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THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.

Stanley Hauerwas and
William H. Willimon

Resident Aliens

A provocative
Christian
assessment of
culture and ministry
for people who know that
something is wrong

Life
in the
Christian
Colony

REFLECTIONS AFTER 25 YEARS

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Brian D. McLaren

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PLUS a reply from

Stanley Hauerwas

and William H. Willimon

State of the colony

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, 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*. The book called on Christians to think of themselves as “aliens” in American culture who were part of the countercultural ethos of the church and shaped by the biblical witness rather than by liberal, capitalist, or democratic assumptions.

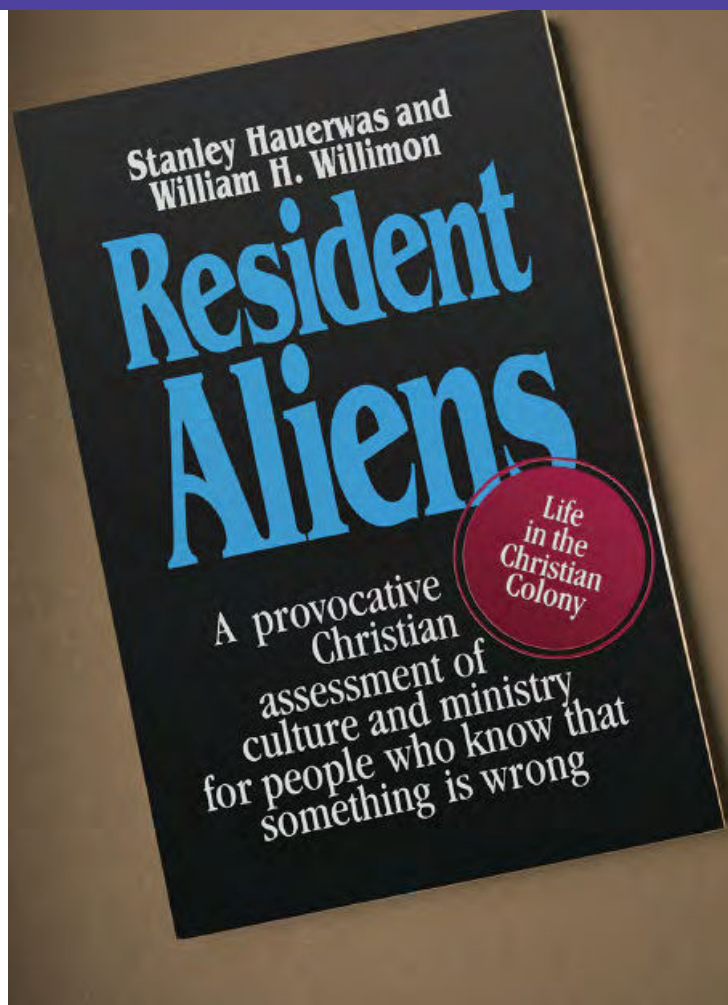
Several major themes in *Resident Aliens*—the importance of Christian formation in the church, the church as a community set apart from the wider culture, and the end of the Constantinian alliance between church on the one hand and state and culture on the other—have since become part of the mainstream theological conversation.

Have these themes and arguments been helpful to theologians, pastors, and Christian communities? After 25 years of experience and argument, has the church learned anything about what being a “colony of resident aliens” could mean or should mean? Are there important ways of being countercultural that the church has overlooked? Has the focus on creating vibrant, ecclesial communities had a favorable impact on the witness of the church or the opposite? What are the challenges to realizing this vision? We asked some pastors and theologians to offer their perspective.

Several years ago, when the Baptists of North Carolina decided to take a stand against homosexuality, the new preacher at a church in my hometown excommunicated Gene. The pastor’s case was simple: Gene was, as everyone knew, gay. North Carolina Baptists had just made it clear that being gay was a sin. Therefore the church had to distance itself from Gene.

I wasn’t there to witness the proceedings, but the result was swift: Gene was no longer welcome in the church that had raised him.

Counties don’t get any redder than that little corner of North Carolina where Gene and I grew up. I can’t imagine that Gene ever felt affirmed as a homosexual in school, on the Little League field, or at church. But in that little congregation where his daddy played the organ and his uncle chaired the board of deacons, Gene had always had a home. People who read their Bibles and loved Jesus also loved him. Maybe this



love for their native son was radical, but they never stopped to think about it until a preacher whose religion made him morally worse came along.

I understand Hauerwas and Willimon’s *Resident Aliens* as a response to the sort of civil religion that makes people morally worse than they would be otherwise. Hauerwas and Willimon both grew up during the civil rights movement, when people like Clarence Jordan were being excommunicated for

The gospel’s power depends on Christians remaining *resident*.

fellowshipping with black people. In such a context, the words of the prophets ring true. We cannot live at ease in Zion. We must acknowledge that God’s people are aliens and strangers in a strange land.

Resident Aliens tried to show that this problem at the heart of southern religion is endemic to American Christianity. Two southerners held a mirror up to the church and said, “Y’all have a look. To everyone else in the world, you don’t come off much better than a Mississippi Klansman.”

Or rather, that’s what they might have said. Instead, they took on the ideologies they saw propping up American civil religion—liberalism, democracy, and Christendom. *Resident*

Aliens made space for a conversation about how being a good Christian might be different from being a good American.

But I wonder if the attempt to make us less American has made it more difficult for some of us to see that the problem at the heart of southern religion belongs to all of us. Yes, we need communities of character to form people in the virtues. But we can't simply opt out of our inherited contradictions. However alien the gospel may make us, its power in the world depends on us remaining *resident*—awkwardly present in compromised churches like Gene's, where corrupted religion threatens to make us worse.

My guess is that two or three would have been enough to turn the tide against that new preacher. If *Resident Aliens* is right, then the future of American Christianity may depend on such as these.

—Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove
Rutba House, Durham, North Carolina

When I read *Resident Aliens* I thought about blood pressure. Not because the book raised mine, but because an analogy to blood pressure medicine describes my reaction to the book. The medicine that saves patients with high blood pressure will harm those with low blood pressure, and vice versa.

I think the primary patients of *Resident Aliens* were traditional mainline Protestants—epitomized by Methodists, who largely understood themselves to represent America's religion. Jesus had value for the afterlife, to be sure, but he also had

“Alien colony” is not the only image the church needs.

value in strengthening the American people for their role as global leaders in this “Christian century.”

The authors' bold counterclaim was that Jesus did not come to be the mascot, watchdog, or spiritual cheerleader for the American project of pursuing happiness. The church was more than “yet another ‘helping institution’ to gratify their individual desires.”

With this, of course, I agreed and still agree. But around 1990 I became concerned because I saw the religious right gaining steam and its members didn't read Hauerwas or Willimon. I worried that if moderate and progressive Christians retreated into their churches as resident aliens, focusing on “being the church” rather than “transforming the world,” the religious right would be the only Christian voice in the public square. That would be bad, I felt, for Christian faith and for the public square.

That is largely what has happened over the last 25 years. Now, perhaps ironically, the religious right has so deeply fused its agenda with that of American nationalism (also known as “exceptionalism”) that it is in a situation very similar to that of the mainline Protestants for whom *Resident Aliens* was origi-

nally prescribed. Its members feel that America is rightfully theirs, a possession to “take back” or defend or transform. They elect politicians, set (or obstruct) policy, and define *Christian* for more and more people.

Hauerwas and Willimon saw this coming. The fundamental issue, they said, was “not whether we shall be conservative or liberal, left or right, but whether we shall be faithful to the church's peculiar vision of what it means to love and act as disciples.” Of course, describing that “peculiar vision” is not as easy as it sounds.

The Bible contains many images that convey a wide range of possible relationships between “church/people of God” and “society/world.” *Resident alien* is one of them, and it is an important corrective medicine to *chaplaincy to empire, helping institution, or conquering army*.

But medicines are only of value in relation to the disease of the patient, and *alien colony* (a problematic image in itself) isn't the only image we need. *Yeast, salt, doctor, and light*, for example, are alternative images that suggest a concern for “transforming the world”—while also requiring a unique, countercultural identity. Perhaps the book that needs to be written now might be *Resident Salt, Light, and Yeast . . . or perhaps Doctor in Residence?*

—Brian D. McLaren
author of A New Kind of Christianity

I always appreciated the effect that *Resident Aliens* had on students. It gave them confidence to take the church seriously as the place in which and from which to imagine their lives and work in the world. This theological manifesto captured so much of the gestalt of Hauerwas and Willimon—their lightning quick wit, their relentless slashing of liberal Protestant sensibilities, their trenchant diagnosis of the identity crisis of mainline Christianity, and their inspired vision of the politics of God made manifest in the body of Jesus.

The book also captured the feel of the times at the tail end of the Reagan revolution, along with the retreat of progressive coalitions and politics and the rise of a new class of intellectuals who would come to be called neoconservatives. In fact, the book had the feel of the neocon texts that were emerging at that time. It paralleled their critique of liberalism, their diagnosis of a fading moralistic American identity, and their demand for a disciplined role for government.

Resident Aliens was not a neoconservative text, although some read it that way. It was, however, quintessentially an American text. The book affirmed the strange way we Americans deal with our racial history and its current realities by indirection, innuendo, and avoidance. Black people remained a subtext, an unspoken backdrop for narrating the Constantinian problem. Even in his preface to the 25th anniversary edition, Willimon, without ever reflecting on the racial complexities of Obama's presidency or of his faith, chides United Methodist bishops for their deferential focus on the president. Avoidance continued. *Resident Aliens* told

a generation that they could make church-state issues intelligible in American without seeing how race is tightly woven through that relation.

The book also presented a romantic notion of church practices inside a detached vision of formation. The book told students that church practices are identity forming, which for some was news but for many simply affirmed their precritical

The book has a detached vision of Christian formation.

piety and exaggerated their focus on the sacraments. The idea of formation in *Resident Aliens* ignored decisive racial, class, and gender formations and gave little help in seeing their interplay. Its vision of practice was impotent in helping grasp the social conditions within which practices are always embedded.

To its credit, the book gave us a more finely grained view of the church-world distinction. Yet here it was haunted by a narrative of social decline fueled by white anxiety. The charge of sectarianism never stuck, but the charge that its version of Christian identity was protectively closed and fed into America's segregated sabbaths did. It gave us an idea of

Book of Kells

October 19, 2013: folio 253v-254r

The text of the day is open to Luke, chapter sixteen, verse ten. The initial N, made up of blond men

facing off, grappling and tugging at each other's beards, becomes the first word in the section that warns us

that no servant can serve two masters. Irony intended. Later, in beautiful insular majuscule, the open letters filled

in red and blue, we read *You cannot serve both god and money*. I wish that these words would rise off the page, a swarm of bees,

become honey to spread on our daily bread. When the scribes made an error, in a world before white-out, the correct word

was inserted in a box of red dots. Aren't there words today we'd like to amend like that? In this dimly lit room, circling

glass cases, I return to view the same vellum over again, Twelve hundred years later, clear as the day it was written,

I think of Henri Nouwen: *The word is born in silence, and silence is the deepest response to the word*.

Barbara Crooker

Christian identity as a wall with a door and not a door in a wall. This is no minor difference, because it pivots on the barrier-breaking body of Jesus, who brings together those who would prefer to stay separated and places confidence in us to do the same.

—Willie James Jennings,
Duke Divinity School

By directing our attention to questions about the church's identity and mission, Hauerwas and Willimon have done us a great service. To assess how helpful their specific claims are for this project, however, we must be clear about their imagined audience. The audience Hauerwas and Willimon implicitly have in mind is mostly, if not exclusively, white, as evidenced in the opening pages of *Resident Aliens*, which describe a scene in

Privilege is not shed simply by "being church."

1963: "By overlooking much that was wrong in the world—it was a racially segregated world, remember—*people* [emphasis mine] saw a world that looked good and right."

The authors' imagined audience makes the language of "resident aliens" inappropriate and disingenuous. Although attuned to the need for a Christian witness against racism—multiple anecdotes in the book center on race—their framework lacks an analysis of white privilege that is necessary for faithful living in the U.S. context. It is disingenuous for white Protestants to deem ourselves alien to a culture and society we benefit from and have created. Certainly, the call to think of ourselves as resident aliens is normative: we *should* be resident aliens in that we *should not* participate in the destructive forces of American society even if, at present, we foster and maintain them. But their use of the term is also descriptive—as Christians, we *are* resident aliens—and this description is profoundly self-deceptive.

Given the dominance of white Protestantism in our liberal-capitalist-democratic culture and given the privilege that naturally follows, the first step toward a more faithful existence is not to deem ourselves alien to this society but to name our complicity as residents in its sin and repent in concrete ways: by becoming allies in our everyday lives or joining coalitions working to undo racist structures like prisons.

Efforts to mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons will indeed lead to what Hauerwas and Willimon hope for—Christians becoming more estranged from the American mainstream. But church communities like the Open Door Community in Atlanta that undertake this work know that privilege is not shed simply by "being the church"

through word and sacrament. At the Open Door, sacraments are the primary resources for Christian social engagement—but only when they intentionally reach beyond church walls. At the Open Door the Eucharist table extends to the fold-up tables in the community's dining room where homeless persons eat, and the Eucharist meal includes vending machine food from the death row visitation room. When the sacraments break through church walls in this way, they lead to the work of which Hauerwas and Willimon are so suspicious, the work of “making society better”—in this case, advocating for affordable housing or working to abolish the death penalty. This is the work of residents in a democratic society and the faithful work of Christians who repent of social sin and love their neighbors.

—Jennifer M. McBride
Wartburg College

To be a resident alien is to live on the border. Borders signify the existential reality faced by those, like myself, who have been resident and illegal aliens. Regardless of where we live, how long we have lived there, or how we or our ancestors came to find ourselves within the United States, we live on the borders. To be a resident alien in the United States is to constantly live on the border between power and disen-

franchisement, between privilege and dispossession, between whiteness and color. In this in-between space of borders, we confront economic exploitation and political marginalization.

As one who once actually was a resident alien, I wonder if Hauerwas and Willimon have any clue as to what it means to occupy that space. They do violence to real resident aliens like

The authors ignore the real resident aliens.

myself when they appropriate our social location without recognizing how the foreign Constantinian Christian culture from which they feel alienated is specifically constructed to privilege the particularity of their race, class, and gender. They romanticize “not belonging” to a dominant culture that historically and continuously revolves around them. Those in the center who self-identify as aliens of the center are able to confuse an unapologetic conviction of the truth of the Christian narrative with a Eurocentric interpretation of what that truth might be.

While those of us who pursue a liberative Christian approach intently listen to the matrix of marginalized voices who occupy the space of alien in a postmodern world, the authors of *Resident Aliens* wish to return us (despite their protestation) to a sectari-

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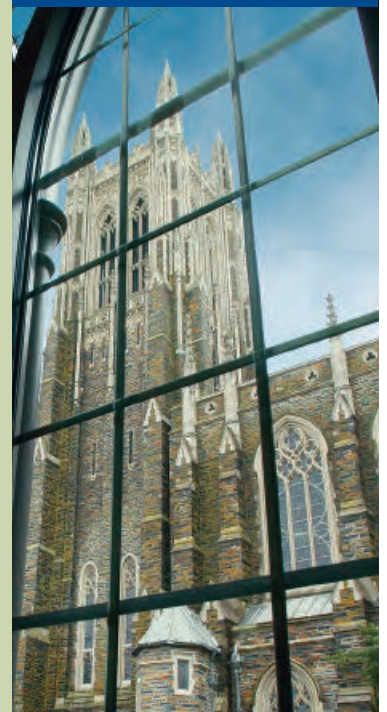
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an premodern world which protects their place while providing religious justification for ignoring the gospel's plea to engage in social justice with those who are the real resident aliens. The authors advocate for a moral vision that provides a virtuous way of conduct which ignores complicity with the social structures that cause oppression. This complicity is further masked through an ecclesiology that makes a preferential option for the church, rather than for the aliens.

This vision of church fails to deconstruct the power dynamics embedded in the type of church attended by Euro-Americans of relative privilege like the authors, thus providing little if any hope for the salvation of the dispossessed, disinherited, and disenfranchised—the real resident aliens. Not to engage in the praxis of transformation is a choice to reinforce the status quo which benefits the authors.

If, as Hauerwas and Willimon claim, “the political task of Christian is to be the church rather than to transform the world,” then all marginalized groups, not just us resident aliens, need to be very concerned, for this is a church whose actions have historically accommodated and justified every immoral form of human exploitation, from massacres to war, from slavery to colonialism. We are called instead to a praxis that challenges, subverts, or undermines the oppressive structures reinforced by the very same Eurocentric Christian vision the authors want us to adopt.

—Miguel De La Torre
Iliff School of Theology

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Resident Aliens was almost a manifesto and perfectly timed. The context was the recent collapse of the Protestant mainline, and the authors were out to assign blame. A “tired old world” had ended sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, Hauerwas and Willimon said, and the church needed to understand itself as “a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another.” Theologian John Howard Yoder never dramatized in this fashion, but he provided theological undergirding by stressing that Jesus espoused “a new peoplehood and a new way of living together.” The gospel is about the new aeon of the kingdom, Yoder argued. In the old order, sin and death ruled under the signs of vengeance and the state; in the new aeon, the rule of vengeance and the state were overthrown.

The authors evade the force of every liberation theology.

Asking how Christians should relate to politics and society, *Resident Aliens* gave Yoder's answer: the gospel alternative to activist churches, which aim at social reform, and conversion churches, which focus on individual souls, is to form confessional communities of the cross that practice love of enemies, suffering for righteousness, and worshipping Christ in all things.

Resident Aliens quatably told church leaders to shed their Christendom consciousness and nostalgia. It knowingly said that seminaries produced young pastors lacking any idea of what their job was—to help congregations be the church. It quoted pastors who felt besieged by a culture that had turned against them. The book provided help by reviving social gospel arguments about the evisceration of kingdom Christianity in Constantinian Christianity—though the authors never put it that way, because denigrating “social activist churches” was central to their agenda. They also provided help by rightly stressing that churches are supposed to be formative communities—never mind that this too was a social gospel theme. *Resident Aliens* won attention by censuring modern churches for being lured into social activism. This critique implicitly skewered the entire tradition of modern Christian social ethics, a critique Hauerwas confirmed in a slew of subsequent books.

But the dichotomy between the faithful church and the pagan everything else, borrowed from Yoder, was not what social ethics needed. It

smacked of religious exclusivity and the conviction that other religions are false or worthless. It undercut Christian struggles for a just order and yielded indiscriminate broadsides against liberalism. It reduced the theology of the kingdom or commonwealth of God to a my-group binary, misrepresenting the gospel-centered faith preached by Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King Jr. Above all, it evaded the critical force of every liberation theology, claiming “nonviolent us” status distinguished from unrighteous others—a unitary claim masking the oppressions identified by liberation theologies.

Resident Aliens helped many pastors scale back to something they could preach and manage in a time of cultural fragmentation and upheaval, economic globalization, and looming ecological catastrophe. But Christian social ethics is supposed to propel you into that world, not rationalize your insularity.

—Gary Dorrien

Union Theological Seminary

Reading *Resident Aliens* is a kind of Rorschach test: the way a mainline Methodist reads it will be different from the way someone like me—an evangelical (of sorts) in the Reformed tradition—does. An heir of Abraham Kuyper encouraged to “transform culture,” I

learned from Hauerwas and Willimon how often, under the banner of cultural transformation, we march ahead into cultural assimilation.

It wasn’t until I read *Resident Aliens* that I realized I lacked a functional ecclesiology. Hauerwas and Willimon woke me up to a sense that the church has its own cultural center of gravity. We didn’t have to figure out how to hook up “Christ” with “culture” because the body of Christ is a culture, and specifically a formative culture.

For those of us breaking out of fundamentalism, the Reformed tradition offered a “common grace” license that

One can be a resident alien and invested in the state.

enabled us to say yes to culture. But in our new enthusiasm for affirmation, we tended to lose the other side of Kuyper’s approach—an emphasis on antithesis. *Resident Aliens* was apocalyptic for me in the sense of unveiling the deformative power of those other spheres of life we were so eager to affirm and transform.

Many of my generation, I think, received this antithesis as a dichotomy: church *instead* of state. We would devote ourselves to setting up an “alternative polis,” the liberal

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—Benjamin M. Stewart, *Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

democratic state be damned. I don't think this was the authors' intention, but their rhetoric didn't do much to curb that conclusion.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the church-as-polis: rereading Augustine's *City of God*, alongside the work of Oliver O'Donovan and Peter Leithart, I can now imagine being a resident alien *and* invested in the state, in all of its glorious failing. The antithesis is always ad hoc. And the Spirit can bend political orders.

You might say that, ironically, *Resident Aliens* brought me to a new, highly qualified appreciation of Christendom—not in the sense of a diminished civil religion, but in O'Donovan's robust sense of a society that bears the crater marks of the gospel's impact.

Charles Marsh's account of the civil rights movement in *The Beloved Community* was a catalyst in this respect. He described a "resident alien" community that hoped its specifically Christian witness would make a dent in the laws of the land. Marsh's tale also narrates what happened when the civil rights movement lost its ecclesial center of gravity. Faithful witness is a precarious dance.

The citizen of the city of God, Augustine emphasizes, will always find herself thrown into a situation of being a resident alien in some outpost of the earthly city. This demands neither a positive or sanguine stance vis-à-vis the earthly city nor a fundamentally dismissive stance with respect to political socie-

ty. Rather, the first political impetus is one of calculated ambivalence and cultivated aloofness tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good. It's not just a question of whether to be resident aliens, but how.

—James K. A. Smith
Calvin College

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,

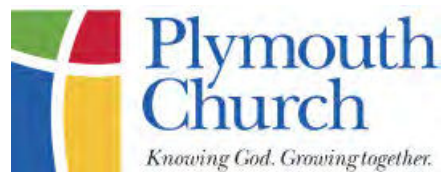
A work of theology was turned into applied sociology.

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*



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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.

—Robin Lovin
Center of Theological Inquiry

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 inter-generational community of formation. As the mother of three

Christians need to talk about rights and the state.

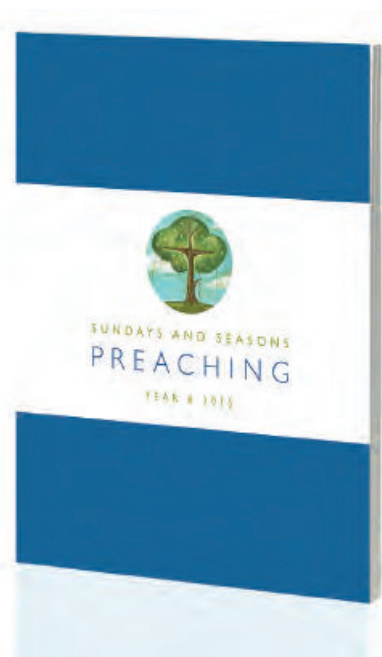
teenagers, I am a witness to how even an imperfect community that tries to be faithful to the way of Jesus can be a powerful force. I would be hard-pressed to raise children in a society traversed by dehumanizing forces such as consumerism and white racism without the support of a village of people engaged 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

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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."

—Nancy Bedford

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Resident Aliens gave its readers the courage to love the church. Not naively or uncritically—real love is always truthful, after all—but deeply and unapologetically. And it helped convince a generation that there is no Christian identity apart from the church.

Still, the work of Hauerwas and Willimon always seems to elicit the question: Where exactly is this adventuresome church?

A decade after the publication of *Resident Aliens*, two acquaintances of Hauerwas created a Listserv of a dozen or so people who were interested in the question of Christian identity. From this emerged the Ekklesia Project, "a school for subversive friendships," in which Christians across the ecclesial spectrum sought encouragement to live the adventure of the gospel and their love for the church in congregations and parishes.

The book gave readers the courage to love the church.

Fifteen years later, those associated with the Ekklesia Project take for granted the alien character of discipleship in contemporary culture. They also benefit from (and in some cases have produced) treatments of the relationship between church and world that are more nuanced than what Hauerwas and Willimon were able to offer in their popular treatment of the subject.

The Ekklesia Project is not a church, but it celebrates and supports Christian communities that understand their mission to be that of paying attention to and participating in the work of God in the world: mending, healing, restoring, reconciling. Indeed, Hauerwas and Willimon gave us eyes to see and a vocabulary with which to describe Christian communities who were about this work even before *Resident Aliens* was written—communities like Grace Fellowship and Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco and Church of the Servant King in Oregon.

Indebted to *Resident Aliens*'s insight that the church is the prime locus of Christian identity, the Ekklesia Project launched a Congregational Formation Initiative, rooted in the conviction that theological conversation is not merely a means to an end—let's talk about this or that interesting idea—but is itself a spiritual practice, a holy habit that contributes to the shaping of a people who learn together over time what it means to love, what it means to forgive, what it means in their common life—imperfect as it is—to be a sign of the reign of God.

Like all books written in response to contemporary culture, *Resident Aliens* now seems dated in places. But it helped to ini-

Common elegance

Kneeling,
he turned the fish by their tails
on the iron grate; their skins

sticking and burning.
The fire died once
and he bent and blew

on the embers, holding
his robe at the throat,
a gesture of such common elegance

the gates flew open.
A ribbon of dawn
lay taut and pink on the sea.

When at last he raised his head
and looked at me, I shivered.
Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Samuel Harrison

tiate a conversation that continues in a new generation about how we negotiate the loves and loyalties that would claim ultimate our allegiance, personally and corporately. In carrying on this conversation, we are invited into the messy, maddening, beautiful adventure that is life in the body of Christ. And we discover—as people in the Ekklesia Project are fond of saying—friends we never knew we had.

—Debra Dean Murphy
West Virginia Wesleyan College

R*esident Aliens* begins by quoting the well-known Christ hymn in Philippians 2, and it draws on the Philippians 3 notion of our commonwealth being in heaven. The authors develop the idea of the church as made up of resident aliens in this world, because our true home is not in the world. They say this assertion is needed because we now live in a post-Constantinian moment, with the church no longer supported by the official powers of society. At the center of the Christ hymn is a claim about the core of God's work in the life, death, and resurrection of the rabbi of Nazareth: Jesus' self-emptying, or *kenosis*, in and for the sake of the world.

But ironically, the rhetoric and substance of *Resident Aliens* continually turns on an embattled consolidation of identity and action over against the world. For instance, Hauerwas and

Willimon write, "In fact, we are not called to help people. We're called to follow Jesus."

At a time when many formerly established evangelical and liberal Protestant denominations found themselves losing their cultural establishment, the book argued for a new identity for Christians as a distinctive minority, despite Christians remaining the overwhelming majority in the United States. This mode effectively makes a virtue of a necessity—seeming to choose disestablishment when in fact it has come down upon us like a judgment.

The church's faithfulness lies in giving itself away.


Twenty years before *Resident Aliens*, theologian Donald MacKinnon named disestablishment as judgment in a lecture titled "Kenosis and Establishment." Like Willimon and Hauerwas, MacKinnon begins with Philippians 2, speaking of the "costliness of the incarnate life." But his argument does not underwrite a Christian withdrawal, consolidating identity over against the world, à la *Resident Aliens*. Rather, he argues for accepting dispossession in and for the world. "To live as a Christian in the world today is necessarily to live an exposed life; it is to be stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether



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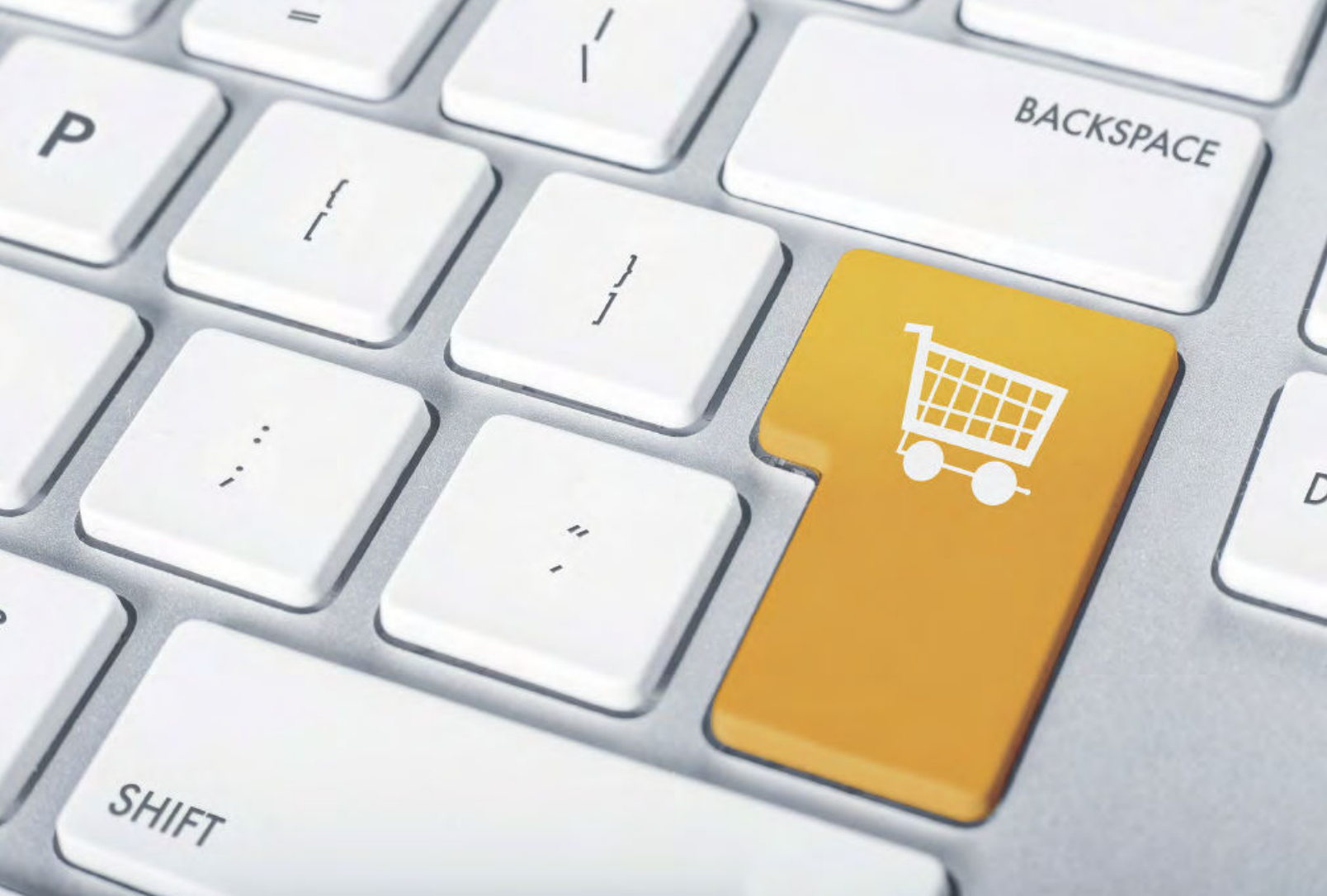
worship

The Vital Worship Grants Program at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship seeks to foster vital worship in congregations, parishes, and other worshipping communities in North America. This grants program is especially focused on projects that connect public worship to intergenerational faith formation and Christian discipleship, a theme that can unfold in many facets of worship from Bible reading to preaching to Baptism and Lord's Supper, intercessory prayer, congregational song, visual arts, and more. We encourage grant proposals developed through a collaborative process from emerging and established churches; seminaries, colleges, and schools; hospitals, nursing homes and other organizations. Application deadline is January 10, 2015.



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ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows.” His argument resolutely outlines the losses and difficulties of such a life.

MacKinnon does not predict the form of the church stripped of its former status. Yet he ventures that our frailty will offer a means of presence rather than withdrawal. MacKinnon notes that in welcoming this new frailty we will find that “it is in our weakness that our strength is made perfect.”

I offer a contemporary example: Augsburg College, which is located in a downtown Minneapolis neighborhood inhabited by a large population of newly arrived Somali Muslims. Augsburg

has declared that it is a college “called to serve our neighbor.” The school’s nation-leading program of community service has created neighborhood friendships across faith traditions, and it has encouraged a growing number of Somalis to enroll and consider Augsburg their school too.

The church today is learning that its deepest faithfulness is not in withdrawal from the world but in an anarchic giving itself away in and for the sake of the world.

—Christian Scharen
Auburn Theological Seminary

A reply by Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon

Probably it’s a good thing that we didn’t try to write a book designed to have lasting value. Everyone knows how dull academics can be when we try to qualify every statement, engage all possible objections, and show off our latest reading. (And every preacher knows that the most interesting homiletics is, in one way or another, polemics.)

Still, it would be disingenuous to act as if we were unhappy about the attention given to *Resident Aliens* by an amazing array of churches and Christians. Because of this book we have made new friends in faraway places and discovered the richness and diversity of the church.

Some critics, upon first reading of our book, asked, “Where in the world is the church you want?” Where is the church that lives as if it really is God’s unexpected answer to what’s wrong with the world? The church that, in the end, wins through suffering witness and love? The church that shares an open table and tries breathlessly to keep up with the movements of the risen Christ? The church that dares to be incomprehensible to the world because it believes Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are true? That church is more ubiquitous than we knew.

We are thankful for the positive and the negative attention to our book because in spite of our modest intentions the book has been used by the Holy Spirit as a catalyst for a discussion that North American Christians badly needed. Above all we are thankful for those pastors who read the book and exclaimed, “I’m not crazy for wanting something more,” or even better, “I almost forgot that my little congregation is at the center of a grand adventure over which we have no control.”

The 1950s were a triumph of boring white middle-class Christianity. We began the book with that time and place because it’s what we know; we were there. Yet as several of the responses indicate, that church which we were trying to encourage to be more faithful was a church deeply implicated, indeed generative of, a host of sin. If that sinfulness was understated in our book, we repent. But then we are white middle-class kind of guys, Methodists who love to get judged, to repent, to be forgiven, converted, and born again. *Resident Aliens* wanted strongly to assert that the 1950s are not coming back. Our time, this time, is a great time to be a disciple of a

Savior like Jesus Christ because he has taken time from us and made time for us.

Although we had many illustrations derived from growing up Christian in a segregated South, we didn’t think of the black church as our primary audience; we assumed that the black church didn’t need us to tell it how to be resident aliens. Indeed, the black church of the 1960s was instrumental in demonstrating to each of us that the church could be a place of critical theological analysis of the principalities and powers, of courageous, everyday resistance to the wiles of Satan, and a place where ordinary Christians received the resources to fight the powers. We may have failed to make that clear partly because we thought it presumptive for white guys to pretend we knew what it meant to be black. We assumed that the mainline, liberal, (still) predominantly Caucasian church badly needed to hear the *Resident Aliens* message. We knew from firsthand experience that the black church had long known how to be resident aliens in a racist world.

We predicted that the church will come to resemble more closely the synagogue, and the last two decades have proved us right. While it’s true that we are deeply indebted to John Howard Yoder, particularly his *Politics of Jesus*, for sending us down the *Resident Aliens* road, we are more indebted to the church that produced people whose children marched on Birmingham. If it happened then, it could happen today; if God produced a church there, God could do it again here.

We really like the response that the North American church’s dispossession is a dispossession for the sake of the world. It isn’t so much that mainline Protestantism has been disenfranchised by contemporary American culture; it’s that dispossession from the dominant culture is the effect that Jesus Christ has upon anyone who attempts to obey him.

Terms like *resident aliens* and *colony* are only a couple of the offensive terms that early Christians used to describe the peculiar situation in which they found themselves due to Christ’s determination to rob Caesar of his power. Being Christian means learning to use Christian language appropriately. We believe that when Christians facilely adopt language

like *rights* or *democracy* or *progressive* or even *liberation* to describe the mission of the church, we attenuate the Christian moral imagination and tame the constant metanoia required of those who think Jesus Christ is Lord—and Caesar (even a democratically elected one) isn't.

What Christ seems to have in mind for us is more abrasive than mere social ethics, more transformative than mere piecemeal transformation of the economy, more demanding even than a struggle to “mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons.”

We gather from many of the responses that some of our readers still don't want to talk Christology with us. Perhaps they are rightly suspicious that our theological and ecclesial claims are a cover for our social/gender/economic/racial location. While we grant that every theology implies a sociology, we thought *Resident Aliens* was an assertion that Jesus Christ is still the most interesting thing that the church has to say or to do in the world, the truth about us and God. God's peculiar answer to what's wrong with the world is a crucified Jew who lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, and even now makes life more difficult and out of our control—but so much more interesting than flaccid sociological analysis. We actually believe that racial, class, and gender formations are not as determinative of who we are as what, in baptism, Christ makes of us.

If *Resident Aliens* is a work of ecclesiology, it is a doctrine of the church tied closely to Christology. The church has trouble in the world because of Jesus. For God so loved the world that the Son was sent to the world, but the world has received him not. We wouldn't know that self-sacrificial, nonviolent love is the point of it all without him.

To those who take offense that we spoke of the church's vocation in terms of being “aliens” and a “colony,” we simply say that it was Paul's terminology before it was ours. The question is not simply how we can change the world to make life a bit less miserable for the marginalized but rather how the church humbly can learn to be more faithful from those who were forced by the world (and sometimes by the church) to be aliens.

We suspect there is among some readers in the now dramatically diminished Protestant mainline the lingering hope that if

we just get our politics a bit more to the left, a bit more “progressive” as some define progress, still hoping for some culturally acceptable social utility for the church, some transformationist impact to make America a better place, we will have a future.

We agree that finding ourselves as resident aliens amid various forms of Augustine's earthly city demands an array of responses from the church, based upon the particular cultural context and the claims of the gospel. We find it difficult to understand how someone might think we had taken a “fundamentally dismissive stance with respect to political society.” Those who suggest that we are recommending a retreat or dreaded sectarian isolationism seem to us as if they are willfully misreading both the book and us. The exact opposite is the case.


Some readers still don't want to talk about Christology.

We both have had lots to say about politics in the earthly city, and we are both very political people, for good and ill. Besides, we are members of a university faculty and have held various positions in local churches; everyone knows how bloody politics can be in the church and the academy.

Therefore we like the notion that Christians are called to “calculated ambivalence and cultivated aloofness tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good.” We reject the idea, implied by some of our readers, that North American Christians can let the world define what counts as politics and meaningful social change. Throughout the book we tried to reiterate that it's not just a question of whether to be resident aliens, but how.

Again we say: when Christians are asked to say something political, we say *church*. The reason we say *church* is that the church for all its limits is where we have some hope of being a people who do not lie to one another.

If *Resident Aliens* has a bottom line, it is that the hidden violence intrinsic to our manipulative relations with one another that are so often identified as “love” can only be named and transformed by a people capable of telling one another the truth. Of all people, Christians should be capable of truth-telling, trained as we are Sunday after Sunday to confess we were there when they crucified the One who is truth itself.

A couple of the respondents are right: now is the time to stress *residency* as much as we once stressed christologically imposed alienation. We rejoice in the evidence that our little book was used by God for the production of a few Christians who refused either to be silenced or to translate our claims into more acceptable sociological platitudes. We are humbled that after reading *Resident Aliens* some once-disheartened churchpeople put the book down and gained new enthusiasm for the odd way that Christ takes up residency among us, people who are able to say to various disbelieving, deadly presumptuous empires, “we are not going anywhere.” 



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