

Flawed and fallen folk

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Incorporation

by Will Willimon
Wipf and Stock

After publishing 64 books on theology, worship and church leadership, William H. Willimon wrote a novel, Incorporation (Wipf and Stock), about a large suburban congregation, its dysfunctional staff and its narcissistic senior pastor. We wanted to

know what led Willimon to try his hand at fiction. Or is it fiction? We asked Lillian Daniel to find out.

Lillian Daniel: What possessed you to write a novel? Has it always been a dream of yours?

William Willimon: Sort of. I'm a lover of novels, ever since a college course in the modern American novel. I love Flannery O'Connor, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann and even dear, sweet, degenerate Marcel Proust. I reread them all.

Pastors must be curious about people. Novels are a natural aid to pastoral work. When you watch Gustave Flaubert dissect a character, it's a great help in attempting to figure out why the chair of your vestry is so screwed up. Also, as a pastor, you spend a great deal of time with people who are exposed and without adequate protection. Being a pastor is therefore almost like being a novelist without all the alcohol.

LD: You Methodists and your obsession with other people's alcohol! In my denomination, we would say that being a Methodist pastor is like being a pastor without all the alcohol.

At any rate, your novel is brutal in its critique of ambitious clergy. The main character—the "senior managing pastor"—leads an affluent tall-steeple church that is liberal leaning and light on the gospel. This guy has no theological depth in his sermons or his life. And yet he is beloved by parishioners and admired in his denomination, and his church has all the statistical markings of success. I get the feeling you know this guy.

WW: Are you suggesting that I am ambitious, affluent, tall-steepled and liberal leaning?

I share much in common with the character except that I have more theological depth and have never committed adultery. And yet for all his faults, which are many, don't you have to admire this character for staying in ministry for 20 years simply because he has the crazy idea that God has called him?

Some have said the novel has "too little grace in it." I don't get that. The grace, if you must have that, is in a God who seems not only to love but also call to service such flawed and fallen folk.

LD: I found this novel to be laugh-out-loud funny when I thought it was about a pompous senior pastor somewhere in the South. Then, when I figured out that it was set in the suburbs of Chicago, where I work, I didn't find it as amusing. Tell me honestly, was that main character based on me?

WW: Did I not make it clear that the character is a man? Also, I don't believe you have a degree from Princeton Seminary, do you? How could you possibly think you were the model for such a reprobate?

LD: Thank you for that reassurance that one of the most narcissistic pastors in all of literature has nothing to do with me. The main character really is unbearable.

WW: I must say that I've been taken aback by those who say, "There are such terrible people in this church—especially the musicians!" I'm rather hurt by that. These are my people! We must have a rather amazing God if God is able to use folk like them to be his body in the world, don't you think?

LD: Readers will note that there are no women clergy in the book. How come?

WW: There is a woman who is the education minister. In a way, the heroes of the novel—the most prophetic, theologically informed characters—are all women.

LD: The real truth teller and theologian is an older laywoman who attended seminary and perhaps was born too early to consider being a minister. She's an interesting character.

WW: That character is about the only one in the novel who is inspired by someone I have actually known in my ministry.

LD: When ministers write, we may have to consider issues of confidentiality. In nonfiction, we may have to change a few details in order to protect people's privacy (and, of course, to make ourselves appear as better ministers). Even when writing fiction, you were probably aware of people whose stories you wanted to tell but couldn't. Could you have written this novel when you were still a bishop?

WW: I did write the novel while I was bishop, but I didn't worry that anybody would read it and think, "Hey, that's me he's talking about!" On the other hand, I did want

everyone to read it and at some point say, “Hey, that’s me—or at least the part of me I try not to show in public.”

LD: Speaking of bishops, there’s a bishop in the novel, and he’s pretty ineffective. The main character of your novel, the narcissistic senior minister, seems to have an unlimited tenure at the church until the wealthy laypeople want him gone. It made me wonder if, when you were a bishop, you could you have dislodged this minister.

Looking at the United Methodist itinerancy system from the outside, it seems like clergy at small churches get moved all the time, but those at large or preeminent churches get to stay forever if everyone seems happy.

WW: I think statistics show that United Methodist pastors don’t move more often than all clergy in general. However, I have seen (and may have overseen) the situation you describe, in which larger-church pastors seem to have longer tenure than pastors of smaller churches. Some of that may be a simple function of how much longer it takes in a big congregation to get to know people and to lead them forward. At Duke Chapel, it took me about eight years before things really began to click with the congregation.

LD: I used *Incorporation* in a class on leadership. The other books we read were nonfiction books about complex concepts in religious culture. In class, we kept referring to the characters in *Incorporation* as examples of those trends in the ministry and the church.

WW: I have to say, fiction wasn’t that big a leap for me. We preachers are all “artists” in the same sense that the gospel writers were artists. We are seeking to lure people toward the truth that is Jesus Christ, and we do that with a wide array of literary devices (even though my devices tend not to be as rich and varied as those of, say, Mark or Luke).

I’m beginning work on another novel that is less churchy than *Incorporation*—and may be a bit more “Christian.” We’ll see.

Lillian Daniel is a narcissistic senior minister in the suburbs of Chicago. She is 63 books shy of her goal of writing 66 books to top William Willimon.