

Locating loyalty: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) 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](#).)*

*Resident Aliens* gave its readers the courage to love the church. Not naively or uncritically—real love is always truthful, after all—but deeply and unapologetically. And it helped convince a generation that there is no Christian identity apart from the church.

Still, the work of Hauerwas and Willimon always seems to elicit the question: Where exactly is this adventuresome church?

A decade after the publication of *Resident Aliens*, two acquaintances of Hauerwas created a Listserv of a dozen or so people who were interested in the question of Christian identity. From this emerged the Ekklesia Project, “a school for subversive friendships,” in which Christians across the ecclesial spectrum sought encouragement to live the adventure of the gospel and their love for the church in congregations and parishes.

Fifteen years later, those associated with the Ekklesia Project take for granted the alien character of discipleship in contemporary culture. They also benefit from (and in some cases have produced) treatments of the relationship between church and world that are more nuanced than what Hauerwas and Willimon were able to offer in their popular treatment of the subject.

The Ekklesia Project is not a church, but it celebrates and supports Christian communities that understand their mission to be that of paying attention to and participating in the work of God in the world: mending, healing, restoring, reconciling. Indeed, Hauerwas and Willimon gave us eyes to see and a vocabulary with which to describe Christian communities who were about this work even before *Resident Aliens* was written—communities like Grace Fellowship and Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco and Church of the Servant King in Oregon.

Indebted to *Resident Aliens*'s insight that the church is the prime locus of Christian identity, the Ekklesia Project launched a Congregational Formation Initiative, rooted in the conviction that theological conversation is not merely a means to an end—let's talk about this or that interesting idea—but is itself a spiritual practice, a holy habit that contributes to the shaping of a people who learn together over time what it means to love, what it means to forgive, what it means in their common life—imperfect as it is—to be a sign of the reign of God.

Like all books written in response to contemporary culture, *Resident Aliens* now seems dated in places. But it helped to initiate a conversation that continues in a new generation about how we negotiate the loves and loyalties that would claim ultimate our allegiance, personally and corporately. In carrying on this conversation, we are invited into the messy, maddening, beautiful adventure that is life in the body of Christ. And we discover—as people in the Ekklesia Project are fond of saying—friends we never knew we had.