

Accidental impact: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Robin Lovin](#) 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](#).)*

In his preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *Resident Aliens*, William Willimon describes its origin as almost “happenstance.” We might say something similar about its reception. Important books get used in unexpected ways, and an important book written for the church quickly escapes its authors’ purposes. Hauerwas and Willimon wrote *Resident Aliens* for a culture that had ceased to be Christian, in which the church needed a primer on how to live in a world where its message was unwelcome when it was not just incomprehensible.

I’ve always thought that this was intended as an affirmation of the primacy of theology over sociology. The Word will always be alien. The church will be more or less familiar, though of course to different degrees in different places.

At least one group, however, seized on the book as sociology. In 1989, mainstream Protestant pastors were feeling pretty alien in a culture in which the declining number of people who wanted any religious affiliation mostly wanted something more evangelical, charismatic, or liturgical than their denominations had to offer. They were also feeling alienated from church leaders and seminary professors who weren’t giving them much help on the local level where things were coming apart. Hauerwas and Willimon seemed to feel their pain, and their farewell to the big, institutional expressions of American Christendom made the work of parish ministry seem important again.

As a result, what began as a work of theology was put to use as a handbook of applied sociology, joining a whole shelf of works about church growth, media-savvy seeker services, and other prescriptions that coupled easy diagnosis with universal cures. *Resident Aliens* was better than that, but important books get read for what people want and need, not for what the authors intended. So the theological

description of life in the Christian colony became, paradoxically, a formula for success, and like other formulas for success in the Protestant culture wars, much of its purpose was to point out what other people are doing wrong.

Willimon sees the “happenstance” behind the book’s origin as providential. Might we say something similar about its reception? Twenty-five years on, the pastors, congregations, and denominations to whom *Resident Aliens* was addressed are more distinct from the surrounding culture if only because the culture itself is so sharply polarized that you can’t assimilate to it without becoming schizophrenic. But in our efforts to define ourselves as something apart, the church has come more and more to share the alienation and mistrust that characterize society as a whole.

Perhaps the time has come for resident aliens to focus on the task of being *resident*, to figure out who else now lives in this neighborhood and what we might have in common with them. Providence, as Augustine reminds us, has for the time being placed us here, and if the barbarians are at the gate, this might be a good time to get better acquainted with the neighbors.