

# OPEN FORUM

I must admit Will Willimon's article in your Sept.-Oct. issue had a familiar ring to it. I have heard his message, implicitly and explicitly for decades from many who grew up in the church, sporting a negative attitude toward those who did not. Since I also grew up in the church, I feel I have a right to respond the way I have to my congregations for the past 15 years. First, seekers are not less valuable to the kingdom than those who have been in the church for their entire life. In fact, many of Jesus' parables place their value equal or higher than the seasoned "religious ones." Second, it is wrong to assume those outside the church are less spiritual than those inside it. ("I know what these young people are looking for—some of it is immoral and illegal!") "Seekers" may not use our words to explain their spirituality, but they are seeking something other, and the gospel of Jesus intersects with this search. Jesus often saw beyond the presenting need to ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" Effective seeker's churches are doing the same thing. Third, it is not a watering down of the gospel to speak it, sing it, and preach it in the language of the people. In fact, Jesus himself was insulted and accused of dumbing-down the message, just because he dared speak it in new language to those whom "church" society shunned! What is so sacred about Yale-style academic preaching, delivered in a spruced-up lecture hall? Perhaps Willimon has forgotten the value of a draw. "If I be lifted up, I will draw all (people) unto myself." The church, it seems, will continually argue over the ways we lift him up, while God really just wants the job done with both fervor and integrity.

The remainder of your magazine effectively balanced out Willimon's bias. The fact is, most traditional services are not being infused with new life and creativity beyond the 20th century. It is no wonder

people are not flocking to them. But the services that are, are growing, whether traditional or contemporary. 21st Century Christian thinking may feel shallow to some, but when you are seeing lives changed by the power of the cross, whether that cross is on the altar table or on the video screen (both are symbols anyway), you are doing the work of Christ. I take Willimon's statement for what is helpful: a call to check our ministries for truth. That includes all the facets of our worship: traditional, contemporary, and in-between, in our wonderful stained-glass window called United Methodism.

**Jeff McDowell**  
Bath, New York

Will Willimon's comments on seeker services were badly off target. Willimon's complaint—that churches too often present a boring, need-filling Jesus—is an accurate and well-needed corrective. But to suggest that only contemporary worship services offer this Americanized Christ is simply misguided. Churches with traditional worship services have employed this same terrible theology for decades. Although I share with Willimon an aversion to seeker services, he should acknowledge that seeker services have not cornered the market on bad theology, nor do all seeker services paint such a tasteless, sterile portrait of our Lord.

**Creede Hinshaw**  
Macon, GA

Will Willimon's article, "It's Hard to be Seeker-Sensitive When You Work for Jesus" (Sep./Oct.) is right on target. Basic to God's love is free grace, but not cheap grace.

Much of our Christianity we accept on faith, but there are other elements that are empirically evident. One such truth comes

in the often quoted words of Jesus: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:24, et al.) Winston Churchill grasped this reality in these words: "You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give."

It is in being a person for others that we find the fullness of our own lives!

**Keith I. Pohl**  
Mason, MI

Will Willimon's critique of "seeker-sensitive" services and churches (Sept.-Oct. 2003) badly mischaracterizes what it means to be seeker sensitive. Willimon names Billy Graham and Bill Hybels as marking the boundaries of "pragmatic evangelicalism" in which "what's good is what works," and suggests they reduce the gospel to something less than the real thing. I have to wonder if Willimon has listened to the diet of preaching and teaching provided by Bill Hybels and the teaching team at Willow Creek Church. They sometimes address a "felt need" in order to grab attention, but they always end up with Jesus. They do not shrink back from tough messages and controversial issues, even if the biblical message is not popular. There is anything but a market-driven, feel-good message. But they employ new METHODS in order to communicate the age-old unchanging message.

While Willimon slams churches that employ contemporary music, drama, and PowerPoint, suggesting they all compromise the gospel, he neglects to mention congregations that hold steadfastly to traditional methods while preaching and teaching a watered-down, feel-good message.

He finished his article with a question to the church that employs a band, Powerpoint, drama, and has lots of Boomers and Millennials joining: "But did you offer Christ?" As the pastor of such a congregation I'll answer: Yes, Mr. Willimon, we offer Christ every Sunday, without compromising the message. And unlike the majority of UMCs, we're reaching lots of unchurched and non-Christian people. And lives are being changed by Christ.

The method is not sacred. The message is. Please don't confuse the two, Mr. Willimon.

**J. David Trawick**  
San Antonio, TX

Thank you so much for including Wm Willimon in the Sept-Oct edition of *CR*.

The remaining articles are basically what I have come to expect, trashing all significance of the Gospel in the wrong-headed support of “seekers.” The seeker movement is essentially what is known as “bait and switch” in other arenas. This would be a difficult era in which to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and risen even were the attempt to be made but to simply cave in and seek to lead people to Christ by providing “what they want” is not only the rankest form of falling under the sway of consumer mentality but is likely to prevent people from even knowing that God in Christ is seeking them, not vice versa.

**Kenneth O. Beck**  
Minneapolis, MN

I read with interest the article from Eric Reed on “Churches Experiment with Preaching on Video” in the Sep.-Oct. 2003 issue. He raises some very interesting and thought provoking points about how we can be the church in some very nontraditional ways. These ways may be so different that many of our churches will not even give them a second thought, but I hope that God’s Spirit will convict us to open our hearts and minds to new areas of ministry, some even more radical than the video idea. Who knows what ways God will use us to reach out in God’s name and spread the Good News.

This quote from the article caught my eye. “If syndicated preaching becomes the norm, who will serve in Craig Barnes’s words, as ‘the crucible where the needs of this congregation and the Word of God meet?’” Wouldn’t this be a great place for many of us who are permanent Deacons to serve? Those of us who are called into ministry to be just that kind of minister—one who connects the Church, the Word, and the World. What a great opportunity awaits those who can see beyond the newness of this type of church setting and see how it can be a tool for God to use. I pray we keep our hearts and minds open to the possibilities that God has ahead of us.

**Tommy Miller**  
Good Shepherd Community Center  
Vicksburg, MS

I was shocked and dismayed, not so much by William Willimon’s article, but that a person whom I have looked up to and admired for so many years as an agent of change in our denomination could be so condescending and judgmental in his critique of contemporary Christian music. I

am sure that Madison Avenue has made more than its share of money from music stars who have produced albums of traditional Christian music from “The Old Rugged Cross” to Handel’s *Messiah*.


I have been to traditional services where not only has Christ not been offered, but his name not even mentioned. Did not the crowds flock to Jesus? When the Samaritans came over the hill did he not say, “The fields are ripe for harvest.”? Did others not seek after him on the day of

Pentecost? Was the rushing sound of the Holy Spirit on that day preceded by the stirring of wind rushing through a pipe organ in a majestic prelude? If Willimon had his way, Peter would have sat on Moses’ seat in the synagogue rather than standing up and speaking to the crowd. Thank God Mr. Wesley bucked tradition and did the same.

**James W. Mitchell**  
Mandeville, LA

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# CIRCUIT RIDER

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### Books reviewed in this issue:

*The Passion-Driven Congregation*  
by M. Kent Millard and E. Carver McGriff

*A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley’s  
“A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”*  
by Steven Manskar and Diana L. Hynson

*Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*  
by Albert Borgmann

*Preaching to Skeptics and Seekers*  
by Frank G. Honeycutt

*Transforming Congregational Culture*  
by Anthony B. Robinson

*Unleashing the Word:  
Preaching Relevance, Purpose, and Passion*  
by Adam Hamilton

Please email any comments or suggestions to Managing Editor Jill Reddig:  
jreddig@umpublishing.org.



Book Review  
Editor

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