

What's your status?

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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I've been thinking a lot lately about the efforts that Old South—the church I serve in Central Maine—has engaged in order to support and encourage new members and friends. I've especially been thinking about the time I've spent with new and fledgling members and visitors of Old South, in person and through e-mail and other contact methods. I've visited with, met for coffee, opened my office to what feels like countless new people—some new to the area and others just new to church. A few haven't even made it to worship. I've met with them, or communicated with them through e-mail or Facebook, while they were considering a visit to worship. How many of these newbies show up on an average Sunday morning these days? A regrettable few.

Some have been kind enough to be honest early in the process. They like Old South, they like worship, but they just don't really have the time to devote to church. Or, they find that they don't really like Old South, or me. Or, they are really looking for a church that will give them those quick and easy answers to life that I just won't do—and there just too many other options in the area, churches that are all too happy to provide those neat definitions of who's "in" and who's "out," etc. For a few others, a job opportunity has lured them away from the area.

But, most do not share with me their reasons for their absence, even when I reach out and ask them about it, trying to make it clear that I would like them to be honest (so that I can learn about what we may not be doing well when it comes to new folks). They just disappear. They attend for a few weeks, or a few months, and then they don't.

Over the last nine years or so, I've spent many hours on work that hasn't amounted to much. Although there are some newcomers who have become active in the life of Old South, many, many more have not. Certainly, it's not just my job to help visitors become acclimated and to feel that Old South is a good place for them. It's also the job of the congregation. But, I'm a significant part of the process, and I wonder about it.

There are lots of things that I and we, as a church, could do better to help visitors and newcomers feel that they have a place at Old South. But, I can't help but wonder a bit about those newcomers who come along, and welcome the time that I give, but may have really no intention of becoming actively involved at Old South. I've had a few conversations through the years that have included something of a suggestion that it's my job to provide countless hours of outreach, of visiting, etc., without expecting anything in return.

I remember visiting with one couple who had attended Old South for quite a few months before becoming disenchanted when the church voted to become "open and affirming." I asked to visit them at home and they welcomed me for several visits. During the last one, the wife observed that the husband really had no intention of returning to Old South and that he was wasting my time. His response was that it was my job to visit and that he didn't need to be concerned about potentially wasting my time. He was, in fact, not planning to attend Old South again, but felt that taking as much time as I offered was completely reasonable.

I've had other encounters where people have been less obvious, but have hinted at the same attitude. What's a small church, with a pastor who works less than full-time, to do? Can we adopt something of a Facebook philosophy when it comes to visitors, asking them to state their intentions up front? I'm thinking about categories like "not in a relationship with a church, but seriously looking," or "not in a church relationship, and really confused about what I'm looking for," or "not in a church relationship, and not intending to get into one, but interested in monopolizing as much of a pastor's time as s/he is willing to give."

Would it be unreasonable to ask that kind of question on the visitor information card? I might think about giving it a try. Then, at least we'll know something useful at the start.

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