision this way: "He's standing on tiptoe, saying, 'This is what God wants.'

Then he asks us to go and figure out how to get there." In a hierarchical system like United Methodism, pastors are used to being told what to do and being rewarded for doing it. Willimon tells pastors what he wants but lets them figure out how to deliver it.

Willimon's approach seems to be paying off. The conference saw an increase in professions of faith last year to 4,000 from an average of 3,500, even though it suffered a net loss (with 7,500 deaths). Other UMC conferences are copying Willimon's approach, which he insists is not his; he cites Janice Huie, a bishop in Houston, as the forerunner in emphasizing results. The denomination's recent document "Call to Action!" called for more clergy accountability and wider publication of what works—themes central to Willimon's work in Alabama. Huie's Texas Conference reports on numbers monthly rather than weekly and asks about only four things: worship attendance, professions of faith, personal involvement in mission, and apportionment giving.

"This is a recovery of Wesley's and Francis Asbury's understanding of evidence of fruitfulness," Huie told me. "Metrics are an indicator, but not the only indicator, of vitality." Huie said she and Willimon are among several bishops pushing a similar agenda.

Being around Willimon one hears an endless stream of stories, and many of his stories are about the struggles of being a pastor. For example, he tells of a pastor who was presented with a list of ten criticisms of his leadership style. When the pastor asked if his two decades of service meant nothing, a woman in the parish responded: "That's the sort of question someone asks right before they retire." Another story he tells is about a pastor who poured forth his personal difficulties in a sermon. An elderly layperson suggested afterward that if the man lacked the stamina for the work, perhaps he should find another job.

One lesson of these stories is clear: ministry may be tough, but people deserve more than to hear pastors kvetch about it. In fact, a key to understanding Willimon is to realize how much he values hard work. As theologically committed as he is to Karl Barth and to the primacy of grace over works, he disdains those who presume that good things will fall into their lap without working hard.

Willimon also relishes stories that are outlandish—like the one about a pastor, a Vietnam veteran, who found out that a parishioner was abusing his wife. When the

man came up for communion, he heard: "The body of Christ, broken for you. If you ever lay a hand on her again, I'll kill you."

He likes to tell about the time he preached at Innerchange Church. A video played beforehand in which an African-American man described how pastor Mike told him his destiny was better than being a drug user and then introduced him to Jesus. A woman appeared in the video to recount how she'd been beaten up by her boyfriend, went to buy milk for her baby and was met by an Innerchange member, who invited her to church—where she got her life back together. Willimon said, "I was crying too hard to preach. I told them they had to sing another hymn."

Though rooted in real life, the stories are undoubtedly blown up a bit. I heard different versions of them retold by pastors and found myself doing historical criticism on them. But they have a teaching purpose: the point is to expand pastors' imaginations.

I followed up on the story about the woman ministering to people on the wrong side of the tracks. When I reached pastor Hilda Walker on the phone, she said the bishop's story is true in the main and added, "He always speaks well of us." Some details were off--but the truth is actually more impressive than the story Willimon told.

The church Walker serves had been set to close in 2000. As part of her ministry in a women's prison she found inmates eager to worship. One had murdered her baby, another had needle tracks on her arm and asked, "Can I come [to church] looking like this, wearing rags?" All of the inmates wanted to come to church when they got out. Walker and her minister husband fixed up a trailer home to be a shelter for them. "We're reaching people no one else reaches," she said.

Walker complained that Willimon hasn't funded her ministry as much as he's praised it. She and her husband pay apportionments from their pocket and she makes no salary. Walker is expected to increase the size of the church enough for it to be self-supporting.

Willimon's theology has always had an enemy, whether mainline Protestant malaise, the university, liberalism or boring churches. Now his enemy is churches' lack of accountability. What seems constant in all this is his effort to point to a God we can't explain, control or follow very well. For Willimon, God is always at work in surprising ways and is calling us to new endeavors. And those who respond need to hustle to

catch up.