



William Willimon, S.T.D., has been dean of the Chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, since 1984. He has served as pastor of churches in Georgia and South Carolina. In 1996, an international survey conducted by Baylor University named him one of the Twelve Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking world. He is the author of 50 books. His articles have appeared in many publications, including *The Christian Ministry*, *Worship*, and *Christianity Today*. His *Pulpit Resource* is used each week by over 8,000 pastors in the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia. He serves on the editorial boards of *The Christian Century*, *The Christian Ministry*, *Pulpit Digest*, *Preaching*, *The Wittenburg Door*, and *Leadership*. He has given lectures and taught courses at many pastors' schools, colleges, and universities in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia. He is married to Patricia Parker. The Willimons have two children: William Parker and Harriet Patricia.



Building a Spiritual Church

William Willimon

☛ PAUL'S FAVORITE TERM FOR THE CHURCH IS "THE BODY OF CHRIST." That is a high calling. Paul claims nothing less than that the church, your church, my church, is the physical form that Jesus takes in this world. When I think of my church (and yours!) that may seem to be too exulted a designation. When one encounters the grubby sociological reality of the church, as opposed to the exulted theological designation of the church, well, it can be quite disillusioning. Nevertheless, for better or for worse, your church and mine is the physical form that the Risen Christ has chosen to take in the world. The church is the flesh of the Word made flesh. If people are to encounter Christ, it will be through the church or nothing else.

Life in the Body is tough. John says that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) in Jesus Christ. Keeping the transcendent Word and the immanent flesh together in the church—that's hard. In my experience we pastors tend to get caught up so much in the mundane, fleshly, institutional, and organizational duties associated with caring for the Body—raising money, going to meetings, keeping the roof from leaking, refereeing in congregational squabbles—that it is all too easy to lose sight that this Body is nothing less than the Body of *Christ*.

All rites of ordination are clear in asserting that the primary vocation of pastors is to be those Christians who are set apart for the maintenance, care, and correction of the community. We are, in our ordination, distinctly "community persons." We pastors are set apart for the specific vocation of caring for the Body, working for consensus in the congregation, nurturing the visibility of the church, preserving the church from one generation to the next. It may be enough for individual Christians to nurture and nourish their own little spiritual garden. As for pastors, we must worry about those matters that keep the community the community of Christ, that keep the individual members in communion with one another, and that keep us with Christ. It is all too easy to allow our min-

istry to degenerate into mere administrative maintenance of the Body—as if the church were just another helpful community organization among many other helpful human organizations—without continually pointing the Body toward its high theological vocation to be the Body of Christ.

There is this constant tendency in the church, particularly among those of us who are called to care for the institution of the church, for church to degenerate into becoming just another human organization, a civic club with a religious tinting, a group of like-minded people with a thin religious veneer. How do we keep refurbishing and rejuvenating the church as a peculiarly *spiritual* Body?

Years ago, when mainline Protestant denominations began to lose members, sociologist of religion Dean Kelley published his important book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.¹

Kelley's book was the first of an avalanche of studies on mainline Protestant church decline and Evangelical church resurgence. Among other things, Kelley claimed that the younger Evangelical churches were growing because they stressed strict doctrine, strong, even authoritarian pastoral leadership, high commitment, and other factors that were thought to be part of conservative faith. Kelley was widely praised or condemned for this view, depending on the particular church allegiance of the critic. But these factors were not at the heart of Kelley's argument. Kelley's main thesis was that growing Evangelical churches grow because *they stick to business*. What is the main business of the church? Kelley put it something like this—the main business of the church is to keep referring people toward God; to keep viewing the world under God; to keep putting the God question on the table; to keep asking, in all of its thought and life together, “What does this have to do with God?” Kelley claimed that churches grow when they never lose sight of this basic business of the church. Churches decline when they forget “It's about God.”

A succession of studies has expanded upon Kelley's thesis. In their book on mainline liberal Protestantism, Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen say that when all factors related to church growth and decline are studied, “The key issue for churches seems to be a compelling *religious character* . . . , not whether the content of that character is liberal or conservative.”²

These sociologists of religion claim that mainline liberal Protestantism is in difficulty because its churches have given people a theological rationale for godlessness. It is not, as some thought in the early '60s, that mainline liberal Protestant churches are losing members to more

conservative Evangelical churches. Rather, the situation, according to these astute observers, is that mainline liberal Protestantism is losing people to the church. Mainline liberal Protestantism becomes the last stop for many people on their way out of the church. Or as one of my friends put it, “Many of our people woke up one Sunday morning and just couldn’t think of a compelling reason to go to church. The church had become so much like the world, why bother?”

In a more recent book by Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing, Transforming Communities of Faith*, he asks, “What is a religious institution?” He answers this question by asserting, “Religious institutions are those that connect or relate the everyday world, the immanent world, into a reality that is behind, beyond, or subsumes our world into the transcendent.”³ This may seem to be a too-fuzzy definition of a church, but it certainly demonstrates Hadaway’s contention that mainline liberal Protestant churches have not taken care of business. Hadaway believes that churches have got to ask themselves, “What are we for?”

What unchurched people are looking for is the same thing that everyone expects the church to be; a religious organization. It should look different, it should feel different, and it should sound different, because unlike every other organization in society its specialty is religion (rather than something else—group fun, golf, scuba diving, bowling, good books, etc.). After interviewing hundreds of people in the United States and Canada that don’t go to church, I have concluded that the predominant view of the church is this: It is not a particularly enjoyable group with a restricted view of morality and spirituality. Unchurched North Americans don’t feel they need the church for social involvement, they don’t think the church has a monopoly on truth, and they don’t think the church would help them very much in their relationship with God.⁴

It is so easy for us pastors to become sidetracked in our leadership of the church. In our internal maintenance of the Body, we lose sight of what the Body is meant to be, how this Body is different from other bodies.

When I was a young theology professor, roaming about on the weekends among churches of my denomination, doing workshops on various topics of church life, I was surprised in my conversations with laity in many congregations to hear a frequent refrain: *We wish our pastor could be more of a spiritual leader.*

“Spiritual leader”—what is that? In probing the laity on this matter, I heard them complain that their pastor had become little more

than a manager of a volunteer organization. One layperson told me, "You can talk with our pastor about everything but God." Another said, "We asked our pastor to lead us in a Bible study, and he said he didn't have time with all the other demands of running a big church. What are pastors for?"

I expect these pastors would have been genuinely surprised to hear such a complaint from their laity. Yet the complaint is evidence that we have not been taking care of the unique business of the church.

As I consider many of the sermons I hear (and many of the sermons that I preach!), I hear a decidedly "a-theistic" tendency. I hear many sermons that are essentially on "self-help." In too many churches that pride themselves on reaching out to "seekers" and the "unchurched," I hear sermons that are little different from the advice one could receive from any self-help book. I fear that these preachers have allowed the seekers and their limitations to determine the content of the message. We Americans are a do-it-yourself society, a people who generally believe that if our lives are going to be better, it is mainly left up to us to improve them. We no longer want salvation, or conversion; we want self-improvement. Jesus becomes another helpful technique, among many techniques, for getting what I want out of life. Jesus becomes another "lifestyle choice" that helps me feel a bit better about myself.

The other day, watching "Dr. Phil" on the television, I at first marveled why anyone would want to put themselves through the rather excruciating critique of their lives that is offered by Dr. Phil. I heard Dr. Phil, the TV therapeutic guru, tell people such things as, "You must be getting something out of your sickness, or you wouldn't stay sick." Or, "You say that you want to change your life, but you don't. This suggests to me that you are lying and really don't want to change."

Why would anybody willingly expose himself or herself on television to this kind of ridicule? And then I realized that Dr. Phil is really flattering us and appealing to our cherished images of ourselves. When there is no longer a God who hears and acts, it is up to us to set our lives right, or our lives won't be right. We don't need to pray when it is all left up to us. We have got to take matters in hand, honestly diagnose our situation, pull up our bootstraps, and move forward—on our own.

I hear too many sermons that appear to be more indebted to Dr. Phil than to Scripture. These sermons say they are based on "biblical principles" or "spiritual rules for better living," but in reality they are advocating a form of self-help and self-salvation. Christians don't believe in self-help. We believe we cannot help ourselves, exclusively by our-

selves. We need a God who saves, who reaches in, intrudes, and acts to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

(When you think about it, “self-help” books are a lie. We really can’t help ourselves by ourselves. If we could, why do we have to spend \$19.95 for a book by someone like Dr. Phil telling us how to help ourselves!)

Too many of us pastors have taken our models from essentially secular images of effectiveness. We are the skillful church administrator—electronic notebook in hand, moving efficiently from meeting to meeting, getting the job done, setting goals, reaching those goals, evaluating, improving, with purpose and direction. Or we are the therapeutic leader—helping sick people get better, offering people psychologically based techniques for self-improvement, enrolling them in therapeutic groups where the group is supposed to be their salvation. Either way, there is too little of God in these approaches to ministry. God sometimes offers us “biblical principles” from Scripture, but not God himself.

How can we keep our congregations close to the business at hand? How can we keep nourishing a sense of our churches as the Body of Christ, as essentially spiritual organizations that keep raising the God question and who keep turning our lives toward God? I have some suggestions:

1. Scripture

In the church’s weekly rhythm of worship, in our constant encounter with the Word of God and its encounter with us, we keep being reminded of who we are meant to be. The pastor’s task is, on a weekly basis, to lay the biblical story over our life together, to let that story become the lens (John Calvin) through which we read the world. Christians differ from Buddhists mainly in that we have listened to different stories. These stories teach us how to attend to our lives, tell us what is really going on in the world, where we are all headed, who is in charge, who we are called to be.

I work on the interpretative principle, when reading and interpreting Scripture for teaching and preaching, that the Scriptures always and everywhere speak primarily about God and only secondarily or derivatively do they ever speak about us. Scripture is an ever-present reminder that *it’s about God*.

Leaving home for a meeting the other night, passing through my living room full of graduate students who had gathered at my wife’s weekly disciple Bible study group, I said to them, “It strikes me that what

you are doing is very odd, very strange. That a group of early 21st-century North American people should gather, open up this ancient book, written in languages so different from our own, in a culture so different from our own, and study that book word-for-word, verse-by-verse, with such care and attentiveness, with such respect and submissiveness, that's odd." I congratulated them for so attuning their lives to this holy text.

Then one of the group asked me, as I was on my way out the door for my meeting, "Is where you are going also odd, distinctive, and holy?"

The question sort of ruined my meeting! Yet it is precisely the question that more of us ought to ask in our round of church meetings. Is this meeting an opportunity for a true "meeting" with God?

2. Personal Devotion

The pastor helps the congregation be encountered by the Word of God in Scripture, by the pastor constantly being encountered by this Scripture. When I moved from the parish ministry into campus ministry, for the first time practicing ministry in an institutional context other than the local church, I found that I desperately needed to begin each day with an intentional, directed time of focus. This meant Scripture reading, not for the purposes of sermon preparation, but for the purpose of remembrance, refocus, and nurturance of identity. It also meant prayer—an earnest, intentional attempt to lay myself open to the claims of God upon the day before me. This time of meditation, before I began any other work, helped remind me of who I was, helped to focus my activity, caught my attention. It was a way of saying to me, "You are not a second-level academic administrator. You are a priest. Now go out of this office and look for what God is doing on this campus today and get with it."

I realized that my parish ministry would have been much more effective and faithful if I had taken this time of focus and reflection seriously when I was a parish pastor. How many pastors allow themselves to become distracted? They begin their day opening mail, answering the phone, caught up in the busyness of the pragmatic, the utilitarian, and the everyday. Or they get on that treadmill of running about, visiting at the hospital, counseling the troubled, caring for others when what they most need is a time to focus.

I've learned much from my work with military chaplains. Here are men and women in ministry in an institutional setting—the armed forces—that in no way has as its goal anything that can be called "Christian." What are they doing there? As one chaplain put it to me,

“When I get up in the morning, put on that military uniform, with military insignia and a cross on the uniform, all mixed together, I have to take a moment, look at myself in the mirror, and ask, ‘What is my real mission today?’ Is it keeping order in the army, keeping the troops pacified and docile, or is it service to Jesus Christ?”

The chaplains, at least the best of them, had learned that they were in a highly ambiguous, potentially dangerous (at least dangerous to their souls) situation that required reflection, focus, analysis, and care in how they went about their tasks, in how they defined their tasks, in how they used their time and for what purposes.

I believe those of us in more traditional forms of ministry would do well to spend some time in similar reflection as we begin our day, asking ourselves, “What about the work that I do today will be specifically, undeniably *spiritual* and not merely useful and helpful?”

I remember hearing Henri Nouwen say, “If you pastors don’t know the absolutely essential, then you will do the merely important. And because so much of what you do is potentially important, you are apt to allow the important to crowd out the absolutely essential.”

3. Corporate Worship

Marva J. Dawn provocatively titles one of her most recent books on worship *A Royal “Waste of Time”: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being the Church of the Word*. She is, in her title, pointing to the peculiarity of Christian worship in a utilitarian, pragmatic society that judges every person, experience, and institution on the sole basis of, “What will this do for me?”

We pastors ought to nurture among ourselves a strange view of being “effective.” Much of the trouble starts when we try to be “effective.” We measure effectiveness as the world judges these matters; we run about with such purpose and efficiency that one day you won’t be able to tell the difference between a preacher and a politician, between a spiritual leader and a secular therapist.

I remember a Duke undergraduate bragging to me about her “great pastor” who had called her at midnight the night before, “just to talk.” “He calls me about every couple of weeks,” she said, “just to check on me. He is the perfect pastor. Always late to everything. Missed a wedding last summer! His car is always a mess, loaded with books and papers. He takes time for you. His lead question, in almost any conversation, is ‘What’s God doing with you now?’ Really a great pastor.”

And I marveled at the influence of this unorganized, sloppy, God-

centered pastor on this upwardly mobile, driven, ambitious undergraduate student. I think that pastor constantly created room for her to be with God, for her to worship. We pastors need to stop asking so much “How can I be more effective?” and ask more theological questions such as, “What is God up to today?” “Where is God leading us now?”

Pastors are often criticized for “wasting time.” But we must keep re-learning the odd view we have of time. The church really believes that our most important business, our best use of time, is when we (in the world’s eyes) “waste” time in the praise of God. In fact, think of Sunday morning worship as constant training in the attentiveness, the peculiar use of time, and the topsy-turvy value system of the Body of Christ.

My last congregation had many problems. They had lost hundreds of members in the previous decade. So much needed to be done when I arrived there. It was overwhelming. What did this church most need from me as their new pastor? How could I possibly get all the work done? In desperation, at the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee meeting, the committee that relates most directly to the pastor and the work, I gave the committee a set of 3 x 5 cards, each card listing a different pastoral activity—visitation, answering the telephone, visiting the sick, preparing sermons, and so forth. I told them, “This is your church. You may know more about what I need to be doing here than I, as your new pastor. I’m going to leave the room, and I want you to arrange these duties in the order of their greatest importance.”

I left the room. They were in heated debate for the better part of an hour. When I returned to the room, there were all the cards, arranged in the order of priority. What was the number one, most absolutely important priority? Preaching. Number two? Bible study. Number three? Worship preparation.

Worship is that time in the week when we take time for God, when God takes time for us. An important priority for any church that would take care of business, that would be more spiritual, is the necessity to take back time, to redeem our time as God’s time. Worship is training in taking back time.⁵

We must keep being nourished by the miracle of corporate worship: “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47, RSV).

4. Prayer

So much of prayer is a matter of paying attention, listening, helping God to make room in our world. Prayer is essentially how God speaks to us, not so much how we talk to God. Yet for God to get to us, we must be available to God. There is that tendency, particularly among the most conscientious pastors, to be busy, to fill up all the empty space with activity. Prayer keeps making room. Prayer forces us into that threatening silence, where we are no longer speaking or listening to others speak, no longer anxious about next week's sermon or tomorrow's Bible study session but rather where we dare to be silent and allow God to speak.

There is often too much pastoral chatter in our Sunday morning worship, where the pastor offers a running commentary, microphone in hand, as if we are the "color commentator" at a football game broadcast. Silence on Sunday, in worship, can be oddly threatening. I think it is a threat because in the silence, God can come.

So those of us who think of ourselves primarily as preachers, as speakers, may need, in order to develop a more spiritual church, to think more of ourselves as courageous nurturers of silence, creators of room that allows God to have God's way with the church.

Hadaway and Roozen say that when all factors related to church growth and decline are studied, "The key issue for churches seems to be a compelling *religious character* . . . not whether the content of that character is liberal or conservative."⁶ Dean Kelley was right in insisting that it is not so much that conservative churches are growing because they are theologically conservative, it is rather that they stick to the business of providing a theological rationale for people's lives. They keep focusing on God. Or as Hadaway and Roozen say explicitly, "To grow and to continue growing, a mainstream church must be a vital *religious* institution, vibrant for the presence of God. It must have a clear *religious* identity, a compelling *religious* purpose, and coherent sense of direction that arises from that identity and purpose."⁷

I think it would be helpful if we pastors conceive of everything that we do as a form of prayer, of constant attentiveness to God, of constant expectancy for the intrusion of God, as a possible invitation to worship. Karl Barth says repeatedly in his *Church Dogmatics* that theology is best thought of as prayer: an earnest attempt to listen to God. So in response to the question, "How can I have a more spiritual church?" perhaps the best response is to say, "Well, you can't." A spiritual church, the Body of Christ, is something that God does. So we rephrase the question: How

can God have a more spiritual church? How can Christ have a livelier, faithful body? I think the answer lies in part in our willingness to listen, to be open, to make room, and to dare to let Christ use us to be the Body that He deserves.

Notes

1. Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
2. C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 69.
3. C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. When Thomas G. Long studied a group of vibrant churches, and then listed the characteristics of their worship life that were significant, among all the characteristics he listed, the very first is that in their worship they “make room, somewhere in worship, for the experience of mystery.” Long says, “Worship is about awe, not strategy” (Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* [Washington, D.C.: Alban Inst., 2001], 30-31). In worship the church and its leaders make room for and take time for the most important act of business by the church—the glorification and enjoyment of God.
6. Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 69.
7. *Ibid.*, 86.