

Against hegemony, not state: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Nancy Bedford](#) 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](#).)*

Of several insights in *Resident Aliens*, I'll mention two. One is that the focus on the conservative-liberal divide in churches can distract us from perceiving how members of both groups accommodate themselves to dominant values. Both liberal and conservative Christians often buy into the myth of redemptive violence and its justification of militarism. It is good to remember that the path of Christian discipleship often meanders along routes that are not commonly traversed by either liberals or conservatives as defined in the United States.

The second insight is an insistence on the church as an intergenerational community of formation. As the mother of three teenagers, I am a witness to how even an imperfect community that tries to be faithful to the way of Jesus can be a powerful force. I would be hard-pressed to raise children in a society traversed by dehumanizing forces such as consumerism and white racism without the support of a village of people engaged in discerning the byways that God's Spirit seems to be opening up in our time and place.

Nonetheless, the book's central metaphors of "colony" and "resident aliens" have a number of problematic resonances. To speak of a colony is by definition to envision a group of people involved in a colonial endeavor. Given Christianity's complicity with colonialism in much of its history, "life in the Christian colony" is probably not the best way to envision the decolonial way of life that Jesus puts before us.

Furthermore, privileging the expression "resident aliens" may obscure the reality of the millions of those who do not have the benefit of legal residency in this country, though their labor and expertise are of incalculable worth to society. Undocumented migrants experience the incongruences of a legal system shaped by the rights of

financial capital to circulate freely rather than by the rights of the earth and its inhabitants of all species to live and thrive. The reality of the undocumented can push us to revisit the language of “rights” and of the “nation-state” (notions disparaged in the book) in ways that do not emerge when we privilege the symbol of resident aliens.

The recent history of many Latin American countries illustrates that a counter-hegemonic sensibility may lead us to defend aspects of the national state (such as public education and hospitals) as a bulwark against the privatization of all things. Likewise, the language of rights has been helpful in Latin America in the struggle to defend nature from depredation (as in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador). I would hesitate to rule out the language of rights or of states as fertile spaces for the Christian imagination; the U.S. civil rights struggle would have been unimaginable without them.

What we require is a spiritual agility that allows us to recognize varied expressions of a counter-hegemonic “citizenship in heaven” (Phil. 3:20) whenever and however it “becomes flesh.”