

The steeple dropout: Will Campbell, 1924-2013

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue



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I had never heard of Will Campbell until the day I walked into a bookstore and saw a brand-new novel called *The Glad River*, written by a Baptist preacher whom the dust jacket described as a “steeple dropout” and veteran civil rights activist.

I was a student pastor of a small rural Texas Baptist church. While I didn’t know it yet, it was a good church. But at the time the church and I were in turmoil over the issue of race. At one point I had a shotgun pulled on me with the threat to blow my “nigger-loving head off”; in the year ahead I would have a man come after me in a congregational meeting to “whip the pastor’s ass because I’m tired of his preaching on race.”

After reading the dust jacket I didn’t hesitate; I bought the book. I read *The Glad River* in three days and then cried for another three.

I found a copy of Campbell’s *Brother to a Dragonfly* and cried some more. Then I sat down and wrote a long letter to him about my struggle with my congregation over race, my struggle about remaining Baptist and my struggle with what seemed like almost everything.

In those days I was just discovering the works of Wendell Berry, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Walter Brueggemann and James McClendon and soaking in their

ideas. Now Campbell came along, speaking to my heart in a way that unleashed the grief and joy of all the heady changes that were happening.

When Campbell wrote back, I expected this prophet to call me to fight “the Enemy.” Instead he encouraged me to love my enemies and discover that they are my neighbors, my sisters and brothers whom Christ has reconciled.

This “steeple dropout” didn’t tell me to stay in this small steeple, but he came close. Whether I decided to go or to stay, he said, “the issue is not right or wrong, justice or injustice, good or bad. It’s human tragedy, and in a tragedy you can’t take up sides. You just have to minister to the hurt wherever you find it.” He continued: “Maybe some of your church members are assholes, but God loves them, and us, anyway,” echoing the words that became among his most quoted.

“Well shit!” I thought. This was harder than I realized. I sat in a pew of that country church one night and cried some more.

Of course I made the pilgrimage up to his cabin in Mt. Juliet, outside of Nashville. I spent the day with him and William Stringfellow, who was also visiting and who further subverted my hopes of becoming a successful large-steeple pastor.

The result? For the last 24 years I’ve been the shepherd of a small steeple. After reading and believing what I learned from the likes of Will Campbell, Wendell Berry and the rest, what choice did I have? About the time I came to Nacogdoches, I also linked up with five other Texas clergy to form “the Neighborhood,” a group named after Will’s small band of radical believers in *The Glad River*. Like the friends in the book, our friendship has renewed us, kept us sane and even saved some lives.

I learned a lot about being a pastor from Will. I learned to hold the institutional church lightly, even a small one, and not take myself too seriously. As he liked to say, “God is God, and we’re not.”

I learned that no ministry, no service, no action is the gospel of Jesus Christ if it is not incarnated in flesh and blood community, relationship and friendship. For me, that means keeping it small, living in hope in the midst of tragedy, and ministering to the hurt wherever we find it.

At the conclusion of *The Glad River* two members of that Neighborhood bury the third member, and one gives this eulogy: “We had good times together. And bad.

We laughed together and we cried together . . . We confessed our cares in unlikely places. We worked and piddled, sat on rushing riverbanks in the hills, and whiled away many a summer afternoon on sleeping bayous. We read books and learned to talk like each other, argued about trivial things and took hard counsel together about the things that mattered . . . But mostly . . . we just loved one another.”

Will was this friend for me. He died just a month before his 88th birthday. I’ll cry one more time.