

Can I ban "remember when"?

Questions that begin this way rarely have to do with the mission.

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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New England, early 20th century

As in any church with a lot of longtime members, and any church in the midst of the wider church's decline, it's a fairly common occurrence for us to hear "remember when" at the start of a sentence or question.

At Old South, the congregation I serve, I've noticed that remember when-ing usually has something to do with numbers. Remember when the sanctuary was almost full on most Sunday mornings? Remember when we had a choir so large that it took up both sides of the choir loft? Remember when people had to arrive at least an hour early to get a seat for the Christmas Eve service?

Remember when-ing is also sometimes connected to a sense of status or privilege. Remember when the mayor was always a member of Old South?

I've come to loathe any sentiment, sentence, or question that begins with "remember when." I want to yell and scream in protest whenever I hear those wretched words.

It's not simply that sentences or questions that begin with "remember when" tend to be ones that drip with futile nostalgia. The problem is that "remember when" sentences always convey a sentiment that actually has nothing to do with what makes a good church. When people begin their remember when-ing they tend to talk about full sanctuaries and community status. But such things, in and of themselves, do not say anything about the church fulfilling its purpose or mission.

Remembering when-ing statements never have anything to do with the year that the outreach offering doubled, or when a group gathered in a prayer circle in the midst of a winter storm to pray for someone who had experienced a catastrophic medical event, or when someone took a big leap of faith and led worship on a Sunday when the pastor was on vacation.

Remember when-ing steers any conversation to that sad, distant place that usually involves the heaving of the heavy, nostalgia-laden sigh. Oh, yes, those were the days. What's happened to us? Why can't we have what we once had? Why can't we be that thing that we used to be?

Remembering when-ing brings any productive conversation to a complete halt, as heads fill up with all of those scenes of what once was, but isn't any longer (and may not have been to begin with).

Remember when-ing is never about the church being good church and doing good church things. Although I haven't been at Old South long enough to have personal experience of those "remember when" days, I suspect I know a bit about them. As a child of the '70s, and an active church-goer for my entire life, I remember the days of larger numbers and fuller sanctuaries.

It's not that the church of those days did nothing good. I'm sure churches did plenty of good things. But, they were also very aware of and settled into their status in the community.

My guess is that churches like Old South are now engaged much more in the work of good church than they ever were in those "remember when" days.

At Old South, we may have a much smaller congregation, a much lower average Sunday attendance, and a choir a quarter of the size it was 25 years ago, but we are doing more than we ever have in terms of ministry and mission.

Among Old South's signs of good church:

- In a very short time, the church has doubled its outreach offering (the offering that goes mostly to local charities such as a fund for prisoners in the local jail and the food pantry. We also contribute generously to denominational and ecumenical offerings. And, more than that, there's genuine interest in learning about those on the margins of our own community.
- Old South actively cares for those who are part of the congregation, reaching out with phone calls, cards, and more. People are particularly aware of those in distress and those who are struggling or lonely.
- Old South takes seriously its Open and Affirming statement, endeavoring to welcome all.
- Old South no longer relies on supply ministers when I'm on vacation. Individuals from the congregation cover most of the Sundays when I'm away.

Remembering when-ing casts the current church as inadequate and as a failure, instead of asking deeper questions about the whys and hows of the change in circumstance, and how well the church has maintained and expressed its faithfulness regardless of numbers. Remembering when-ing not only keeps the outlook in the past, but in a past that may not be entirely accurate. Remembering when-ing curtails our call to move ever forward, to be the church in every time.

Remembering when-ing keeps us from fully appreciating the movement of the Spirit in our midst, and the story of God and God's people of which we are part. *Now.*

There is grief in the changes that we have experienced. But, there is also love and hope, joy and grace—and the continuing crucial and significant work of being church. For where only two or three are gathered . . .

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