

BELONGING AT OLD SOUTH CHURCH

Congregational Belonging Survey

Full Council Report — Executive Summary and Detailed Findings

Part One distills the key conclusions for Council decision-making. Part Two is optional reading for members who want to explore the underlying survey data question by question.

151 respondents · 8 key conclusions · Prepared for the Church Council

PART ONE

Executive Summary

The headline conclusions from the Congregational Belonging Survey — what the Council needs to know to guide the next phase of this work.

THE BIG PICTURE

A strong foundation, with a clear next challenge

151

substantive responses to the Congregational
Belonging Survey

88%

feel welcomed

89%

feel accepted for who they
are

Respondents overwhelmingly describe Old South as welcoming and accepting, and repeatedly cite its progressive theology, preaching, music, justice commitments, and LGBTQIA+ affirmation as institutional strengths.

At the same time, the survey reveals a meaningful distinction between being welcomed into a congregation and truly belonging within it.

The distinction

Old South is overwhelmingly seen as welcoming and accepting. But those numbers decline once the question shifts to meaningful relationships, voice, and opportunity — the difference between welcome and belonging.

KEY CONCLUSION 1

Old South is beginning this work from a position of strength

Progressive theology

Thoughtful preaching

Music & worship

Justice commitments

LGBTQIA+ affirmation

Welcome & acceptance

The Belonging work does not need to begin from the premise that Old South is an unwelcoming congregation. Most respondents feel welcomed, accepted, and positively connected. This work can build on significant existing strengths, not repair a deficit.

KEY CONCLUSION 2

Welcome and belonging are not synonymous



What this means

The next phase should focus not simply on how people enter Old South, but on what happens after they walk through the Open Door.

- How do they develop relationships?
- How are they invited into participation?
- When do they begin to feel known?
- Does their presence and voice matter?

KEY CONCLUSION 3

Relationships are the primary mechanism of belonging

Personal relationships

Invitations

Small groups

Service

Shared experiences

Pastoral relationships

Being personally known

Programs and events can create the conditions for connection, ***but respondents make clear that programs alone do not create belonging. Relationships do.***

KEY CONCLUSION 4

Racial diversity is a significant unfinished area

~90%

of respondents who provided racial demographic information identified as White

The tension

Racial diversity and representation come up repeatedly when respondents describe their hopes for Old South in five years, how belonging could be strengthened, and future pastoral leadership — creating tension between Old South's aspiration to be radically inclusive and the composition reflected in this survey.

The experiences of Black congregants and other congregants of color cannot be adequately understood through the survey alone. Their perspectives should continue to be intentionally sought through listening sessions and individual conversations.

KEY CONCLUSION 5

Two different points on the inclusion journey

LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION

An established, visible part of Old South's identity

Respondents cite Old South's Open and Affirming identity, welcome of LGBTQIA+ people, and progressive theology among the reasons they value and remain connected to the congregation.

RACIAL DIVERSITY

More frequently described as an aspiration

Respondents repeatedly express a desire for greater racial diversity within the congregation and its leadership — an area where respondents believe there is still substantial room to grow.

This does not mean respondents want racial justice to be prioritized over LGBTQIA+ inclusion — the congregation is simply at different points in each part of its inclusion journey.

KEY CONCLUSION 6

Representation matters — but it will not create belonging alone



Why representation matters

People notice who occupies positions of spiritual and institutional authority, and whether leadership reflects the community Old South hopes to become. This showed up clearly in responses about Old South's future and the Associate Minister search.



Why it isn't sufficient alone

Belonging also depends on relationships, voice, participation, trust, power, and culture — and on whether people feel able to help shape the community, rather than simply being welcomed into it.

KEY CONCLUSIONS 7 & 8

A congregational practice — read alongside the listening sessions

Belonging must become a practice, not an initiative

- Learning people's names
- Noticing who is standing alone
- Initiating conversation
- Personally inviting participation
- Listening across differences

Congregants themselves — not just programs — will determine whether Old South develops a deeper culture of belonging.

Read the survey alongside the listening sessions

- 84%** connected 4+ years
- 59%** connected 10+ years
- ~50%** serve on a committee or board

Respondents skew White, older, highly educated, and financially comfortable. The survey should be paired with listening sessions and individual conversations, especially with Black and Brown congregants and others less represented here.

ASSOCIATE MINISTER SEARCH

ASSOCIATE MINISTER SEARCH FEEDBACK

The survey included an opportunity for respondents to share their hopes and perspectives regarding the Associate Minister search.

Because this feedback relates to a confidential search process, individual comments and a detailed summary will not be presented here. The Associate Minister Search Committee will receive the relevant survey responses for its consideration.

This approach ensures that congregational feedback informs the search while respecting the confidentiality and integrity of the process.

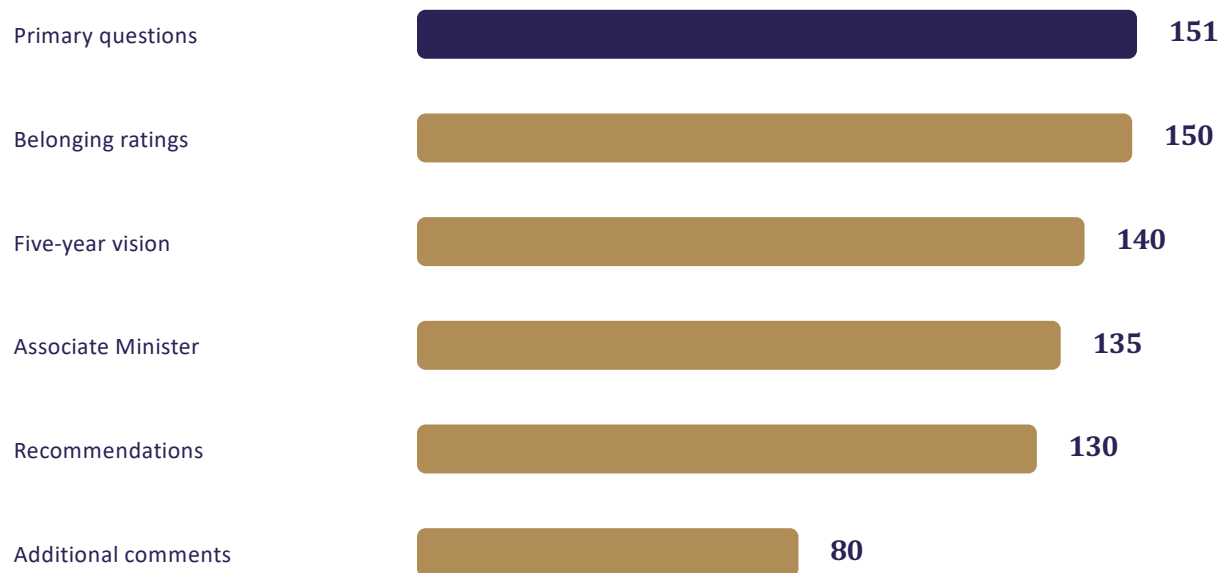
PART TWO

Detailed Survey Findings

Optional reading for Council members who would like to explore the survey data and individual questions more deeply.

SURVEY PARTICIPATION

151 respondents, with engagement tapering across the survey



What this means

84% have been connected to Old South for 4+ years

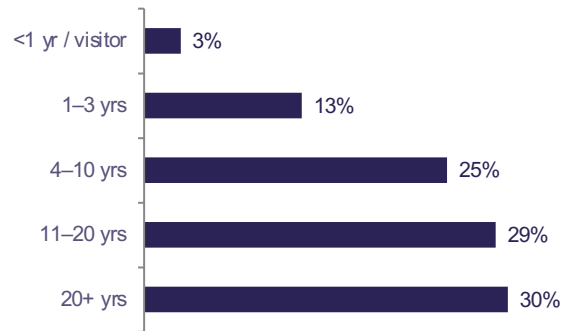
59% for more than a decade

The respondent pool skews toward long-tenured, highly engaged members — people who have already found reasons to stay.

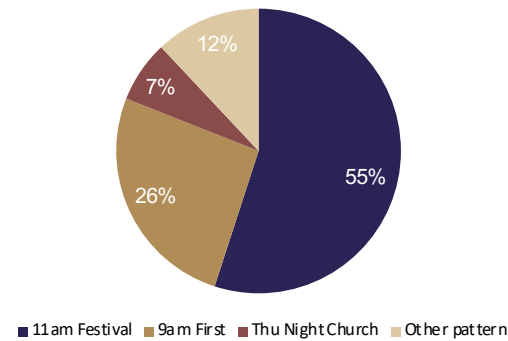
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Tenure, worship community, and involvement

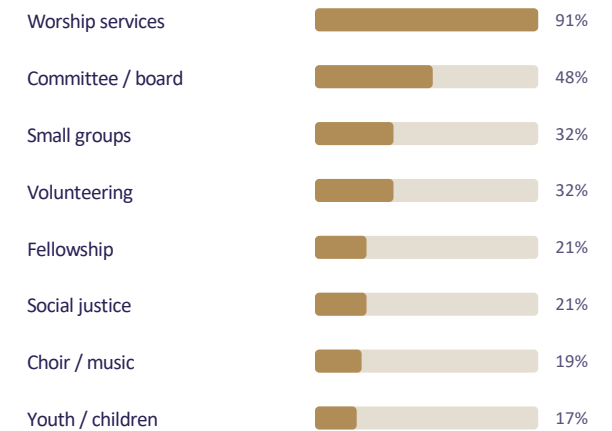
Length of Connection



Primary Worship Service



Congregational Involvement



Nearly half of respondents serve on a committee or board — this is a highly engaged respondent population.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Age, gender, race, and identity

76%

of respondents are
age 55 or older

90%

of respondents identified
as White (of 135)

63%

identified as women;
35% as men

13%

identified as
LGBTQIA+

98%

hold at least a
bachelor's degree

88%

describe themselves as financially
comfortable or very comfortable

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Why the racial composition of respondents matters

Of 135 respondents, approximately 90% (122) selected White as part of their racial identity. The remainder included 4 Black/African American respondents, 1 Asian respondent, 1 respondent identifying as BIPOC, 1 Middle Eastern/North African respondent, and several respondents identifying with more than one racial or ethnic category.

This is especially important context for the Belonging work: the survey provides significant insight into how Old South's predominantly White, established membership experiences the church — but considerably less quantitative insight into how Black congregants and other congregants of color experience belonging.

WHAT DRAWS PEOPLE, AND KEEPS THEM

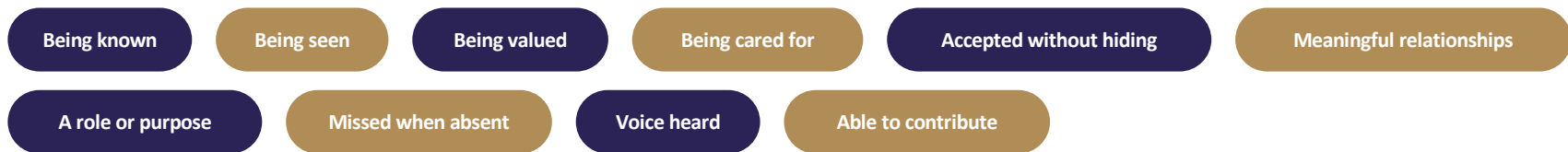
A strong, recognizable identity among established congregants

- 1 Progressive theology
- 2 Thoughtful preaching
- 3 Music and worship
- 4 Social justice commitments
- 5 Open and Affirming identity / LGBTQIA+ inclusion
- 6 Clergy and pastoral leadership
- 7 Historic identity and architecture
- 8 Relationships and community
- 9 Opportunities for service

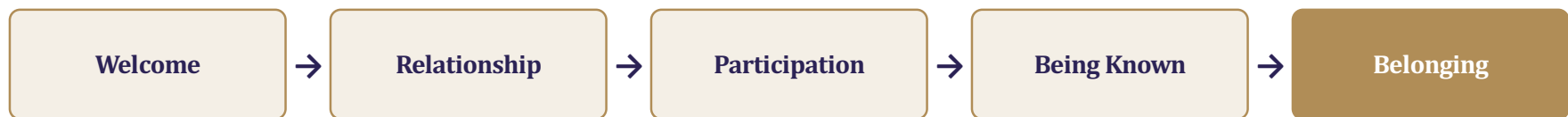
For LGBTQIA+ congregants and allies especially: Old South's explicit affirmation of LGBTQIA+ people appears repeatedly as a reason for choosing or valuing the church.

WHAT DOES BELONGING MEAN?

Respondents describe something deeper than hospitality



THE PROGRESSION



THE BELONGING GAP

Agreement declines as statements move from welcome toward opportunity



24-point drop

from “accepted” (89%) to “satisfied with opportunities to find belonging” (65%)

This is perhaps the clearest quantitative evidence that welcome and belonging are distinct experiences at Old South.

Nearly one-third of respondents do not affirmatively say their voice matters — notable given how many already sit on committees or boards.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Belonging is described as shared — not something clergy alone can create

● Introducing oneself to unfamiliar people

● Learning and remembering names

● Initiating conversations

● Extending personal invitations

● Noticing people who are alone

● Listening with curiosity

● Moving beyond established friend groups

● Welcoming different backgrounds

● Avoiding cliques

Key implication: *Old South cannot simply program its way into belonging. Structures can facilitate relationships, but congregational culture determines whether those relationships develop.*

140 responses describing what a visitor should experience

Continuity themes



Some respondents distinguish Old South's identity as an inclusive institution from the demographic diversity currently visible in the congregation.

~26 of 140

responses (about 1 in 5) explicitly referenced race, racial identity, or diversity aspirations

- Greater racial and ethnic diversity
- More Black people and people of color
- Greater socioeconomic diversity
- More younger adults and families
- Greater diversity in leadership
- A congregation reflective of Boston
- Continued LGBTQIA+ affirmation

TWO DIFFERENT STAGES OF PROGRESS

Racial diversity and LGBTQIA+ inclusion appear differently in the responses

LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION

An established value and strength to preserve

- ✓ Why respondents came to Old South
- ✓ Why they remain
- ✓ What they value
- ✓ What should continue

RACIAL DIVERSITY

More often described as an aspiration requiring further work

- ▶ The five-year vision for the congregation
- ▶ Recommendations for strengthening belonging
- ▶ Leadership and representation
- ▶ The Associate Minister search

This does not indicate a desire to replace LGBTQIA+ work with racial justice work — it indicates that respondents perceive different levels of institutional progress on each.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING BELONGING

130 responses point to four recurring themes

1

More Opportunities for Relationship

Small groups, shared meals, fellowship, post-worship gatherings, cross-service events, and informal ways to meet others.

2

Clearer Pathways into Participation

Some respondents struggled to move from attending worship into deeper participation: Attending → Meeting People → Participating → Serving → Leading.

3

The Power of Personal Invitation

A direct “Come with me” or “There’s a place for you here” repeatedly outperforms general announcements.

4

Greater Diversity & Cross-Community Bridges

Racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and generational diversity — and stronger connections across services, committees, and friendship groups.

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THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does Old South move from a church where people are warmly welcomed through the Open Door—to a church where people across identities and backgrounds are known, represented, connected, heard, and able to shape the community they belong to?

That is the opportunity at the heart of the next phase of the Belonging work.

Eighty respondents offered additional comments — gratitude and affection alongside critiques, concerns, and hopes about community, inclusion, race, LGBTQIA+ identity, and leadership. There is not one singular congregational experience of belonging. The purpose of this next phase is not to impose a single definition, but to help Old South develop a shared understanding and practices that make deeper belonging possible across difference.

Prepared for the Old South Church Council — Congregational Belonging Survey