

Inactive in the steeples

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When I first started working for the *Century* about six years ago, I was given the assignment of [interviewing Will Campbell for the magazine](#). I'll admit it: I didn't know who Will Campbell was. I understood from others that he had written a beautiful memoir and that he had been active in the civil rights movement. Beyond that, I was ignorant.

I called Campbell at his farm in Tennessee and asked if we could talk. He said, "Why not? I don't have anything to lose. Not much to gain either."

I had just returned to church, making the trek back into the faith of my childhood as many people do. I was tentative about the whole business, not yet confirmed, and worried that the culture of church might be too much for me. I asked Campbell if he went to church. He said,

Well, I'm in church right now: We're talking about the faith. We're remembering what God in Christ has done. We're having church. Now if you are asking me whether or not I am active in the steeples at 11 on a Sunday morning, I can't say that I am.

Since then, I've had a tiny aspiration to be a part of a church community that Will Campbell wouldn't call "active in the steeples." A place where maybe he'd be willing to come, share a meal, and sit around a table or on the front step—where we could talk about "what God in Christ has done" without any pretension or image-making. A place where we could each be free to see the world as we saw it and speak the truth as we knew it to be.

That was the Will Campbell I discovered and the church he inspired me to see. He might not have had much to gain by talking to me, but even our brief encounter gave me an important vision for the church in which he caused so much trouble.