

The allure of denial

It's not that things are changing for our church. They've already changed.

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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At Old South, the congregation I serve, I've started talking to the leadership team about beginning to discuss the process (just the process and not yet the content) of considering the future. How should we talk about, consider, make decisions about our future? Should we sell one of our two buildings, and if we think we should, how do we go about figuring out which one? Should we insert a "sunset clause" into our bylaws and, if so, what should it say? How shall we talk about our endowment, and how it should be used as we get smaller and have more trouble meeting our budget?

The simple act of talking about the process through which we might discuss these issues is raising a bit of anxiety—no surprise there. But, in the expression of anxiety a few interesting issues and perspectives have been exposed.

One of those issues is the concern over how it will look if we begin to talk openly about our decline. What if word gets out that we are thinking about selling one of our buildings? How will the larger community perceive the church if we begin such a process? How will we be judged? Will people consider joining us if we have what amounts to a "going out of business" sign out front?

Another issue is the possibility that even those among the most faithful of church members may decide to flee. Instead of engaging in the process of discerning the best path forward, the way that God is calling us to follow, some may prefer not only to stay out of that discussion—fraught as it is with complexity and emotion—but to leave the church altogether.

Some moments have transpired where the grasping onto denial is almost palpable, as if its soft comfort of security can be held like a child's cherished blanket.

The aspect of all of this that seems to create a lot of discomfort is the notion that we must contend with a world that is not only changing, but has changed—past tense. Without a radical reorientation of our notions of what it means to be church, Old South's days are numbered. And even if we were to engage in a radical reorientation, our days may still be numbered. The world in which we exist is dramatically different. It's not that things are *changing*. It's that things have changed.

For me, it seems clear that we must heed the call to continue to live out our faithfulness as a church of Jesus Christ—no matter what happens. And part of that is to find the courage to keep the allure of denial at bay.

Sure, it is understandably tempting to bury our heads in the sand—to continue to do what we do and think that our fortunes will change at any moment, that we just need to be ready for some sort of reinvention of the 1950s. It's also understandable to cast blame at all of the usual suspects—sports practices on Sunday mornings, the pastor who isn't doing her job adequately, etc.

But, this is the time when we must demonstrate that we are a church, and not just a religiously affiliated business, that we are tied inexorably with our Savior, even to the point of being willing to die.

The challenge ahead of us is profoundly significant. We need to resist the temptation of denial. We also need to try to keep people from wanting to flee. We need to find the grace and the courage—as individuals and as a community—to speak up about our grief, sadness and even anger. We must be willing to talk about our emotional responses to what has happened, and to be willing to listen to each other.

Denial may feel a whole lot more comfortable—not to mention desirable. But, denial will keep us from perhaps a most remarkable experience—that though we die, we may also live. In walking the path to our end, we may find a whole new beginning. It's just that to walk this path is to give up control of our church, and to trust that it is Christ's. We need to be willing to give up what we hold dear, and to trust that our Savior will be there to catch us as we fall.

The road ahead is not an easy one, but it is one that may very well offer something much more wonderful, a security that no blanket can bestow.

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