

Sent to serve: William Willimon on being bishop

by [George Mitrovich](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue



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Widely published author and preacher—and Century editor at large—William H. Willimon will step down this summer after eight years as bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He will return to teaching at Duke Divinity School, where for many years he was dean of the chapel and professor of ministry. I asked him about his experience as bishop and some other topics.

As you leave the episcopacy after eight years, what do you consider your greatest achievement?

Perseverance. That's a cardinal virtue for any form of ministry, including the episcopacy—the willingness to serve where one is sent with the conviction that God is present, working through your ministry to accomplish God's purposes, even when one doesn't get observable results.

What was your greatest failure?

Well, I failed to communicate our conference's new values of accountability and growth in every level of our church. We didn't start enough new churches, and we failed to significantly increase professions of faith. I also failed to stamp out children's sermons. The list is long. Still, if someone doesn't have a long list of ministry failures, it's a sign that one has failed to comprehend the truly outrageous demands that Jesus puts upon us. For reasons known only to the Holy Spirit, God blesses some of our efforts and sometimes God doesn't.

What would you have done differently?

I wish I had moved more decisively as bishop in my first years. Then again, I seemed to have moved too fast for many of my critics. (Our church overstresses the need for stability and continuity.) I should have found a way to activate and utilize lay leaders more effectively; most of my successful communication was among clergy. I was criticized for being too "blunt," for being too "severe" in my criticism, but I think I could have been more clear and consistent in my message. It's odd that some of my most notable inadequacies as an episcopal leader are the same as my weaknesses as a preacher.

Are the appointing powers of a bishop consistent with democratic ideals?

I love living in a democracy, but I find little support in scripture for the practice. Bishops have power to send pastors because all ministry in the name of Jesus is "sent." Ministry in any form is always God's idea before it is ours. It's too much to expect pastors willingly and eagerly to go to some of the places Jesus is trying to save. So we have bishops to remind everyone that God so loved the world (and not just me and my friends)—including the remote reaches of Alabama.

The appointive system is one of Wesleyanism's great contributions to the mission of the church—God forgive us when we bishops allow the church to degenerate into a kind of clergy club, honor seniority rather than effectiveness in clergy and fail to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Was it a mistake to guarantee church appointments to clergy?

It's a mistake to fail to hold every pastor accountable for the results of his or her ministry. Nothing in the discipline requires a bishop to overlook a pastor's incompetence or to protect clergy from the truth. God uses some clergy for the advancement of the kingdom and not others. We discharged about 30 clergy while I

was bishop—everything from early retirements to the threat of a formal complaint for ineffectiveness. Fortunately, very few of our clergy are truly, demonstrably ineffective. Sadder still than our failure to remove our few ineffective clergy is our failure to appoint effective clergy where they can best lead the mission of the church.

If you as bishop determined that following ordination a minister recanted doctrinal vows he or she had solemnly pledged to honor, would that be grounds for dismissal?

Absolutely. I'd rather remove a pastor for doctrinal sin than sexual sin. So make my day: tell me you have misgivings about the Trinity or trouble believing in the bodily resurrection and I'll help you to find less intellectually demanding work—like being a Republican candidate for president.

Given that there are 177,000 churches in the United States with fewer than 100 members, what sense does it make to strain denominational resources just to keep church doors open?

The United Methodist Church has more small-membership churches than any other denomination in the world for one reason: bishops. We are guilty of sending well-trained clergy to a congregation that has ceased to participate, in any vibrant way, in the mission of Jesus Christ. In so many ways our church subsidizes and props up nonviable congregations. That's sad. We closed about 15 churches per year in North Alabama. If we had a more effective bishop, that number would have been three times higher. It's more important to start new churches than to expend a huge amount of time closing nonviable churches.

What should the church say about the ever-growing economic divide in the U.S.?

I think our churches should do more to give the wealthy something good to do with their accumulated wealth. John Wesley was a master at that ministry. We also ought to be upfront about the ways in which Jesus gave the poor a privileged place in his kingdom and said that the rich (like bishops who pull down 120k a year) are in big trouble.

Where do you stand on gay rights?

We ought to zealously uphold the civil rights of all people and to eagerly recruit gay and lesbian persons to our churches. Considering all the unkind things some in our church have said about those with their sexual orientation, evangelism of gays won't be easy. What annoys me is those who say that sexual orientation is such a huge biblical sin (it isn't) and who apparently feel no compulsion to welcome these persons into the grace-filled fellowship of United Methodism. Jesus was notorious because of the persons he received, not those he rejected.

What is your position on abortion?

It is the same as our church's position on capital punishment. Lifewatch has been a pain in the neck (and I mean that as high compliment) in helping Methodists focus on the theological dimensions of abortion.

What do you plan to say to students at Duke Divinity School?

I will tell the students that I feel a bit like Moses on Mount Nebo. I've seen a vision of a renewed and revitalized United Methodism, but I fear that I won't get to go with them into a promised land of United Methodism again vital and flourishing. Of course, that promised land may be in Africa rather than Alabama, but such are the drawbacks of following a Lord who wants the whole world and not just the U.S.A.

How do you hope you are remembered?

Alas, I can't choose the way I'll be remembered. From what I've seen, bishops make big mistakes trying to leave some enduring legacy. Here we have no abiding city (Hebrews 13:14). Our only hope, in life and in death, is that God remembers us. Like all struggling sinners, I pray that God will forgive me for the sins of commission and omission in my episcopacy such as my unfair criticism of Glen Beck, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, the governor of Alabama, contemporary Christian music, children's sermons, Joel Osteen and—wow, come to think of it, I've really got a long list of sins. If I live to be 101, maybe I'll have adequate time to repent.