

The meaning in meetings

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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I wish that I had had the foresight when I was young to have started a tally of church meetings that I attended—though I'm not sure if I would be impressed or depressed by the number. I started attending regular church meetings when I was in high school, when I was the youth group representative to the Christian Education Committee at First Parish Congregational Church in Wakefield, Massachusetts. Through my life in the church, and my career as a parish minister, I've attended a vast number of meetings.

Here in Maine—at the local church and conference levels in the United Church of Christ—there's a lot of talk about reducing church meetings. For many churches, like the one I serve, there are fewer people to fill committee slots. People seem busier than they once were and don't have as much time to devote to committee work. And, any younger people around clamor for doing more ministry, getting outside of the walls of the local church.

In the work that I do with my local church as well in the conference, I hear the rally cry among the younger lay people and clergy for fewer meetings. At Old South Church in Hallowell, we have begun the process of reducing committee work. At the conference level as well, we are working on a process to bring about a different way of being the wider church. For the conference, the number of meetings probably won't change much, but the meetings will be different. Especially at the governing level, a new proposal that will be voted on next month will reduce the number of people on the council—from 25–30 to 12. The hope is that volunteer time can be better spent in other ways, in “doing ministry.”

The problem is, as I listen at the local and the conference levels, that some of the older folks who have remained faithful and active in church life seem perplexed at the notion that meetings should be reduced. At one particular conference meeting, I heard someone suggest that we should actually have more meetings instead of fewer.

One of the more active members of Old South is someone who spends about half the year two hours north of the church—"at camp," as we say in Maine. During those months away, he rarely if ever attends worship, but he does attend church meetings. When I first started serving the church, this habit of attending meetings, but not worship, bothered me a little. How could meetings be so much more important than worship, that they were worth a two-hour drive each way?

Over time, I've come to realize that for some in the church, especially many in the older segment of the population, the meeting *is* the doing. Meetings are where ministry happens. Through church meetings, people get to know each other. They work together to solve problems. They share fellowship and find purpose in their shared love and commitment to the church. There are some good church folk who, through church meetings, connect with their faith, with the holy, even with themselves. Good church folk don't always bring their best selves to church meetings, but many of them—the ones I know—try.

In the nine years that I have served Old South, we have faced some significant challenges. Many of those challenges have been discussed, wrestled with, and resolved at church meetings. Just a few months ago during a church council meeting the treasurer shared her concerns about paying the church bills through the lean summer months. This year was feeling even leaner than usual. She was worried. The people around the table nodded their heads and expressed sympathy and support. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as all that. Then we moved on to the next agenda item and the next. But, then something remarkable happened. The church moderator stopped the meeting and said something like, "I'd like to go back. I think we need to try to do more to make the treasurer's life easier." And so we did.

It's not all glamorous or fun. It's not all exciting or heady with spiritual fireworks. But there are times when church meetings are important, meaningful experiences. There are moments when people are able to work together in unexpected ways, to offer a little witness to God's love and hope.

In a time when political partisanship runs so deep and so little gets done by our elected officials, perhaps we in the church should be doing more to raise our profile and to show our witness for how things can get done. There are churches—Old South is one of them—where very different people gather around tables in church basements and parish houses, and somehow manage to work together despite differing opinions and perspectives. These churches live out of loving one's

neighbor. They do ministry.

While it is important that we church people get out more, reaching out to share God's love with those outside our church walls, we ought not be quite so quick to dismiss the good old church meeting, or to relegate it to a place where only "governance" and "business" happen. We can do ministry anywhere—even around a table in a church basement.

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