

White Protestants aren't aliens: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Jennifer M. McBride](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

*In 1989, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon sparked a lively debate about church, ministry, and Christian identity with their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Twenty-five years later, we asked several pastors and theologians to offer their perspective on the book and its impact. (Read all [responses](#).)*

By directing our attention to questions about the church's identity and mission, Hauerwas and Willimon have done us a great service. To assess how helpful their specific claims are for this project, however, we must be clear about their imagined audience. The audience Hauerwas and Willimon implicitly have in mind is mostly, if not exclusively, white, as evidenced in the opening pages of *Resident Aliens*, which describe a scene in 1963: "By overlooking much that was wrong in the world—it was a racially segregated world, remember—*people* [emphasis mine] saw a world that looked good and right."

The authors' imagined audience makes the language of "resident aliens" inappropriate and disingenuous. Although attuned to the need for a Christian witness against racism—multiple anecdotes in the book center on race—their framework lacks an analysis of white privilege that is necessary for faithful living in the U.S. context. It is disingenuous for white Protestants to deem ourselves alien to a culture and society we benefit from and have created. Certainly, the call to think of ourselves as resident aliens is normative: we *should* be resident aliens in that we *should not* participate in the destructive forces of American society even if, at present, we foster and maintain them. But their use of the term is also descriptive—as Christians, we *are* resident aliens—and this description is profoundly self-deceptive.

Given the dominance of white Protestantism in our liberal-capitalist-democratic culture and given the privilege that naturally follows, the first step toward a more faithful existence is not to deem ourselves alien to this society but to name our complicity as residents in its sin and repent in concrete ways: by becoming allies in our everyday lives or joining coalitions working to undo racist structures like prisons.

Efforts to mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons will indeed lead to what Hauerwas and Willimon hope for—Christians becoming more estranged from the American mainstream. But church communities like the Open Door Community in Atlanta that undertake this work know that privilege is not shed simply by “being the church” through word and sacrament. At the Open Door, sacraments are the primary resources for Christian social engagement—but only when they intentionally reach beyond church walls. At the Open Door the Eucharist table extends to the fold-up tables in the community’s dining room where homeless persons eat, and the Eucharist meal includes vending machine food from the death row visitation room. When the sacraments break through church walls in this way, they lead to the work of which Hauerwas and Willimon are so suspicious, the work of “making society better”—in this case, advocating for affordable housing or working to abolish the death penalty. This is the work of residents in a democratic society and the faithful work of Christians who repent of social sin and love their neighbors.