

New bishop Willimon displays puckish style: Hauerwas: "It's a sign we're not dead yet"

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The outspoken dean of the Duke University Chapel, William H. Willimon, who once said “the greatest sin Christians can commit is boredom,” has been elected a bishop in the United Methodist Church. Many expect him to shake things up, or at the very least inject some humor into a denomination sometimes seen as stiff, rigid and highly bureaucratic.

“It’s a sign we’re not dead yet,” said Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School, referring to his friend Willimon’s election. “It’s a wonderful vote of confidence in the United Methodist Church.”

Eight years ago Willimon was nominated for bishop but did not win. Then he was considered too much of a critic by Methodist clergy and laypeople, who usually prefer effective church administrators.

But last month, the South Carolina native was elected at the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference, held at Lake Junaluska in the mountains of North Carolina. He was consecrated July 17, then assigned to the Birmingham, Alabama, area. A total of 21 bishops were elected the same month—nearly half the 50 active UMC bishops nationwide. Willimon, 58, will serve for eight years before he retires.

In 1996, Baylor University named Willimon one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world. Soon afterward, when a Massachusetts pastor was kicked out of his church for plagiarizing Willimon’s sermons Sunday after Sunday, Willimon quipped, “I hope he does it with a southern accent.”

Humor aside, many pastors rely on Willimon for guidance and inspiration. He has written more than 50 books, mostly for pulpit pastors, and is one of the Christian Century’s editors at large.

Four years ago, Willimon ran into a maelstrom of criticism when he and then Duke President Nan Keohane agreed to allow the blessing of same-sex unions in Duke Chapel. Although the United Methodist Church does not permit same-sex unions, they said the chapel was a university facility not tied to a particular denomination.

Willimon said in an interview that as bishop he will defend United Methodist doctrine and faith, which sees gays as persons of “sacred worth” but denies them ordination or the blessing of same-sex relationships.

If the past is any indication, he will continue his mischievous streak too. In one article lamenting the shrinking membership in the UMC, Willimon once proposed baptizing pet dogs. In another, more serious article, he declared gossip an ethical activity. “Let’s face it,” he wrote. “Most of us enjoy talking about other people.”

Willimon’s colleagues at Duke, where he has taught for 20 years, said that as bishop he would challenge the assumption that the church must kowtow to popular culture. “He’s very critical of the church always reaching out in a reflexive way toward relevance,” said Richard Lischer, a professor of preaching at the divinity school. “He’ll say, ‘Forget relevance. Let’s work on truth. The truth will make us relevant.’”

Willimon’s most famous book, cowritten with Hauerwas, is called *Resident Aliens*. In it, Willimon argues that American Protestants have been too busy trying to accommodate Christianity to modern life. They should instead become more countercultural, or “resident aliens,” set apart from society and capable of critiquing it when necessary.

The silver-haired bishop said he does not take kindly to bureaucracy and expects to continue to critique a denominational structure he has called “a geriatric institution.” But Willimon said he expects his main role as bishop to be that of teacher and theologian with lots of things to say. “One of our institutional demands is to be interesting,” he said, “because we’ve got an interesting God.” -*Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service*