

Will Willimon

DON'T LOOK BACK

Methodist Hope for
What Comes Next



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Chapter 1

BY GOD'S GRACE, HOPE

Methodism as we have known it is ending, dying from a dozen wounds, some self-inflicted, some wreaked by a world that's God's but hasn't gotten the news. Methodism as we have yet to experience it is being born. The new Methodism could be better than the old, for all we know. Just what you would expect from a God who, from the first, loves to raise the dead and make a way when we thought we were at a dead end.

Kicked by social forces and sicknesses we neither caused nor control, we've been pushed into a church that's different from the one we joined. God has called us to be the church during a divisive time in the United States. Infected by political divisions (mostly among white voters), racial antipathy (say, "I've never seen America more divided," and it's a sure sign you are white), suspicion and distrust of leaders ("Bishops are buffoons"), and tensions between the generations ("Why won't the kids come to church?"). Our self-signifiers "traditional" and "progressive" are more determinative of the fights we pick on social media than the label "Methodist Christian." Other denominations ask, "Weren't you Methodists always ecumenical? You're in fellowship with Catholics who are wrong on the ordination of women and clergy

celibacy, yet you can't keep conversing with Methodists about marriage? What gives?"

It's my contention that our divisions and separations are less menacing than the specter of our expiring. An organization with a median age of sixty-three is a group in accelerated devolution. Farewell to the church many of us loved, the church that introduced us to Christ and made us disciples. UMC, you'll be in our thoughts and prayers.

Still, in any grieving, the trick is to grieve like Christians. As Paul put it to one of his morose congregations, we don't "mourn like others who don't have any hope" (1 Thess 4:13). We grieve, yes, but our greatest grief is framed by God-given hope. The most searing Psalms of Lament deny grief the last word. (Psalms 51 and 130 come to mind.) Christians don't have to put on a smiley face and deny our loss; we have hope that's "a safe and secure anchor for our whole being" (Heb 6:19), hope that won't let death and dying have the final say.

My minor book on major Methodist beliefs (*This We Believe: The Core of Wesleyan Faith and Practice*) ended, as orthodox Christian theology usually does, with hope. When it's all said and done, a resurrected Christ enables us to hope that it's not over until God says it's over. *Don't Look Back* begins with forward-looking hope, because if specifically Christian hope isn't true, there's no use having this conversation.

Hope in a Savior Who Defeats Our Hopelessness

Hopelessness was me when I was deposited by the bishop at a forlorn inner-city Methodist church in the early 1980s.

The congregation had been formed in the 1960s when the pastor of my home church asked twelve families to leave our congregation and plant a new church on the north side of town. (Ah, the good old days when large Methodist congregations felt a missionary obligation to birth new churches.) A forward-looking, suburban congregation built a proudly modern building and enjoyed spectacular growth. But after initial growth (1,000 members by the end of its first decade), decline began (as old-timers recalled congregational history) when their hot shot preacher shook the saints with his sermons condemning the Viet Nam war. The prophet was succeeded by a deflated pastor, sent to the church four years after he should have retired. Further losses. The young families who began the church aged out. Few of their children stayed past high school. By the time I got there, the congregation had shrunk to less than three hundred (no matter what the Conference Journal alleged) with a median age of sixty.

Grass growing in the parking lot, seven (count 'em, seven) empty Sunday school rooms, aging HVAC, leaking roof, and broken budget infected the remaining faithful few with hopelessness.

“Son, give this congregation one honest-to-God victory or you’re good as dead,” advised an older pastor.

“That appointment will shut him up,” the District Superintendent was reputed to have smirked. “He won’t talk his way out of this.”

This is not only the sort of church that can be dumped upon a pastor in mainline, oldline, sidelined, itinerant Protestantism but also what one gets when serving a Savior who is a sucker for—and a redeemer of—lost causes. A dying church is just one

more opportunity for Mr. Resurrection and the Life to do his thing (John 11:25).

So Patsy and I threw ourselves into revitalization of the congregation, without measurable response. In my first miserable year, decline continued unabated, demonstrating that my perky preaching, breathless pastoral care, adroit administration, even my suffering with the youth on a five-day camping trip (lying on an iron bunk praying to God for dawn to come), couldn't give this ailing congregation a future.

Amid my self-doubts and the congregation's defeatism, I was forced to go deeper spiritually. A little prayer at the beginning of the day, an hour of biblical study to prepare a sermon didn't lift the luggage to lead a church whose prognosis was grim. In short, the work that needed doing was impossible without God.

I was empty-handed, forced to ask for outside help. An experienced (though inexpensive) coach was found. "How is your tolerance for pain? Pray that God will give you the guts to face the truth, then the grace to find a way to share it without their killing you. Still, they are so far down they've not the oomph to resist you."

"These people have forgotten how to be Methodists," the consultant told me after a day of interviews with our leaders. "They like not being Baptist. They think their moderate, middle-of-the-road Methodist-believing is a gift from God. But their muddled sense of mission is too modest to save this church. Don't get them on a plane to do mission in Zimbabwe; get them in gear doing good in this neighborhood. You believe in them half as much as the Lord does?" asked the consultant, his eyes drilling into my soul.

After just over a year, I figured I had earned enough congregational trust to tell the truth. On a Wednesday night the board met in the dingy little chapel where the congregation was born. I showed them the numbers—giving patterns, average age of the membership, worship attendance, children, and baptisms. “According to my calculations, the last Methodist will turn out the lights fifteen years from now.”

There were tears. Some anger.

“Why weren’t we told?”

“The bishop has never sent us good preachers.” Ouch.

“If you would preach less intellectual sermons, we’d have better attendance.” That hurt.

“The Methodist church has gone full-on liberal and now we’re paying for it.” Give me a break.

“It’s just as well that the malcontents and naysayers left,” one old-timer wheezed, defensively.

After the naming and blaming, someone said, “I want there to be a church here for my grandchildren, but I wouldn’t know where to begin to make that happen.”

I laid aside my charts and graphs and said, “The good news is, I think we can grow, which is the only way we can survive. I also believe I know how. The bad news? It won’t be painless. We must decide to grow, or else we will become just another Methodist church on the way out.”

Someone finally said, “Tell us what we’d need to do to have a tomorrow.”

Back to the depressing graphs. “See this line here? Note that it drifts downward sometime around 1975.”

“That’s when Preacher Smith was here,” someone called out. “His left-wing sermons drove away some of our best-paying members.”

“No, I think the problem wasn’t your pastors’ sermons, it was that your pastors (including your present pastor), and the church as a whole, lost the adventurous spirit that got us here in the first place. We stopped being a church for this neighborhood, and made the fatal mistake of becoming a church for the sake of church. We lost our monopoly but acted as if ours was the only way to worship God in this part of town.

“For our first decade, we had growth. Nearly all of our members came from this neighborhood. But then, in the early seventies, we ceased attracting new members. We stopped thinking about everyone else’s children and focused on our own. The number of baptisms declined. But attendance and giving gave us the illusion that we were okay. By the end of the seventies, the young families who founded this church had moved to other neighborhoods and commuted back for Sunday services. Our average age began to rise, and the number of children declined dramatically.”

“But why?” asked a plaintive voice.

“The simple answer? We lost our neighborhood. Or, should I say, our neighborhood lost us? We became a church of commuters who loved one another, who found God here in our worship and life together, but who were inwardly focused.”

I couldn’t help myself; I began to preach: “The first Bible verse I memorized as a kid was John 3:16. ‘For God so loved me and people who look a lot like me and with whom I’m the most comfortable that God gave....’ No! Jesus didn’t die just for the church. Christ wants it all! Looking at our numbers, it appears that Jesus is unkind to a church that forgets how to join him in

his retaking of his world. We've made church inward; Jesus Christ won't let us be anything but outward."

Then one of our founding members asked the decisive, frightening question: "Will, do you think there's any hope?"

That was my cue. I rattled off quickly the four or five things we were doing right: new signage on nearby streets and in our building, improved music program, exterior lighting, trained hosts at our doors on Sunday, a better-looking brochure.

"But we've got to do more," I said. "I'm not sure which specific steps we need to take, but I promise, after tonight, I'll start moving in the direction of reclamation of our neighborhood. Tonight I claim four blocks in every direction of our church as our turf. Where God has planted us. Our responsibility. Our pulpit. I promise to spend less time caring for our members and more time finding out which of our neighbors needs what we've got to offer. You'll have to support me and interpret my move from being just a pastor to a coordinator of missionaries. I don't exactly know which steps to take, but after tonight, I know where we're moving. Let's go!"

The meeting ended with a benediction from one of our founding members. "Let's all try real hard to believe that the Lord was on to something when he began this church in Bentley and Eva Lou's living room twenty-six years ago. Amen."

We scuttled all church officers and committees (along with their monthly meetings) and slimmed down governance to an eight-person task force. I recommended the membership of the task force: those who knew how to start things, who didn't mind taking risks, and who could move with urgency.

Growth in membership became our priority. None of our problems—financial, morale, building maintenance, dearth of

youth and children—could be solved without fixing our shrinking membership. Every dime we spent, every hour I worked, the test for any new initiative—*growth*.

We junked plans to refurbish the church parlor and, instead, renovated the nursery and children's rooms. I promised the church I'd share the ways that I had changed my daily schedule in order to lead with their priorities.

We paid only half of our Conference apportionments. "We're now spending a greater portion of our income on mission than the Conference. If our efforts pay off, the Conference can count on more cash; if we fail, well..."

I went on a crash church-growth reading course. I preached a sermon series called "Mission Possible," in which I presented the gospel as God's mission. Each sermon was heavy on examples of individuals and churches who got geared up for mission and evangelism. At the end of each sermon I said, "Okay. You've watched Jesus in action in mission. Now I want everyone, yes you, to take one of those cards in the pew rack and complete this sentence: *Because Jesus's mission was to _____, therefore our congregation's mission should be to _____*. Drop your cards in the box at the back as you leave."

With many flops and false starts but a few successes and victories, God got mixed up among us in new, life-giving ways. These were some of our most memorable wins (which I celebrated as if they were the *eschaton*):

- We selected a set of stereotypical grandparents and commissioned them to visit every baby born on our turf. By checking the newborn list at the local hospital, it was easy to find where new babies lived. About a week after the baby was brought home, our official "Baby Visitors"

showed up on the doorstep saying, “Can we see our new neighbor?”

The generic grandparents bore a children’s Bible storybook (“Never too soon to start reading to the baby,” the parents were told), a pamphlet on baby care, and a set of disposable diapers. “Our church is right down the street. Children are our top priority. When you visit, you’ll find a group of talented, vetted caregivers to greet you. We also have a new Parents Morning Out program. First two visits free. Childrens’ bulletins for worship too. Just want you to know that you don’t have to be parents alone. We’re here to help.”

For the first time in a decade, growth.

- We awoke to the presence of an elementary school across the street from the church. I took the principal to lunch so I could ask, “Could your after-school tutoring program use five or six vetted, able, retired school teachers?”

Those after-school tutors were coached to eventually find the right time to tell their students, “I’d like to meet your parents.” Nearly all were invited into their homes where they invited the parents to church. We received the first visitors who were not of our ethnicity.

- When one of our older members was fired from his executive job and went into depression on his couch, the Holy Spirit prodded me to ask, “Weren’t you head of personnel? I bet you have skills that some of our young adults badly need.” I got him together with three twenty-somethings who were having difficulty finding their way into the workforce.

“The man’s a genius,” gushed one. “I was a business major, and nobody cared enough to teach me what to say to get a job.”

The Holy Spirit, working through a pushy pastor, prodded our Job Coach to say to the three, “Love

working with you guys but if we're to continue, each of you must find a friend to join us, somebody who's not a member of a church." The town's hottest young adult ministry was born.

"There's just about no problem we face in this church that can't be solved by more Methodists," was our mantra. The more we noticed our neighbors, the more we discovered the unique ministries of our members, the more we grew. Fifty new members joined during the first year of our mission emphasis.

"Turns out, lots of folks around here want to do something to make this town better; they just hadn't found a church that would show them how," mused one of our leaders.

In a year, we had more hope than we could handle. When I missed the August meeting of the Finance Committee, they baffled me by voting a 10% increase in the new budget.

"You must be joking," I told the chair. "This church has always had a record of bad finances. That big a jump is nuts," I pronounced.

Two weeks into our Fall Stewardship Emphasis the chair used that Sunday's "Stewardship Minute" to say, "I never dared even to hope that I'd be making this announcement. You have, as of this week, pledged next year's budget in full."

Spontaneous applause.

"Ten percent increase over last year!" Again, applause.

"Now as I recall, someone said, when the Finance Committee launched out on faith, 'You will never pledge that budget.' Someone who even said, 'That's nuts.' Now, who had so little faith?"

Gales of anti-clerical laughter.

"Turns out," he continued, "we believed his 'money follows mission' sermon more than he did." Haw, haw, haw.

“That’s enough, George. Sit down,” said I, in love.

Laughter, applause, general rejoicing at the irony of a deficit of hope in the guy who’s supposed to be leading hope. Tell me there’s not a Holy Spirit.

I could go on. My guestimate is that for every one of these mission initiatives that worked, three bombed. (How were we to know that no neighbors needed a community garden, dog obedience classes, Saturday Night at the Movies, study of Major Methodist Beliefs, or a food pantry?) Yet during those four years I got to experience the fun of a congregation stepping up to their baptismal promises and playing a part in God so loving the world.

I wish I could say that the congregation continued to grow and to connect. A succession of pastors—none apparently appointed to lead the mission of a church that was determined to live—came and went. Valiant, committed laity alone can’t sustain a congregation’s mission. Those laity who had a missional view of the church, who were demanding and visionary, drifted into more vital congregations. The few who stayed looked back, reverting to what was most comfortable: internal caregiving. “We are a loving, caring congregation,” they reassure one another as they pass away peacefully.

Last year the church that got unstuck in the early eighties became a part-time pastoral appointment, testimonial to the difficulty of keeping up with the mission of Jesus Christ, to the lethal effects of inwardness, and to the poor administration of the United Methodist appointive system. It’s vital for a congregation to focus on mission, but when bishops don’t honor a congregation’s mission in clergy appointments, it’s deadly.

I look back to one of my early appointments to make this point: *I didn’t do that*. Few of the good ideas for mission in our

neighborhood, none of my restlessness in the face of decline and death, little of the growth came from me, nor even from a group of determined laity or a savvy consultant. Hopefulness arose—as Christian hope always does—as a gracious gift of a God determined to have a family. To God be the glory.

And yet, to give ourselves credit, we did try to face the truth. We asked for help. We prayed and sought the advice of those who were already following Christ into the world he loves. We had no expectation of help from the General or Annual Conference. Little time was wasted looking back either in nostalgia or assigning blame. Daring to hope that God still had a purpose for the likes of us, we risked following Jesus, even when we weren't sure where he was going.

I'm grateful I got a front row seat on the Holy Spirit's machinations, setting in motion the Body of Christ. What a privilege to participate in the work of a God who chooses to save the world, one neighborhood at a time, through Methodists.

Paul wrote to one of his beleaguered congregations, "We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4). Of this, I am a witness. When someone says to me, "That church is dead, died two pastors ago," or "No way that congregation will turn around," I think back to a church that rediscovered its God-given mission. While I don't know that we took "pride in our problems," we at least endured facing up to them. The fruit of it all, as Paul promised the Romans, was hope.

By the way, four decades later I tried to apply what I had learned at that early appointment to a declining inner-city, part-time appointment the bishop gave me on the verge of retirement. Though I entered into it with enthusiasm, lots of experience,

prayer, and determination, I failed. Decline was unabated by truth-telling, endurance, and earnestness. True, I was only there a year, but I recall my disappointment in order to remind you that being Christ's church is risky, prone-to-failure work. Read the statistics on UMC attendance and giving patterns, and it will take a miracle for you to have hope for a vital Methodist future.

Good news. A miracle is just what we have in Jesus Christ. For a resurrecting God, divine work that gives hope to the hopeless is just another day at the office.

If God's got no use for Methodism, then there's no hope. But if your congregation can find a way to hitch on to what God's already up to in your part of the world, then from what I've seen, there'll be more hope than you can handle.

Biblical Hope for Methodists

My experience with a congregation that moved from hopelessness to hopefulness is empirical verification of biblical hope. "Hope" appears in scripture, Old Testament and New, as both a noun and a verb, as something hoped for, as a human attitude, and as a disposition toward the future.

To the Romans, Paul speaks of "the hope of God's glory." Although we don't know the sources of First Church Rome's fear and consternation, I'd wager that they had greater justification for their flagging hope than we. Having extolled the grace Christ has given us, Paul says, "We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory" (Rom 5:2). Hanging on by their fingernails, beset by imperial enemies as well as internal divisions, this fragile gathering of the first Christians is told to "boast in the hope of God's glory"?

Please note that the Romans' boasting is in God's glory and not in their astute analysis or their glorious powers of organizational rehabilitation. Old Testament and New, whenever *hope* is used as noun (Greek: *elpis*) or verb (*elpizein*), hope is always dependent upon God's fidelity and goodness. More than wishful thinking, biblical hope is a reasonable, confident expectation that's based upon the nature and work of God—past, present, and future.

Hanging in there, anticipating good from bad, are aspects of biblical hope:

Israel, wait for the LORD!
Because faithful love is with the LORD;
because great redemption is with our God!
(Ps 130:7)

The hopes that Jesus's followers had for the redemption of Israel were dashed by his death. To their surprise, God made a way when they thought there was no way and gave hope for a future they couldn't give themselves. "If all we have to hope in is ourselves and our efforts," said Paul, "we have no hope" (1 Cor 15:19, paraphrased).

When things seem hopeless, we hang in there out of faith that God shall at last, after all is said and done by us, have the last word. Thus, Paul tells squabbling First Church Corinth to "stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58). If we keep trying to be the Body of Christ in motion, keep struggling to stay together, hope makes us do it.

Everywhere "hope" appears in the Bible, it's always connected to and solely dependent upon a good and loving God.

(Implication: If God is not who Methodists say God is—Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, reconciling the world to himself—there's no hope.)

The beloved “Serenity Prayer” of AA—with its petition for the courage to change what we can, acceptance of what can't change, and wisdom to know the difference—applies to the church. We can humbly ask for the grace to learn to live with what we can't impact (General Conference, errant Bishops, the Institute on Religion and Democracy) and to change what we can (your local church).

However, note anything missing from the Serenity Prayer? *God*. We are not the only actors. In this book I'm going to talk about best practices and proven methods to give your church a future. But human work alone cannot do this.

We have hope amid our present struggles, not because we've got certainty about the future, but because we are clear about who God is and what God is up to. We don't know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future. Our hope is not wishful thinking; it's reasonable Methodist expectation based upon all that we know of God—Jesus Christ.

A God Who Defeats Our Hopelessness

Cynicism (the belief that our noble goals are mostly motivated by self-interest and that criticism is more intelligent than courage) is less demanding than hope. Rather than risk engagement, setting goals and strategizing to achieve them, we declare, “Tired of arguing, let 'em go.” “Tired of arguing, I'm going.” “Don't waste time trying to talk them out of it.” “We tried that ministry back

in the sixties. Didn't work then, won't work now." "All Methodist churches are dying." "Clergy are lazy."

Hope makes demands: will we stay out of step with God's resurrection reality?

Rather than risk failure, it's safer to say, "Why make an effort? I already know how this story ends."

No, you don't. God only knows.

Cynical criticism is not curious. Hope stands on tiptoes, expectant.

Hope is motivating, "Yes, we can." Cynicism is debilitating, "No, we can't." When clergy are labeled as "lazy," pastoral inactivity and chronic fatigue are often symptoms of clergy hopelessness.

John Wesley must have been the most hopeful of Anglican priests. Where else would Wesley have caught his cockeyed conviction that it was possible—given the right sort of preaching, small groups, and methodical practices—for ordinary, poorly educated, gin-drinking eighteenth-century English people to become saints?

Say to your followers, "Love your enemies and pray for those who harass you" (Matt 5:44), and you must be the most hopeful of saviors, unafraid to risk failure. If God is truly in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to himself, then hopelessness is a sign of the stubborn refusal to believe that God cannot do any new thing or make a way when we thought there was none. Jesus Christ is God's determination not to give up hope in us. No wonder Paul linked hope not only to love but also to faith (1 Cor 13), boldly claiming, "We were saved in hope" (Rom 8:24).

Giving up and leaving the UMC, as well as the attitude, "Let them go! I'm sick of their criticism and negativity!" could be cynicism spawned by hopelessness. How can either group be sure that

it's not faithlessly impugning the ability of Jesus Christ to change hearts and minds?

Martin Luther King Jr. would have never written "Letter from Birmingham Jail" except out of his passionate, prophetic judgment upon the white church *and* his unquenchable hope in the power of Jesus Christ to save sinners. Thank God all those Black UMs who endured the indignities of last century's racialized Central Jurisdiction as well as our exclusionary clergy appointive system didn't give up hope for the predominately white UMC!

The hopeless don't write letters from jail cells in Rome or Birmingham, don't listen to sermons, and refuse to study the scriptures or to pray lest their hopelessness be rattled by the Holy Spirit. (That you risk reading this book suggests that in my harping on hope, I'm preaching to the choir.)

The church historically defined sloth as a sin of hopelessness. Sloth is not lazily lying too long in the bath; it's the arrogant failure to use the available means of God-given grace. Sloth is the temptation to believe that God is unwilling or unable to save sinners and to use them for God's purposes, a refusal to receive the sacraments, and to listen to sound teaching. Sloth is the passive-aggressive unwillingness to be loved by God or to be called to God's work.

On the Road with the Risen Christ

On the evening of the end of the worst week of their lives, two hopeless disciples trudged toward the village of Emmaus, talking about the trauma they had endured: their beloved Messiah, defeated, dead on the cross (Luke 24).

Suddenly they realized that a stranger walked alongside them.

“What are you talking about as you walk along?” the stranger asked.

Cleopas replied, “Are you clueless about what’s happened in the last few days?”

“What things?”

“The death of Jesus of Nazareth! He did much good and was a great teacher. But prominent clergy and political big-wigs handed him over to be tortured to death.”

Then Cleopas uttered those sad words: “We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel” (24:21). We had hoped!

Along the way, Jesus did Bible-Study-on-the-Go, opening up the whole Bible to them—Moses through the prophets. Still, the disciples were clueless. The exasperated teacher called them, “You foolish people!” and accused them of having “dull minds.”

Jesus just can’t help being truthful.

When they get to Emmaus, something in them bid the stranger to stay and share supper. There at table, when the stranger took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread, “their eyes were opened” (24:31) and they recognized Jesus. And though the risen Christ “disappeared from their sight,” they marveled, “Weren’t our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?” (24:32). They raced back to Jerusalem, hopeless no more.

Take this as a parable of what happens in your church most Sundays. We gather, often fearful, sad, and hopeless. We can’t see a way through our present situation. Then we open the scriptures and submit to God’s word. In spite of our differences, we go together to the Lord’s Table where bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given. Our eyes are opened, and not by us. We see. Jesus

with us, even us. Full of hope not of our own devising, we race back into the world to tell everybody, "The Lord really has risen!" appearing to us, even us (24:34).

Where is Emmaus? Only those who break bread together in Christ's name know for sure.

Hope and help for pastors and congregations who are asking, *What now? And What's next?*

Will Willimon spent a year talking with clergy, organizational leaders, and parishioners across the US, asking questions and listening carefully. He found pastors and congregations who have managed remarkable innovation, and others who've experienced a long, slow-motion, downward cycle of loss.

Don't Look Back invites you into the asking and listening, and challenges you to respond. What do you think God is up to in the present moment? What should we stop doing and begin doing, responding to God's call now? What are the biblical texts, stories from our past, and core Wesleyan convictions that might guide us from this point? And are we at Good Friday or at Easter? This is a book to read, reflect, and act on with colleagues, congregants, and Methodist friends.

Don't Look Back...

"...is a gift to get us talking about a future church that reflects Christ's purpose, not our preferences."

—**Gil Rendle**, consultant; former senior vice president of the Texas Methodist Foundation

"...reminds me of my vows as a pastor and follower of Jesus Christ—one of the most inspiring books I have read, with truth and hope for tomorrow."

—**Susan M. Sharpe**, pastor, Wesleyan Hills UMC, Memphis, TN

"...brings good news for weary, sad, and cynical Methodists: You are loved and chosen. There is a place and future for you in the relentless renewing work of God in our world."

—**Joni Sancken**, professor of homiletics, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH

Will Willimon is a lifelong Methodist. He is Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke University Divinity School and retired Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church, after serving for twenty years as faculty member and Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. As Bishop, he led North Alabama's 157,000 Methodists and 792 pastors. He has authored roughly a hundred books and is widely recognized as one of Methodism's most insightful, inspiring, and challenging voices.

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