

"I INTEND TO COME TO WORSHIP HERE NEXT SUNDAY
BECAUSE...."

2718 20 Jan 95
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008

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was the way the bulletin-on-the-collection-plate was worded Jan.8&15.

These words (printed both Sundays, spoke by the pastor only the second Sunday) introduced the generic stem, which was followed by two blank lines: "As part of a research project, Willis Elliott would very much appreciate people responding to the following question." And this the second Sunday: "If you did not write a response to this question last Sunday, please do so now and put your response in the offering plate. Thank you."

I was pleased with the result, knowing aforehand that (1) some would be irritated by this interruption of the worship mood, (2) some (New Englanders!) would consider the survey, even though anonymous, an invasion of privacy, (3) some would think about it but not perform, (4) some wouldn't want even to think about it, & (5) some would think about it but didn't get a bulletin. Lump up all those categories & I was pleased to have 1/3rd of the congregants at South Congregational Church UCC, Centerville, Mass., do as I requested.

AIMS of the project: (1) To encourage congregants to think about the question; (2) To inform them as to why their fellow-worshippers will be in our worship next Sunday morning; & (3) To present the interpreted data to our not-yet-chosen interim pastor.

DESIGN of the presentation: I'm asking the data only one question (& presenting all the data so other questions may be asked): *Of the respondents, which can be counted on no matter what, which will probably be with us most Sundays, & which are touch-&-go?* Let's call the first the **dependables**, committed to regular worship attendance at our church; the second **marginals**; and the third **"at risk"** of being away for the slightest reason (e.g., having guests) & also permanently away for some reason having nothing to do with worship (e.g., not liking "the new preacher").

Please feel free to disagree with where I put what! A lot o' livin' has gone into my judgments, but the subjective element in the categorizing is necessarily high.The responses are treated in declining order, the number of each appearing in parentheses immediately after the response.

DEPENDABLES

come because they want to recognize the Presence of God (6) in their lives; honoring God's presence in "church" is, beyond being important in itself, practice for looking for God in the "world," including one's own heart & home. (Much of what I add after the number comes from respondents' own notes, some written all over the page, not just on the two blank lines. E.g., on this response: to be "close to the Lord"; "renews my communion with God"; "only in South Church.")....Fellowship (5): "It is our church"; "This 'place' is the center of my community of faith"; "church family."....Hope (4): "assures me of goodness in the world, in spite of all bad things"; "Every week brings a new expectation of what church offers"; "By coming here, maybe God will call me back."....The joy of worship (4): "no better place"; "I enjoy being here"; "It lifts up my heart to know I have a friend in Jesus, to think that he will guide me and give me life and strength to continue serving him"; "laughter."....Duty (3): "I am a member of this church"; "my duty to thank God for his goodness in all things."....Praise (2): "The weekly praise of God in Christian community is part of the Christian life"; & the tone of this: "The Holy Spirit resides here in this strong Christian family" (a statement fitting well with the first response in "Dependables")....Thanks (2): "The least I can do is give 1 of my 7 mornings of the week to God."....Choir (2): "I sing in the choir"; (soloist) "to give of my God-given gift."....Scripture interpretation (2): "hear the Word of God through music, prayer, and sermon"; "greater understanding of the Christian faith."...."Sing hymns (1)....And the pastor quipped, "I'll be here because I'm the pastor."

MARGINALS

may not be peripherals, only a little interested; but they are fragile in their commitment to this church/congregation ("church" originally meant only the building)....Sustenance (which one could find also in many other churches) (13): "regular attendance gives me strength to get through the week"; "faith needs reinforcing"; "the spirit needs refreshing"; "battery recharged"; "spirit of renewal"; "starts my week off right," "on the right foot"; "spirit refilled"; "love is here."....Be with others in worship (but, I presume on these responses, not necessarily in this church) (4): "family of God"; "to be one of those gathered in His name"; "be in the

energy of a great congregation...that I may add my support to."....Habit (3): This looks like a strong reason but isn't: research shows that it takes only three Sunday absences in succession to form some other habit: "I always go [meaning "come"] to church on Sunday unless I go to the Methodist."....See people (2)....The following are (1) each: Fear: "I'm afraid not to. By coming, maybe God will call me back."....To remember (it takes only 6 days to forget everything most important)...."Trying to find a place in the church family."...."I need forgiveness for the past week."....Healing....Comfort: "I find comfort"; "Church is a vital part of my life."....Just before the (1)s I should have put meditation (2): "I can meditate here"; "no better place for contemplation."

"AT RISK"

of going somewhere else, or nowhere, to worship are those who come to be entertained (& are therefore more clapping-prone), & those who at least for the time being are attached to something specific but subject to change.....Sermon (10): "wonderful"; "hear Pastor Bill."....Hear music (2)....The following are (1) each: "Like the pastor." Oh, how quickly this one can flipflop into "don't like the pastor" as the reason for seldom or never coming to worship in our church! The correlation of liking the preaching / the pastor is unstable. Pastors vary widely in sermonic ability & in likability. The "at risk" crowd milling around the tent will drift away if the pastor fails to "hold" them. But the pastor whose primary aim is to get them in under the canvas will suffer the loss of those who came to worship God, not the preacher, & will be self-enslaved to the role of performer. Many churches are self-oppressed with a pastor/people conspiracy to avoid worship, attending unto God. If we get a pastor who's great except for not being able to preach worth a damn, we'll quickly see who comes to church for God's sake....The following are (1) each: "Meaningful service"; "religion for my children."

I thank whoever wrote, "Thanks for asking. A wonderful idea!"