

First-year bishop: Dispatch from Birmingham

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

On my last Sunday in Duke Chapel, after I'd preached to a full church and received a standing ovation after my sermon, a sophomore came up to me and said, "Thanks for abandoning us. What am I supposed to do for spiritual guidance now?"

I told him that God was calling me to a new ministry in Alabama and that whoever replaced me would be great.

"Say," the student continued, "are you going to be doing much preaching in your new job?"

"Sure will," I reassured him. "I'll be preaching two or three times every Sunday."

"That's good," he said. "I've heard that you are hard to follow and that your sermons are poorly organized, so now you'll be able to work on that."

"Who said that about my sermons?" I demanded.

"Everybody at Duke," he responded.

I said with infinite earnestness, "Look kid, are you open to a move to Birmingham? The Lord is putting me in a morally vulnerable situation, where everyone either respects me or fears me too much to tell me anything. Would you be willing to come to Alabama and every now and then tell me the truth?"

I've just completed my first year as a bishop of the United Methodist Church. I've got 630 pastors to appoint. Our systems of accountability and evaluation are poor, however, so only the Lord knows what they're actually doing for the kingdom. Through my conference lost an average of 2,000 members every year for two decades, no clergy were removed for incompetence. But then, most live just above poverty, in someone else's house, no matter how good they are.

One of the most difficult parts of my job has been to ordain these people—who have promised God to go where I send them, subordinating family, upward mobility, personal choice and home ownership to that one promise. The last day of annual conference, a pastor came up to me with tears in his eyes. “Bishop,” he said, “I can’t go where you are asking me to go. This move could destroy my marriage. My daughter is a high school senior. I can’t do this.”

“Were you at the service of ordination Sunday night?” I asked. “Remember, you promised God that you would go where I sent you. It’s a heck of a way to run a railroad . . . but it’s our way and we pray it’s God’s way too. You promised. Start packing.”

I’ve learned a lot in this first year. First, attend to the local. If United Methodism has a future, it lies in being more local and parochial. I am consecrated to be an officer of the general church, but most of what I’ve seen of that is not that invigorating. At our last Council of Bishops we spent a great deal of time wrestling to get an appointment with a United Methodist named George Bush. President Bush gave our handful of representatives less than ten minutes before turning them over to Karl Rove. What else has to happen to indicate that we bishops have lost social significance?

The good news is that most of what bishops do is mundane. That’s one reason Chrysostom gave for why he ought not to be a bishop. He enjoyed, as he said, serving a creative God in more interesting ways. More good news is that most of what the Trinity does is mundane too. And local. After all, the Word was made flesh in Bethlehem before it went to Washington, London or Paris.

The great genius of Protestant Christianity is in the living, breathing local communities of faith, congregations that struggle to embody that which they profess in places that only Jesus could love. God is forcing me to take the side roads and attend to the local and the particular, to eat copious barbecue and to lie awake at night worrying about the kingdom of God at Alabaster, Alabama.

I’ve been led to another, contradictory insight: No church is the fullness of church by itself. Jesus is too demanding, the Trinity too exasperatingly rich for any one church, congregation or denomination to do justice to God. United Methodists call that “connectionalism.” When I despair over the condition of a congregation, the Lord reminds me that he never puts all of his theological eggs in one basket. “Take

heart,” God says. “Enjoy the other 829 congregations while you still have them.”

I’ve relearned the value of the tradition. Scripture requires bishops to uphold what the church has been given, to guard the faith. In many churches on a Sunday morning there is a lot of sinning against the fourth commandment. Our willingness to jettison historic hymns, creeds and commitments of the faith sends me into an episcopal rant. In the fog of contemporary Christian worship, I can’t tell the difference between aging “liberals” and bogus “evangelicals,” between John Shelby Spong and Rick Warren.

The church is up against formidable adversaries. I’m reminded of this on my way to work, when I go by an abandoned Methodist church where, in a basement Sunday school room, a group of men planned one of the Birmingham bombings. We cannot do battle with such evil if we have weapons that are merely contemporary, purpose-driven techniques or heart-happy liberal accommodation. We need theological refurbishment.

Alabamians are called by God to testify to the redemptive power of a living Christ. Visiting one of our inner-city missions, a storefront church in the worst part of Birmingham that feeds over a hundred of the city’s homeless, I found that the pastor was checking the worshipers for weapons. “Our guiding theology,” he said, “is that there is nothing you can bring in here—no addiction, no craziness, screw-up, hate or sin—that Jesus can’t handle. He is Lord.”

Methodists tend to settle for an innocuous Jesus that looks like us, only is nicer. So I was surprised when a pastor who had moved to a new church said to me, “Bishop, you don’t have to apologize for handing me and my family a \$7,000-dollar cut in salary with this move. Don’t feel bad about it. I came into the ministry from a \$100,000 job with Mobile Oil. There’s nothing you can do to hurt me as bad economically as when Jesus called me to go to seminary and be a preacher.”

One of the reasons why our church is in such a mess is Jesus. One pastor, in a discussion about evangelism, reported that her church was about to fall down, victim of decades of neglect.

“Still,” she said, “a bad-looking, run-down, ugly church can be a blessing. Some folks got their lives in such a mess that they don’t want to set foot in a beautiful, big, pretty church. My first Sunday out there, only 12 gathered for the service. So I got out and went down by the railroad tracks, out into the pine woods, down by the

unemployment office and found me some people who had nothing better to do on a Sunday than come to a run-down, ugly little church. I baptized six of 'em last Sunday."

"Six!" I exclaimed. "Why that's 50 percent growth in one year. What church in this conference can boast that sort of growth? You get this year's Denman Evangelism Award."

"Not so fast, bishop," she said. "The week after I baptized them, we lost six of our most dedicated members."

"You mean you took in six but then you lost six? Why?" I asked.

"The members who left said they didn't want to go to a church with a bunch of crackheads and their kids," she explained.

"Hilda, did you make clear to them that you and I just work for Jesus? We have no discretion in the matter of whom Jesus calls? Did you tell them that? Did you tell them that you and I don't like some of the people he attracts either? We can't be blamed for Jesus' friends."

Every time I show up at a church I am a sign not only of the unity and faith of the church but also of the boredom and infidelity of the church. Still, this is the only body that the risen Christ has, the only plan God has to get back what belongs to God. As Barth said, the church "may become a beggar, it may act like a shopkeeper, it may make itself a harlot, as has happened and still does happen, yet it is always the bride of Jesus Christ."

I can show you lots of churches that are slowly sliding into moribundity. But I can also show you a lawyer who is giving away about a million dollars to the church to establish new churches in the poorest neighborhoods in our state because "when we Wesleyans lose contact with the poor, we lose Jesus."

I can show you a church that meets in a school cafeteria and has just given away its entire hard-earned building fund to a family with six adopted foster children with severe developmental needs. Members said to the family: "God wouldn't want us to build him a house before we built you one." Jesus has some odd notions of success.

On one of my worst days, a grueling eight-hour marathon of appointments, I was about ready to go home when I was informed I had one more appointment. Two

older women walked into my office.

“We’ve come to Birmingham from Cullman to tell you about our ministry,” one said. “Gladys’s grandson was busted, DUI. We went over to the youth prison camp to visit him. Sad to say, we had never been there before. We were appalled by the conditions, those young men packed in there like animals. We got to know them. Are you aware that only 10 percent of them can read? An illiterate 19-year-old and we wonder why he’s in prison!”

“Well, we began reading classes,” the other one said, “Sarah taught school before she retired. Then that led to a Bible study group in the evening. We’re up to three Bible study groups a week. Two friends of ours who can’t get out bake cookies for the boys. We’ve also enlisted two wonderful nurses who help with the VD. Some of them said those cookies are the first gift they’ve ever received.”

“And you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?” I asked with bureaucratic indifference.

“No, we don’t want to mess it up,” Sarah responded.

“You need me to come up with some money for you?”

“Don’t need any money. If we need something, we get it from our little church,” she said.

“Then why have you come down here to tell me about this?” I asked.

“Well, we know that being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church—too many things that we are not doing that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something’s going right, that is, up in Cullman.”

In the late afternoon light, Birmingham glowed like the Holy City, or at least Bethlehem. Almighty God was located, incarnate, and I was blindsided by the undeniable fidelity of the people of God.