

Adventures in ministry: A trinitarian perspective: Excerpts from the 8th Annual Christian Century Lecture by William Willimon

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

I've asked mainline pastors, "Who is the most sinned-against person of the Holy Trinity?" They always answer, "The Holy Spirit." Let's confess: there is this sinful tendency in the church to want to contain and stabilize God. Church furniture tends to be heavier than it needs to be—large and bolted to the floor. Church buildings tend to be built more substantially than is necessary. Church scholars tend to characterize God as an ossified essence. Perhaps this attempt forever to stabilize and to secure the church comes from the church's inchoate knowledge that it is the nature of this God's word to cause oaks to whirl, to shake the foundations, to rip doors off hinges (Ps. 29; Acts 2).

Preaching is a perfect medium for the communication of this God because of its fragility, its orality, its lack of stability and its resistance to duplication and definition. It is of the nature of the Trinity to be fecund, effusive, overflowing—that is, missional. The Trinity loves processions—the Father sends the Son who returns a world to the Father, who with the Son sends the Holy Spirit, who penetrates our every nook and cranny, descending that we may ascend. All ministry is sent, externally authorized and commissioned.

As a campus minister at Duke, I marveled at the ability of the Trinity to get into the dorms and disrupt upwardly mobile sophomores. I decided that youth get along well with the Trinity because at their tender age they love to be disrupted, called, jerked around and generally destabilized.

The church has always wanted the Trinity to be parochial rather than processional. The church apostolic is not that church that is proud of being its succession of dead

men; rather, to be apostolic is to be a body in motion, a church that is sent. It is not to seek permanence, stability or some significance of its own, but instead to be content to be apostolic and to serve at the pleasure of the One who calls and commissions. Introversion is the death of a church because the Trinity, for all its loving concern, seems to be ruthless in killing any church that won't be apostolic.

Like the preacher, the church has no stable or ongoing significance beyond that of being called for a task. Catholics overstress the visibility and eternity of the church. Church is God's creation, God's evocation. We're always on our way to church. Church is pure mission. In the peculiar logic of the Trinity, churches either join the Trinity's procession—that is, they are in mission and grow—or they die. There is no third alternative.

The comforting thing is that we don't have to content ourselves with the sorry state of the present church because the living God keeps raising up a new church. "A sower went out to sow . . ."

I went to a dormitory Bible study at Duke on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, about the farmer who goes to town repeatedly to hire workers for his vineyard but at the end of the day pays them all the same wage, regardless of the time they spent in the vineyard. I asked them, "Now what interests you most about this God?" A grad student replied, "He's never at the farm!"

Here is a God who is peripatetic, nomadic, ecstatic, unable to settle down. Jesus told many stories that begin, "A rich man called all of his servants in, distributed everything he had, then left." God has absconded our stable fellowship in order to beat the bushes in search of people we don't like, has abandoned the sheep safe in the fold in order to risk looking for the lost.

— *excerpted from the Christian Century lecture, September 28, 2006*