

# How to Reclaim the Missing

by

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International Institute of Christian Ministries  
Training Syllabus

PEv 106

## INTRODUCTION

Bill and Betty haven't been to church since Betty started working the third shift at a local factory about six months ago. Sundays are about the only time they can see each other and they really need the time for themselves.

Stan and Stephanie more or less dropped out of their congregation five years back when the kids left home. It was important to give their children a good Christian upbringing but now there are other things they'd rather do on Sunday mornings.

George and Gracie had a bad experience at a church they were involved in a few years back. The minister, they felt, turned out to be a real con artist and now they no longer feel they can trust anyone or anything associated with forms of organized religion.

Patrick and Priscilla had a falling out with members of their congregation--a difference of opinion about how matters were conducted within the church. Nobody knows what the actual objections were, but they haven't been to church for more than a year.

Nancy and Neville were divorced three years ago. No third party was involved at the time. While incomparability was generally understood to be the reason for the divorce, Neville has since remarried and moved to another congregation. Nancy feels the shame of it all, and since no one has been to see her feels no one at the church accepts her anymore. She quit attending.

According to clergy of all denominations, the reasons for church members becoming inactive and dropping out are not only varied, but they are also often difficult to determine. This makes the problem doubly difficult to deal with. As one leader put it, "Sometimes the real reasons are not even known by the people themselves."

For whatever reasons, membership in most American churches is declining. According to figures of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Church*, in the past two decades membership in the Presbyterian Churches has declined by 25%, in the Episcopal Church by 28%, and in the United Methodist Church by 18%. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has experienced a small decline in the past couple of years and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, a small gain, while the Catholic Church has averaged about one percent annual gain for the past several years. What about the Seventh-day Adventist Church? The statistics will be revealed in the first chapter of this booklet. Overall, the picture has not been a very

bright one.

While the reasons for not coming to church (the causes will be examined in depth in chapter 2) listed above are quite common, there seems to be an endless list of uncommon, or perhaps peculiar, motives for sudden inactivity. I recall one pastor who told me about a woman who said she stopped coming to church because he reminded her of her deceased husband and she couldn't stand to look at him. Then there was the man who kept his vow never to darken the door of a church again in protest against the priest who suggested the world might not have been created in six days.

Another clergyman summed it up rather bluntly when he asserted, "Sometimes when the local church or division committee doesn't agree with a member's perception of the way the world is, they take their paper dolls and go home." Of course, statements by division leaders can affect individual's decisions for or against active involvement in the local congregation. For example, the issues have sometimes centered on differing views about biblical interpretation (women ordination), other times, it might be different opinions about ethical and moral issues (like abortion and homosexuality).

Whatever their reasons, church dropouts constitute a real challenge to the concerned Christian community. Our Lord's parables of the sheep and the coins become watchwords for this concern as well as a call to action to bring them back into the Christian community.

Inactive member, says one leader, constitute what he calls "an institutional hazard challenging all churches." He views the churches as failing to provide a distinctive message of salvation in Christ and instead watering down their ministry. He charged, "the church is trying so hard to be like the world today, there's nothing available for people to hunger and thirst for." Another leader finds some inactivity gender-related--seeing dropping out among men as often connected with a midlife crisis in which the male ego "is threatened and among women as a result of having feelings hurt or being ignored."

Members often become inactive as the result of unresolved, uncommunicated misunderstandings. In congregations, it becomes easy for them to "fall through the cracks."

In the name of Christian caring for souls, the contents of this booklet have been put together. The identity of and reasons for people backsliding will be carefully exposed and some definite steps to win them back will be suggested. The final chapter will examine some practical preventive strategies.

# Chapter One

## IDENTIFICATION: WHO ARE THE INACTIVES

"How baffling you are, Oh church, and yet  
 how I love you.  
 How you have made me suffer and yet  
 how much I owe you.  
 I should like to see you destroyed, and yet  
 I need your presence.  
 You have given me so much scandal and yet  
 you have made me understand sanctity.  
 I have seen nothing in the world  
 more devoted to obscurity,  
 more compromised, more false,  
 and I have touch nothing  
 more pure, more generous, more beautiful.  
 How often I have wanted to shut the doors  
 of my soul in your face, and how often  
 I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.  
 No, I cannot free myself from you,  
 because I am you, although not completely.  
 Besides, where else could I go?"

- Carlo Carreto, The God Who Comes

**"How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face"** is a cry of angry resignation that you will hear from the lips of many former church members! They have either become "inactive" in the church where their membership resides, or have literally left the church, even renounced their faith in God!

Carl S. Dudley reports, "Membership decline for most mainline denominations, in the past decade, has been unexpected, unprecedented, and most upsetting. These mainline churches--Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed--stand in the heritage of the great Reformation tradition." Where Have all the People Gone, p. x.

You say, that is not true in the Seventh-day Adventist church!

Not so! Consider the following statistical report on the "Apostasies and Missing Ratio between 1988-1992", by General Conference archivist, Don Yost:

**SDA World Statistics**  
**Apostasies and Missing Ratio:1988-1992**  
 Formula:  $\frac{A \& M}{ACC \rightarrow 10}$

Division	Accessions	AP/Missing	Ratio
AID	412,605	79,439	10:1.9
EAD	610,556	150,355	10:2.5
EUD	125,749	8,499	10:0.6
ESD	49,506	5,092	10:1.0
FED	272,348	30,557	10:0.1
IAD	517,820	131,842	10:2.5
NAD	169,372	70,914	10:4.2
SAD	506,206	122,140	10:2.4
SPD	85,896	21,594	10:2.5
SUD	42,911	6,157	10:1.4
TED	14,572	3,404	10:2.3
Attached Fields	15,952	3,866	10:2.4
<b>WORLD</b>	<b>2,823,453</b>	<b>631,343</b>	<b>10:2.2</b>

The North American Division reports "**More than a million former or inactive Adventists are missing from our churches.**" - Rejoice With Me, The Pastor's Kit for Homecoming '93.

The reasons for membership decline are complex. They include demographic factors and other causes outside the congregation. Here we look at those causes within the control of the local church. Considerable evidence supports the conclusion that member dropouts are a major cause of membership decline.

Concerned congregations may focus on member recruitment on the assumption that conservative churches grow because of their ability to attract new members. However, research reveals that conservative denominations grow principally because of their ability to keep transferring members and the children of members. It shows that membership decline in many denominations results from their inability to do so.

Membership loss is of special urgency for congregations whose local context is unfavorable to church growth. If they are to survive, they must keep members they already have, rather than depend on attracting new ones.

What major conclusion stands out from the extensive research about what bonds members to congregations? Churches that meet members' deep needs will attract and keep them. The glue that holds them is there when members experience caring community and discover meaning for living. It is strengthened when they engage in meaningful service and feel that they really belong. There are specific things that congregations believe and are and do that make a difference. These will be described in a later chapter.

But first let us identify who these people representing a membership loss are. Traditionally we have classified them as "backsliders". Today they are commonly known as "inactive" members. Which term is correct?. Is the term "inactive" an appropriate designation? The term "inactive" appears in the following report:

**"Of the more than a million former or inactive SDAs in North America, the majority are adults less than 50 years old who grew up in Adventists homes. They are our children and grandchildren ... our brothers and sisters ... our friends from church school, academy, and college. Almost all of the one million missing members have personal contact with an Adventist relative, friend, or professional colleague."** - Ibid

In the interests of accurate classification, I will distinguish between "former members" and the "inactive members".

### 1. The Inactive Member

**DEFINITION:** Inactive members are individuals who have chosen not to participate in the worship life, financial support, and program activities of the congregation. They become inactive at the point where they begin to detach emotionally and physically from the congregation. It may mean:

reduced attendance or continued absence from worship services; reduced giving, or no giving; reduction or stoppage of participation in program activities.

Ben Maxson reports, "During the second quarter of 1986 the SDA churches across the United States, Canada and Bermuda took careful attendance counts and discovered that almost universally, less than half of their members were present on a typical Sabbath. Of the approximately 750,000 members in the NAD, no more than 400,000 are regularly involved in a local church." - *Reclaiming Inactive Members*, p.2.

It is important to distinguish between TWO CATEGORIES among the "inactives": those who are "inactive" and those who are "unable". The distinguishable criterion is **freedom of choice**.

The **inactive** person, chooses not to be involved.  
The **unable** person has no choice in the matter.

What makes a person "unable"?

**a. Physical limitations:**

lack of mobility because of age or disablement.

**b. Emotional incapacity:**

a person in the grip of phobias are just as much without choice as a person who is bed-ridden. Eg. AGORAPHOBIA: fear of open spaces. Victims of this irrational dread, cannot drive across bridges (Standish).

**c. Spacial realities:**

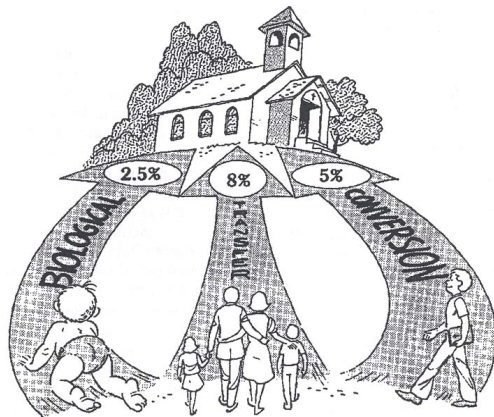
separated from church by distance--serving in the military, attending college in another city. Job requires they be out-of-town over weekends.

By contrast the **inactive** person could come, but chooses not to. You will find out quickly in talking to an individual which category they fit.

Gary McIntosh & Glen Martin in their book *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, suggest that there are only **two ways to grow a church**:

- (1) we must bring people in the "front door", and
- (2) we must keep people from going out the "back door"

THE FRONT DOOR: is the way people come into the church. Traffic flows through the front door in **three ways**:

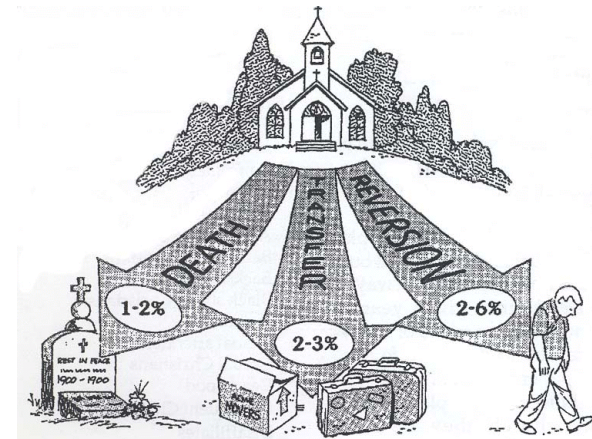


- (1) **Biological Growth:** children of church members growing up, receiving Christ, and joining the church. In North America biological growth equals 2.5% of a church's worship attendance.
- (2) **Transfer Growth:** as people move, face job relocation, or become disheartened with their current church, -- transfer membership = 8%.
- (3) **Conversion Growth:** as people hear the gospel and respond in personal faith, they need a church home ... normally equals 5% of worship attendance.

McIntosh and Martin claim that during one year: "A church with 200 in worship attendance will likely see 5 people join through 'biological' growth, 16 people through 'transfer' growth, and 10 people through 'conversion' growth, for a total of 31 people." - *Finding Them Keeping Them*, (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman Press, 1992) p.10

These 3 paths into a church are always open, but there are also ways out of a church--the "back door".

The BACK DOOR: is the way people leave the church. Traffic flows out of a church's back door in **three ways**:



- (1) **Death:** in a given year a church will lose up to 2% of its attendance due to death. "Life is a sheet of paper white ..."
- (2) **Transfer:** as people transfer into one church, they are also transferring out of another. Annual this accounts for a 3% loss.
- (3) **Reversion:** people slowly drift away from a church without uniting with another one. This accounts for a yearly loss of up to 6%.

"A church with 200 in worship attendance will likely lose 4 people through 'death', 6 people through 'transfer', and up to 12 people through 'reversion', for a total of 22." - *Ibid*

Is there a better term than "INACTIVE MEMBER"?  
Look at the alternative terms:

Absentees	Disaffiliates
Apostates	Estranged Church Members
Back door Christians	Fallen-away brethren
Backsliders	Fringe Members
Black sheep Christians	Lapsed Members
Bystanders	Marginal Members
Casual attenders	Parish dropouts
Casual Christians	slippers
Deadwood	Suspended animation
Delinquent Christians	Wayward Christians

The problems with most of these "terms" is the offensive connotations they carry. They are basically *judgmental* rather than descriptive. INACTIVE MEMBER is much better because it is **descriptive**. It refers to people's **activity level**, not **character**.

Think of it from the point of view of the INACTIVE MEMBER for a moment. Can you imagine such a person saying, "Last year I was a *lapsed member*"? Or how about, "I was a *delinquent* for six years"? I can't.

## 2. Former Members

FORMER MEMBERS are those who have been officially dropped from church membership roles. Writing about the North American Division, Monte Sahlin reports:

"Since 1950's, a total of 450,000 names have been dropped. Adding this figure to the perhaps 350,000 on the books who never attend and another estimated million or more whom we have no record of other than their self-identification in public polls as Seventh-day Adventists, it is estimated that there are somewhere between one and two million former and inactive Adventists in North America. These are people who have accepted the truth of the Adventists message but who have somehow slipped out the 'back door.'"

FORMER MEMBERS may be divided into two groups -

- (1) the disenfranchised through weak relational ties, and
- (2) the problematic because of constraints such as mental health, drug buse, doctrinal conflict, etc. Summarily speaking, FORMER MEMBERS, have simply "walked away"!

### A. MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FORMER MEMBERS

There is a whole collection of **misconceptions** about "former members", most having to do with prejudging what goes on inside them:

1. "They" are all lazy.
2. "They" have lost their faith.
3. "They" are all apathetic.
4. "They" don't want to come back.
5. "They" want to be left alone.
6. "They" will come back on their own.
7. "They" will come back if you bully them.
8. "They" only need to be reminded of duty,
9. "They" will come back after a brief telephone call.
10. "They" need to be told what to do.
11. "We" don't have to deal with their feelings or try to understand them.
12. "Whatever the problem, it's "their" responsibility, not "ours."

Are these assumptions true, or are they hasty and presumptuous? You be the judge.

### B. MYTHS ABOUT FORMER MEMBERS

There are likewise a whole collection of **myths** about why people left the church. Monte Sahlin suggests the following:

#### 1. Quick and High-pressure Evangelism.

In fact, half grew up in Adventist homes and only one in seven came into the church through public evangelism. Four out of five spent more than two months in preparation for baptism, and the majority have attended regularly for six years or Longer. Jerry Lee, social scientist at Loma Linda University reports: "**Members and former members report similar histories in terms of how they came into the church.**"

#### 2. Method of Conversion.

This has little influence on whether or not a person will drop out of the church, but AGE is a powerful predictor. Nearly half of the dropouts are in the 20-35 age group, and another quarter are 36-50 years of age. Jerry Lee says: "**The church is losing its younger members.**" The median age of members is 48, while the median age of former members is 40.

#### 3. Religiously Superficial and were never really Adventists.

Not true. They continue to have a strong sense of connection with the Adventist Church. Only about one in six joins a church of another denomination when he drops out of the Adventist Church, and only one in five says that he is unlikely to reenter the Adventist Church. Perhaps as few as one in five has habits or lifestyle that would prevent him from returning to active membership. Lee found that 37 percent say they are still "**practicing**" the Adventist faith, 75 percent still believe in the Sabbath, 69 percent still believe in the Second Coming, 53 percent still believe in the inspired role of Ellen White, and 84 percent still have Adventist friends.

#### 4. Lower Middle-class blue-collar Workers.

Not so. A significant number of inactive members have occupations in the professional or white-collar categories. They are also more likely to report stressful life events and moves from one house to another. In fact, from the research that he has supervised, Gottfried Oosterwal believes that one of the points at which Adventist church members are lost is in the techniques used to transfer membership from one local church to another.

"Some people, because of their high mobility, had to transfer membership frequently. Often, the new church did not appeal to them, and they stopped attending. Others indicated that they simply never bothered to ask for a letter of transfer."

#### 5. Singles and Divorcees.

Not a myth! Half of the former members that Lee surveyed were single at the time they dropped out. Ardyce Sween, in a report published in the *Adventist Review*, April 28, 1983, said that about 40% of single members in one church never attended. In fact, "**many Adventists attend singles' functions at churches of other denominations.**" Garland Day (while Adventist Singles Ministry president) conducted surveys at ASM retreats and reports, "**Without exception ... singles leave the church because of unfulfilled needs rather than differences over theological issues.**" Lee states: "**Individuals in the missing and apostate group are more likely to report having been divorced.**"

Dropouts are three times as likely as active members to be divorced and remarried, four times as likely to be divorced and single. In another study, 40% of the former members interviewed were divorced.

Lee emphasizes that family life is the key to holding members in the

church. 60% of former members had a non-Adventist spouse as compared with 28% of the active members who have one. In many ways members who attend church without their spouse may be treated by the congregation as if they were single.

In the next chapter we will examine more closely the reasons that people are leaving.

## Chapter Two

### CAUSATION: WHY DID THEY LEAVE?

You've experienced it many times. Joy spreads through the congregation when people come forward, take the pastor by the hand, making public their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. Joy also is evident when the congregation welcomes into its fellowship Christians from other congregations. In such moments of joy, two sobering questions are, Where will this person or family be six months--a year from now? Will this family become a vital part of our fellowship?

In some cases we saw them for awhile and then one day we thought to ourselves or mentioned to a fellow church member, "You know, I haven't seen Jim and Nancy at church in several weeks."

There are both INTERNAL (church related) and EXTERNAL (societal trends) reasons that lead people away from the church.

#### 1. Internal Church-Related Causes.

Hear are some of the cries from "former members":

"After my baptism I would wait each week in the foyer. No one would talk to me, no one spoke."

"You just can't walk in and expect to be welcomed."

"The church I attended was so cold I could skate down the aisles."

Norman Yergen's research into former members surfaced five areas that led people away from the church:

**"The church is: (a) cold and unfriendly; (b) hard to be assimilated into; (c) judgmental, critical, and negative; (d) demands perfection and is rule intensive; and (e) its main message is the need for money."** - RWM p.1.

There is general consensus about 3 reasons given by defectors:

##### (1) Emotional

Similar to the responses of new members when asked why they joined the church, the memories of dropouts are fuzzy and inarticulate. Often those who are the most introspective offer the vaguest responses, supported by descriptions of feelings involved, which seem to be more **emotional** than **theological**. Pastors and

church officers who stand by and observe class after class of new members may have underestimated the emotional life many people feel on **entry** to a church. With joining comes an openness to friendship, and a vulnerability to disappointment.

##### (2) Relational

Dropouts who remain in the vicinity of the church frequently cite broken relationships as their main reason for leaving. Some former Presbyterians list their reasons in this order:

- (1) loss of important friendships,
- (2) disappointment with pastoral relationship,
- (3) theological disagreement with the church,
- (4) a need for personal independence.

As a result of interviewing a sampling of former Methodists, John S. Savage was able to establish early incidents in which dropouts felt alienated from a significant relationship--usually with the pastor, family member, or another member of the church. If personal alienation is allowed to fester, the entire church relationship will be infected. Unresolved personal tensions play a major role in causing people to drop out.

Donald Metz has noted that a high incidence of dropping out can be traced to strained or broken relationships that lie beyond the membership of the congregation. Other family members were usually identified as the source of conflict.

People join congregations, at least in part, for **social satisfactions**. They leave when these social expectations are damaged or are left unfulfilled. Congregations must find ways--formal and informal--by which the social needs of individuals can be recognized, their achievement needs can be honored, and their social status can remain intact. Without these three strokes--

**recognition, esteem, and a sense of belonging--** members will become frustrated and withdraw.

##### (3) Theological

Although theological conflicts as reasons for dropping out of church are not offered as frequently or with as much emotion as the feelings aforementioned, they are still important.

**Some** dropouts mention a theological conflict with the social involvement of the congregation; for them, religion is more than a private affair. **Others** note the absence of contemporary worship or the financial preoccupation of church leadership as explanations for their withdrawal. **Generally**, membership dropouts were far more apt to leave in boredom than disagreement. The challenges of the church, if any, had not made

contact with priorities among the member's own goals and values.

Implicit in membership withdrawal is a curious **double standard**. When people unite with a congregation, they resist suggesting personal need or social satisfactions as causes for joining. They consciously relate church membership with program participation and religious values. When they leave, however, they are more likely to blame a breakdown in personal relationships.

Do members suddenly become inactive? In the vast majority of instances there is nothing sudden about it. Typically the final movement away from the church completes a long-term process with multiple causes at work. But others detach themselves from the church because of a crisis in their lives: internal or external.

INTERNAL CRISIS: may be some emotional tidal wave that snaps the moorings one had.

EXTERNAL CRISIS: a family upheaval that saps one's energies for anything but survival.

Even in instances of crisis, however, individuals are more likely to become inactive if there are other causes at work.

John Savage, an interdenominational Protestant researcher, has identified a "dropout track" that unfolds over a period of 6-18 months. The following key phases of the dropout track have consistently surfaced in hundreds of interviews with inactive Adventists, conducted by Adventist pastors and by lay leaders trained by Savage:

#### THE DROPOUT TRACK

1. A member has a cluster of stressful events.
2. He makes subtle attempts to reach out for help.
3. The pastor and church members do not respond.
4. The hurting member feels angry at the nonresponse.
5. The involvement in church decreases.
6. The pastor and members do not respond.
7. The hurting member quits attending, expecting to be contacted.
8. No one contacts him to ask why he dropped out.
9. He tries to forget the painful memories.
10. He reinvests the time he spent at church in other

activities.

Obviously, the sooner someone recognizes the cry for help and deals with it, the greater the chance of restoring an alienated member and the easier that restoration will be. However, those who respond to a cry for help must recognize that the presenting issues will not necessarily be the same as the source of the person's deep underlying pain. And it is that pain they must deal with before resolution of the anxiety is possible. Congregations will be more likely to keep their members if they follow up on absent members quickly and consistently, if they recognize the cries for help and deal with them promptly and skillfully. Techniques for doing that will be explained in the next chapter.

In his videotaped lecture, *Why Active Members Stay Active*, John Savage draws on findings from a major research project by Kenneth Stokes involving interviews with 30,000 people from a hundred denominations. The six stages listed by Savage provide a helpful framework for understanding the faith needs of parishioners at critical transition points in their lives. Ages given are approximate and will vary from individual to individual.

The Age of Differentiation (18 to 25 years of age). The three primary tasks are finding a mate (or postponing it for a career), finding an occupation, and developing a value system. The primary religious question is: Am I a spiritual clone or do I have a faith of my own? Many dropouts occur during this life stage.

The Years of Boredom (30 to 32 years of age). Life has become routine for those who have established their life patterns. The faith questions are: Is this all there is? What is the real meaning of life? Why are we really here?

The Recapitulation Years, the Mid-Life Crisis (38 to 41 years of age). Awareness of one's inevitable death comes to the fore as peers begin to die. Skills that have been effective in earlier life don't work any more. Issues not dealt with at any of the prior stages are reworked. This may lead one to take a new mate, new career, new philosophy or theology.

The Years of the Empty Nest (50 to 55 years of age). The fact that life is transitory is now real. The questions are What can I do for which I will be remembered? What can I do that will be meaningful, productive, and helpful to others? If other stages have been successfully traversed, faith begins to mellow.



The Years of letting Go (60 to 65 years of age). Employment ends for many. For some, this can mean a loss of identity. Other reinvest in different meaningful activities.

The Years of Approaching Death (70 and over). People lose their spouses and sell their homes. Deprivation from such losses can be traumatic.

One who has successfully negotiated the earlier transitions can be gentle, warm adult Christians who is characterized by acceptance, serenity, wisdom, compassion and openness. However, one who has failed to deal with those transitions can become bitter, brittle, critical, and frightened.

Savage points out that a cluster of events at any one of the major life transitions may lead members to drop out. At each critical transition, one must find supportive friends and support groups to keep **going**.

A survey conducted in the Upper Columbia Conference by the Andrews University Institute of Church Ministry also validates Savage's dropout track. Former Adventists report a variety of events that eventually led to their no longer attending. Note the following variety of events:

- \* an unpleasant experience with church member or pastor;
- \* dissatisfaction with the church program;
- \* failure to keep church standards; and
- \* marital or family problems.

The institute director, Roger Dudley, says:

"Generally speaking, poor interpersonal relationships in the church were either the most frequently cited first change or one of the three changes that moved persons away from the church."

Gottfried Oosterwal, supervising research of the Midwest, says:

"Only very few people indicated that they had left because of a disagreement over doctrine. Many had questions and doubts, but no basic disagreements with the main tenets of the SDA faith."

Ernie Voyles, retired research coordinator for Conference summarizes several studies conducted among members of that field:

"It is a lack of love and concern that drives them out of the fellowship of the church, and the evidence of love and concern that attracts and brings them into the church!" He gives two key issues that influence dropouts: "A sense of too much politics and impersonalness among church leaders" and "lack of sympathy or understanding or help in the matter of divorce."

There is evidence that dropouts are people who never bonded with the core group of their congregation, never felt a part of the "inner circle." Two out of three participated in church, while they were active members, only by attending, and did not hold office or have some volunteer task in the congregation. They report few visits by church members or pastors, even while they were still regular attenders. Only about one in three has attended an Adventist school at any level, kindergarten through college.

Lyle E. Schaller says:

"There is considerable evidence which suggests that at least one-third, and perhaps as many as one-half, of all Protestant church members do not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members. They have been received into membership, but have never felt they have been accepted into the fellowship circle." - Assimilating New Members, p.16.

## 2. External Societal Causes.

Societal trends of the past three decades have helped to increase the number of inactive church members. Here again, we must distinguish between myth and reality--between unusable and usable causes.

### A. UNUSABLE CAUSES:

#### (1) Wealth and Leisure.

Some suggest that people are too rich to be bothered with church attendance; weekends were occupied with alternative recreational opportunities. WEALTH and LEISURE are often coupled as the **twin monsters** that have bedeviled church membership. But, studies in church membership cannot support the thesis of worldly competition. Leisure opportunities long preceded the decline in church attendance and in no way parallel its configuration.

#### (2) Overwork.

Some advance the opposite argument, that people are too busy making money to have time left over for church activities. The increased employment included many more working wives, mothers, and church volunteers. This cultural shift has had a direct effect on the programming of women's activities. But, an examination of church membership shows that the percentage of working women represented in churches is roughly the same as in the population as a whole.

(3) **Public Events.**

Dramatic and disturbing public events have been blamed for the decline in church membership. While the identification of a common enemy--FASCISM of the 1940s and COMMUNISM in the 1950s--gave solidarity to Christianity, the VIETNAM WAR triggered the opposite reaction to church membership. These disruptions had significant social impact, but no single public event has been tied to membership decline.

(4) **Social Action.**

In the midst of the civil rights disturbances of the 60s, churches often appeared discouraged, divided in faith, and hypocritical in action. Although such activities have been a favorite target for people who seek a single cause for declining membership, there is no clear statistical basis to support that claim; there is no exodus of members, no clear coincidence of social encounter & member decline.

Something deep and more pervasive is affecting the once-faithful members than this quartet of reasons.

**B. USABLE CAUSES**

(1) **The Privatization of Faith:  
Separation of Religion from Church Membership.**

For many people the CHURCH is the **organized form of religion**, and RELIGION is the **personalized expression of faith** that is carried by the churches. RELIGION and CHURCH are **independent** but **inseparable**. For many mainline church members, faith *outside* the church would be a rather shoddy second best. For CONSERVATIVE CONGREGATIONS, faith *outside* their own communion would be dubious, and even members of their own congregation are occasionally suspect. Those who remain outside the church are clearly **beyond the ordinary means of salvation**". BELIEVING without BELONGING is an awkward idea for mainline church members and a scandal to more conservative Christians.

Notwithstanding, collected studies show that a great number of people find their religious faith *apart* from the organized church. Some who believe *will* join the churches; others who believe *will not*. The simple fact is, **religious belief** is not synonymous with **church membership**.

(2) **The Portability of Faith.**

Faith statements which are the foundation of orthodox Christianity including

faith in God;  
belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God;  
belief in the Bible as the Word of God;  
practice of prayer; and,  
expectation of life after death--

are also held by people who do not participate in churches. Furthermore, they are the statements about a personal relationship between the individual and the divine being. These faith statements do not need institutional church support and are individualized in character. These beliefs provide a faith the believer can keep in the inner life and can take within himself on any kind of journey. Faith is **portable**. The church has become optional equipment.

(3) **The Perforation (undermining) of Congregational Life.**

Believers who join churches tend to emphasize the importance of SOCIAL BELONGING in two ways:

(1) LOCALISM--community is located in the place of belonging--my church building, my church neighborhood, my church family, my locality. LOCALISM embraces the stability of family patterns, the strength of community friendship networks, and the social composition of the community.

(2) SOCIAL STATUS--provides another expression of social belonging. In status groups a church member associates with "my sort of people." There is overwhelming evidence that congregations tend to be composed primarily of a single class and a single ethnicity, though church members are seldom willing to identify social reasons as an important motivation in choosing a particular congregation.

But, LOCALISM has been adversely affected by social mobility and population diversity. The **Nuclear Family** is a remarkably mobile social unit. It can be stripped of all sentimental restraints due to over attachment to significant places or to family and close personal friends. Community is sacrificed for another move when the right opportunity comes along. Mobility becomes a state of mind.

The cultural secularization of children and youth prepares them for

years as mobile adults. At HOME children are urged to think for themselves, to make decisions, to live in their own space, to be responsible for their personal possessions. In HIGHER EDUCATION they are permitted or encouraged to leave home, to separate from the oversight of family and the fabric of community life. FRIENDS made in college are scattered as each chooses a location based on employment opportunities. Faith is a personal and usually private experience. Community is a temporary arrangement.

Both LOCALISM and SOCIAL STATUS are important definitions of community in our Protestant heritage:

LOCALISM reflects the geographic parish understanding of congregational life, SOCIAL STATUS similarity reflects a gathered community of those who share a common calling.

Unfortunately, the LOCALISM upon which many congregations depend is measurably reduced by mobility, in general (As city churches became alienated from their neighborhoods, membership declined), and by high education in particular. Both social and economic mobility have directly contributed to the decline of the congregational life in which they are spawned. Changing communities, social mobility, and alienated populations are the enemies of congregational life.

#### (4) The Privacy of Extreme Individualism.

What Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* calls concern for the **common good** has largely dissipated over the years since World War II. Our culture is being reshaped by extreme individualism that values personal satisfaction and well-being over the common good. Withdrawal from community activities, such as church involvement, has been the result.

The importance of the individual believer is at the center of Christianity. The individual believer expects fulfillment through PERSONAL FAITH, INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY, and CONTINUED GROWTH **"in the nurture & admonition of the Lord"**.

**Individual response** is the target of the Protestant invitation to faith.

**Individual responsibility** is the basis for private morality.

**Individual growth** is the assumption that motivates believers to higher, more specialized levels of education and professional training.

If, as some believe, Adventism attracts particularly individualistic personalities, then it would be particularly hard hit by this trend.

### A CASE STUDY: "Why I Left my Church"

A minister, whose name and denomination will be unidentified, interviewed 21 people who quit attending the church: six couples, two widows, two women who are single parents, two men (one divorced), and three married women. They attended churches in urban, suburban, and small town settings with memberships of more than a one thousand to a few hundred.

Their first person accounts provide a rich and valuable source of personal and experiential information about the motives and feelings and the subtleties of human interactions involved in the rupture of church relationships. This anecdotal data may provide more usable insight into this unfortunate phenomenon than statistical data gathered through a more traditional survey or poll (Decision makers want information, not data--trend toward usability vs. statistical rigidity).

**General Findings:** Some general findings are worth mentioning first.

1. Nearly one-fourth of the persons originally contacted for interviews were willing to discuss their situations and feelings, after the fact. The people interviewed indicated that they were grateful for the opportunity to tell someone what happened and that they found value in the interview experience itself.

2. None of the participants mentioned the social initiatives of denomination as a factor in their withdrawal or inactivity.

3. None of the participants indicated their sense of relationship to Jesus Christ was altered by the experience.

4. While each participant had his or her reasons for withdrawing from a particular church, each followed a remarkably similar pattern of behavior in the process of withdrawing. This was a pattern of increasing discomfort and growing disaffection over a period of time, rather than a sudden and sharp break. They described in somewhat different terms the "dropout track" identified by John Savage.

The key question was, "What is your current church status and

what accounts for it?" The responses and comments of each person was recorded and transcribed. The results indicate there were 4 main factors contributing to them quitting:

### 1. Failed Expectations

The answers given by nine of the individuals identified failed expectations as the basic reason for their leaving. The congregation and particularly its pastor (s) had failed to relate or minister in expected ways. Here are some of the interviewees' responses.

A mother from a rural church said, "*We had a daughter with a fatal disease ... from June (when the interim pastor left) until her death in November we had heard not a word from the (new) minister.*"

A young wife from a small city church said, "*I guess I feel like when I go to church I really like to come home and say to myself that this is something that really applies to my daily life. And I can see that if I did this it would help me be a better person or help me in my relationship with my family or my friends. And I wasn't getting that feeling and so we just kind of drifted away.*"

A twenty-year member of a small town church quoted the pastor of her new-found church, "*He said, 'The church has failed you. You went through a bad time and they weren't there for you.' And that is exactly what happened to us. But like I say, we have left the church and we do not intend to return.*"

### 2. Non-acceptance and Unrelatedness

A like number gave responses that indicated their reasons for quitting has to do with feelings of *non-acceptance and unrelatedness*. They noted differences and misunderstandings with individuals and groups in the congregation, loss of former friends and relationships, and a seeming lack of acceptance or connection.

A young mother from a smaller suburban church explained, "*As far as my developing friendships (with other married couples in the church), all of them went to Sabbath School together. They are all almost the same age. They all grew up together--a network was formed. It was hard for me to break into that ... We would get young couples in the church and that was it; they would leave. They'd come; they'd leave; they'd come; they'd leave.*"

A man in his late fifties from a central city church said sternly, "*It*

*boils down probably very simply to the fact that my wife left me and went to seminary. And I found it very difficult being in the church ever since ... The people who I assumed were my friends, after the divorce, were no longer my friends.*"

A woman from a large suburban church explained, "*I really like (an associate pastor) who really helped me with my two boys. I am a single parent. But she left. And I liked (another staff person), but she left and I have a problem with being abandoned. And I felt very abandoned in my church. But I just don't feel connected anymore as a person. I have to say that I don't think my presence makes any difference in that church.*"

### 3. Lifestyle Conflicts.

Three persons explained they quite because their lifestyles and work schedules were in conflict with the schedule on Sabbath worship and other congregational activities. Continued participation became impossible or not worth the effort.

A husband in his forties from an urban congregation explained, "*My job takes me away a lot of different times. And so it's very difficult for me to jump in and join any activity in a church because I cannot be depended upon to be there.*"

### 4. The Withdrawing Process

The responses also indicated the individuals all experienced withdrawal and departure in much the same way. That experience is epitomized in the comments of a married woman from a large suburban church:

*"I left, as I said, a year ago. And I would leave church (Sabbath) and I would feel worse than when I (arrived)... There were a lot of things ... (but this was) the last straw. I had gone in and talked to a minister two or three times. I had gone through a very personal upheaval in my life. We talked about confidentiality. It was very important to me that it not go any further. And a year or so later, I did hear it from ... I know exactly how it had gotten back to me. And that is when I decided ... I was going to sing the Christmas program and then I'm gone. So that's what I did. I just left."*

Another woman in a different church and with different circumstances had much the same experience.

*"Kind of what socked me between the eyes is a very specific*

*comment that was made when I was elected president of the \_\_\_\_\_. And it was, "Oh, this is Marge, our little radical." I had felt for a long time that I was in a kind of box. And that just pretty much solidified (my decision to quit) ... It is very important to me that I am a working class woman and I have a tendency to share that pride with whoever I am in contact with. And I kind of came up with a dead end there. And I thought they don't understand who I am ... sometimes, if it doesn't feel good, you just don't do it anymore. And that's sort of what happened to me."*

### 5. Emerging Dissatisfaction

The process or dynamics of disaffiliating began as their members realized something had changed their sense of well-being and comfort with their church life to feelings of discomfort and dissatisfaction. The dissatisfactions mentioned in the interviews came from:

- a. Upheaval in the church
- b. Pastoral change
- c. Overwork and burdensome demands by the church
- d. Unsatisfying worship or sermons.
- e. Unappreciated or exploited effort
- f. Lack of specific services and programs.
- g. Excluding and controlling behavior by leaders or others.
- h. Lack of acceptance, friendliness, and personal relationships .
- i. Lack of personal care and attention.
- j. Conflict with employment
- k. The departure of personal friends or co-workers from the congregation.

#### The Turning Point: "Precipitants"

The interviewees indicated that during this time of growing discomfort and dissatisfaction with some significant aspect of their church life something specific happened that prompted them consciously to pull back and significantly reduce their participation. Savage calls these "precipitants". Specifics mentioned in the interviews were:

- a. Unresolved discomforts and dissatisfactions became intolerable and outweighed other satisfactions, or a specific incident or disappointment or failed expectation occurred.
- b. A hurtful or depreciating comment or behavior was experienced.
- c. A family crisis arose, such as a divorce.
- d. Someone in the family (spouse, child, close relative) died.
- e. Job demands altered lifestyle and available time.
- f. The disaffected member experienced frustration and burnout.

- g. Response to an expressed need or concern was unsatisfactory.

During withdrawal, fourteen said they came to realize after a few weeks (Savage says no more than 6-8 weeks) that no one contacted them about their absence, causing them to conclude that no one had noticed or apparently cared. In cases where contact was made, it only worsened the situation. Either way, the withdrawing persons became confirmed in their decision and they intentionally quit the congregation. About one-third of them found another church relationship.

#### There are Three Stages of Disaffiliating

For these individuals, quitting their churches involved a clearly discernable and fairly common pattern of behavior.

**1. A Discomfort Stage.** It began with what could be called *A Discomfort Stage* when the member became aware of dissatisfaction or discomfort with some important aspect of their life. in the congregation. As indicated above, these discomforts centered around:

**a. Failed expectations:** the congregation and particularly its pastor(s) didn't provide expected services and relationships (9 persons, 43%).

**b. Non-acceptance and unrelatedness:** differences and misunderstandings with individuals and groups in the congregation, loss of former friends and relationships, or a seeming lack of acceptance or connection (9 persons, 43%).

**c. Lifestyle Conflicts:** incompatibilities between the lifestyle of the congregation and its activities and that of the member (3 persons, 14%).

**2. The Withdrawing Stage.** In a second stage, as indicated above, the relationship further deteriorated (Savage sees this as an "anxiety setting" or a time when an "anxiety-producing event" occurs), precipitating a tentative decision to pull back and withdraw from participation in the life of the church. Withdrawal created its own sense of loss and pain, compounding the issue.

**3. The Exiting Stage.** As the person came to realize no one had noticed his or her withdrawal or made inquiry about it, he or she felt confirmed in the decision to withdraw. The person made a conscious decision not to return to the church and either just became inactive or began seeking another church relationship (According to Savage's analysis, 66% of church dropouts became "apathetic" at this point, feeling helpless to do

anything about the situation; the other 33% become "bored," feeling hopeless about their situation. The difference, he explains, is due to whether the person places blame for what happened on others-helplessness-or upon themselves-helplessness). This became *The Exiting Stage*.

It should be noted that nine of the interviewees indicated a visit or inquiry by the pastor or others during their withdrawal period might have made a difference in their decision to quit attending the church.

A divorced woman from a suburban congregation put it this way:

*"I really was bogged down. And I was working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, And as I said, this went on for about two months (which kept me from church). And I guess if someone had called me at the end of that two months and said, 'What's going on?' I probably would have told them exactly what was going on. And then I would have been there the next Sabbath."*

These self-disclosures have defined for us in vivid terms three stages which comprise the dynamics of disaffiliating. These dynamics were at work in one way or another in the lives of the interviewees and became evident as each person told his or her story of why they left their church.

### **Remediation: Communication an Antidote**

Communication--or lack of it--was a major factor in these experiences of disaffiliation. Lively, comprehensive, and all-encompassing communication activity within a congregation can be an effective antidote against dissatisfaction and withdrawal.

Here are five remedial suggestions:

1. Anything a congregation can do to make it possible for *all* of its members and constituents to interact with one another will provide a basic preventive. Interpersonal communication builds interpersonal relationships. And relationships with others in the congregation, with its groups and activities and with its pastor, give members a sense of acceptance and belonging (See Chapter 5 "Incorporating," Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church*. The Alban Institute, Inc.1987). Relationships reinforce affiliation.
2. Both formal and informal feedback procedures are needed because they make the pastor and church leaders aware of changing needs and expectations and of emerging dissatisfactions among the members.

Feedback is particularly valuable during certain "high risk" times. The interviews revealed that sensitive communication during these high risk conditions is particularly crucial so others in the congregation can react with care and consideration and adapt to the resultant new needs or expectations. Caring attention will help prevent dissatisfaction.

3. Some scholars suggest a congregation needs to conduct an annual review of its program and ministries to make sure they are performing well and providing what members need and expect. As Hope and Roozen point out, **"In America with its heritage of religious voluntarism, churches must attract and maintain their members, depending upon how well they can meet the members' personal needs and preferences, both religious and social** (Dean R. Hope and David A Roozen, eds. *Understanding Church Growth and Decline:1950-1978*. New York, Pilgrim Press, 1979, p.221).

4. The interviews show that intentional communication procedures that focus on detecting and intervening in member withdrawal can reverse it much of the time. Nearly half of the persons interviewed indicated they would have welcomed a meaningful inquiry from the pastor or other church leader during their time of withdrawal. On the other hand, three of the persons interviewed said contacts made with them during withdrawal were insensitive and only worsened the situation. So, any intervention effort must be carefully planned and handled by people who know how to relate and listen to those who are angry and hurting. Otherwise the effort will backfire.

There are clear danger signs that indicate possible withdrawing behavior:

- \* Being absent from worship and other activities the person normally attends.
- \* Refusing to accept or resigning a leadership position.
- \* Suspending financial support or unwillingness to renew a financial pledge.

### **Conclusion**

So, what causes members--even long-time members--to depart silently, unhappily, out the back door of the church? The answers given by these 21 church inactives are quite clear. The major reasons were failed expectations and broken or undeveloped relationships. And the *coup de grace* was a failure of others in the congregation to miss those unhappy members after they had withdrawn.

Causation—9

I am persuaded failed expectations indicate a serious lack of communication or feedback between interpersonal relationships indicate insufficient opportunity for members to interact with one another on a personal, one-to-one basis. The most promising preventive action a congregation can take is providing a climate of lively interaction among all members and constituents and seeking honest feedback from its members, particularly during high risk situations.

## Chapter Three

# RECLAMATION: HOW DO WE RECLAIM THEM?

Reclamation—2

### Introduction:

**"Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter  
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore  
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness  
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.  
- Rescue the Perishing (vs.3)**

How can we get those "**chords that were broken**" revibrating?  
Studies reveal that an average of approximately 30-35% of the membership of a congregation is inactive. Whoever you are, whatever place you occupy in your church,

- you can make a difference ...
- you can prevent inactivity ...
- you can relate caringly to inactive members ...
- you can welcome them home should they decide to return ...

When you take the proper approach, you can participate in great wonders of reconciliation and healing.

### 1. DETECTION

How do you discover who inactive members are? The question has behind it a deeper one, How do you detect inactivity in the earliest stages? Every congregation--small or large--would benefit by some forms of organization that would ensure that no one slips through the cracks. Here are some ways to discover who inactive members are:

1. **Attendance Records.** Church staff can note who is not attending.
2. **Inactive Member Team.** This group reviews the membership list together, pooling their corporate awareness of inactives.
3. **Communion Registration Cards.** This quarterly ceremony is when congregants renew their oath of allegiance. Inactives tend to avoid it.
4. **"Rite of Friendship".** Includes passing a sign-up sheet up and down the pews ... a way of determining changes in patterns of attendance.
5. **Undershepherd Plan.** A program where members are designated to keep in touch with fellow members in geographic zones.
6. **Active Listening.** By really listening to people, you can pick up many indicators of early inactivity.
7. **The Grapevine.** A source of leads on people who might be in early stages. "How do you unring a bell?"
8. **Computers.** This technology can help keep track of important information. Statistical programs ... identify changes in patterns for individuals. Your output might be lists of those whose patterns of attendance or contributing have changed.

All these are ways to gather data. None of them is any guarantee that the data, once gathered, will be used ... allow it to guide and direct you to begin

ministry efforts.

**Question:** Isn't it a human characteristic that people are sometimes highly active, and sometimes not so active ... wax and wane in enthusiasm? If you approached some they could well be insulted by the suggestion!

**Answer:** To have 100% of the people in the church 100% eager to be involved in church active it would be a pleasant challenge! Reality teaches that internal mechanisms govern people's willingness and ability to be involved. Sometimes these mechanisms permit a speed of 90 mph ... other times they tick over at 29 mph . People's lives change.

Everyone should continue to grow spiritually, should be stimulated and encouraged in the love of the Lord, and should deepen their relationship with God. But "**shoulds**" are terrible motivators. Three perspectives:

(1) The church needs to upgrade its capabilities in helping people see how their health and well-being depend on a continuing and deepening relationship with God.

(2) The church leaders need to begin by speaking the truth of the Gospel, the "**for-you-ness**" of the Gospel in loud, clear tones. God's love is a love meant for **you**. Jesus Christ died for **you**.

**EXERCISE: Read Isa. 53, employing the first plural pronoun remembering the prophets use of the 3 Hebrew words for sin--**

- (1) my "**transgression**" - v.5: outright rebellion,
- (2) my "**iniquities**": twisted perversion of nature,
- (3) my "**sin**" - v.12; falling short

(3) The priesthood of all believers is an important part of God's plan for the church. When every Christian sees himself as a minister with a sacred trust, and holy gifts to enable that trust, we will be much closer to the 100% dream.

As far as waxing and waning: the church can improve its record in communicating the gospel and equipping people for ministries. Generally no one objects to being sought out with caring concern, so even if you identify someone as inactive, your loving attention will be appreciated, not scorned.

### 2. VISITATION

A ministry to the inactive is not taken seriously by many. It is easier and involves less time to win a *new member* than to reclaim a *former one*. Can a congregation be **motivated** to inaugurate such a ministry?

MOTIVATION is a word that is misunderstood in common parlance. Some think it is all about "**Making people want to do**" thus-and-so. It is not. The frustration for any PARENT or DICTATOR is that no one can *make* anyone want to do anything.

MOTIVATION is always **internally** generated, never **externally** imposed.



You can *make* people do something, which is not the same as making them *want* to do it. This kind of motivation is usually coupled with some form of threatened punishment or denial:

**"Jones, you'll get here on time or be fired!" and  
"No dessert until you eat your brussel sprouts."**

The actual, internal motivation for the individual may be fear, preservation of security, or the desire for some good that is only available after some bad has been swallowed.

Since MOTIVATION is always **internally** generated, what can churches or individuals do to tie in those **internal** needs and wants? How do you motivate a congregation to be concerned about inactivity?

The BAD NEWS is, you can't. The GOOD NEWS is, you don't have to! The initial motivation is already present in large degree for many inactive members. Nearly all Christians have persons they know and care about who are inactive--friends, family members. Those who do have negative feelings toward inactive members when that term is used generally, change when they personalize it, and make the connection that such-and-so is really my neighbor!

Why do ACTIVE MEMBERS resist being involved in this ministry?

- (1) **They have Numerous Fears.** All kinds of fears operate in their minds:
- fear of rejection
  - fear of being exposed to anger
  - fear of uncertainty
  - fear of doing something new
  - fear of the amount of time it can take
  - fear of freezing up because might say the wrong thing.

- (2) **They Lack Social Skills.**

Some see themselves as shy, not very good at social skills. **"I can't make small talk,"** they say. This is good news, because "small talk" is not what the inactive needs! Rather **"Large listening"!** Anyone can learn it.

Informal or casual relating, in a chance encounter on the street is different. The unspoken assumption in meeting an inactive is you have to bring up subject of church. Not so. Far better to greet them warmly and express natural pleasure at seeing them again. Be your natural, friendly self. DON'T BERATE-RELATE!

- (3) **They don't Distinguish between Results Goals and Process Goals.**

Another area of resistance is connected with what the goals of visiting or relating ARE and what they OUGHT TO BE.

If goals are established as **"getting the inactive person back to church at all costs,"** this violates the active members' sense of themselves as caring Christians, but too often such goals--RESULTS GOALS--are exactly the presumed

goals a congregation establishes. Perhaps a few people are naturally comfortable with the hard-sell, high pressure approach, but the great majority of people are not--nor should they be!

If the goals are instead those of establishing a **relationship** and **determining the inactive member's needs**, then discomfort will diminish, maybe even vanish. Such positive goals are PROCESS GOALS and fit very naturally into people's ideas of what ministry ought to be.

RESULTS GOALS: The view that the goals of relating to inactive members is to get them to come back to church, to get them to change their views, or to get them to forgive and forget.

In effect, the ACTIVE MEMBER has decided ahead of time what is best for all concerned, and that outcome therefore is what is strived for. This is playing God with someone else's life. It is often accompanied with the attitude, **"Be active or else"**. The inactive person will invariably choose **"else"**.

PROCESS GOALS: The focus is on the needs of the inactive member. The goals are

listening to the other,  
caring for and encouraging the other,  
sharing Christian love with the other.

There is nothing wrong with results: having inactive members come back to church, having them forgive, or with our forgiving them. There's nothing wrong with barriers going down and attitudes changing--everyone's attitudes. There's nothing wrong, except that when you push for results, results flee.

### RESULTS GOALS vs PROCESS GOALS

**Question: Is there a STREAMLINED way to contact inactive members, lasso them, and drag them back to the corral?**

As with other quality activities--there is no quick and easy way to do ministry.

**SLOGAN: WELCOME TO LIFE THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN!**

If "streamlined" means: removal of attitudes and practices that hinder carefully planned, quality ministry, YES.

A **results-oriented approach** focuses on the future and ends. It increases pressure on everyone, active and inactive members alike. It takes away from God and the inactive member outcomes that are theirs to achieve.

A **process-oriented approach** focuses on the PRESENT, and on MEANS. It reduces pressure on both the inactive and active member. It leaves control with God and the inactive member, while leaving active members in control of their own actions.

#### (4) They Are Embarrassed

Some are naturally shy and feel embarrassed about approaching others. The great discovery is that others will think you are a fascinating conversationalist if you just learn to ask good questions and let them do most of the talking.

Maybe embarrassed members need to ask why they are approaching an inactive member. Many are embarrassed at the prospect because their motivation is wrapped around the fixed idea that the purpose of the visit is to get them to change, or to get them back to church. This kind of **results orientation** is bound to make them feel guilty and embarrassed.

ANTIDOTE: to keep telling themselves that they are simply relating because they care.

#### (5) They Have Anger Towards Inactive Members

Given a chance ACTIVE members can build up a list of resentments against INACTIVES.

**"They get to sleep in."**

**"They don't have to do all the things I do to support the church."**

**"They must have piles of excess money because they aren't contributing to church."**

Overcoming these feelings will not necessarily happen easily. Where to start: Two perspectives--(1) FORGIVENESS. Understand that you are as much in need of forgiveness as the inactive. Offer up your anger to God asking for forgiveness. You can do nothing to help your relating to others until that is straightened out. (2) UNDERSTANDING. When correct information about the inactives is available--the hurts they have experienced, the crisis that has occurred in their lives--anger will melt away in the warmth of compassion.

Follow the JESUS model: How did He behave toward the two tax collectors--Levi and Zacchaeus; the prostitute. It is our "good fortune," God's Good News, that He sees us the same way.

#### (6) They are Judgmental for Fear of Relaxing Standards

Some ACTIVE members see inactivity as the operation of sin in the lives of the "inactives"--which it is--and see them only as sinners. That attitude is self-defeating and deadly. Why? Sin is in all but expresses itself in different ways: now in inactivity, now in lust, now self-righteous! If you categorize them only as sinners your attitude toward them will be judgmental and anger.

STANDARDS: Your standards belong to you, not to someone else. You neither have to adopt nor endorse the behavioral; standards of the inactive. Maintain your own standards. Don't skip going to church on Sabbath in order to make your visit--just because you think they'll be home at that time.

Ministry to the inactives is being JESUS CHRIST to them. Their spiritual growth doesn't depend on what you do for them, but what God does in them. If you

come across in a heavy-handed legalistic way-- "**Ralph, I'm here to tell you what the will of the Lord is for you**"--you may be right but not helpful. Do you want to be right or get them back to church? In the face of their situation, are you calm and genuine, owning your own feelings or do you show disgust at what they share? The first reaction promotes growth, the second stifles it.

### 3. ACTION

What is the best method? There are no hard-and-fast rules, because ministry to the inactive is like painting, and art. The following strategies are merely the colors on our ministry palette.

#### (1) Write Letters to the Inactive

Don't do it! Sending letters exhorting them to come back to church is one of the most practiced and least effective means of trying to reach them, and may put even more distance between them and the church. In a seminar I ask: "Has anyone seen an instance **when a letter to an inactive member brought someone back to church?**" Once a participant said, "Yes, my family was inactive, and we received one of those letters. We got so angry. we decided to join another church!" A letter will not drive people away; it may give them further reason to stay away. Letters are impersonal and often accusatory-sounding, and will almost always be perceived that way whether intended so or not. A letter is very one-sided and sets up a **superior-inferior** undertone to the communication. Even when the letter invites the inactive member to respond, it comes across that the writer is interested in only one response, and that is to **get back to church!**

If the choice is between doing nothing or sending a letter, do nothing. You will do more ministry by doing less damage. Why does a congregation send letters? It's a lot easier to send a letter than to make personal contact. The latter raises all sorts of possibilities for anxiety if the interaction is more open than one is prepared for.

#### (2) Sending Material with Relationship-building Note

As long as there is no hidden hook in what is sent--remember, **process**, not results. The best way to feel clean about your motives is to send the same communication to everyone--at least to selected members of the congregation not just inactive.

Some congregations routinely send **birthday** and **anniversary cards** to all members. If inactives are being treated like everyone else, this is a plus. Notes or letters in combination with personal contacts are acceptable and appropriate, always presuming they are part of a continuing effort to build a relationship.

#### (3) Telephone Contact

As with encouraging notes and cards, this strategy can be a good supplement but not a substitute for personal contact. There are limitations to how relational you can be over the phone. The relationship makes the difference. One observes:

**In one sense I suppose a phone call is also personal contact, but it's not IN-PERSON contact, and the communication suffers from lack of opportunity to 'read' the other's nonverbal cues. I think good process-oriented caring for inactive is in large part a matter of sensing and feeling one's way along. I find my sensitivity to the other much reduced when I am deprived of the visual cues to how the person is feeling."**

As we shall see, telephone contacts have their place in SETTING UP a visit, but beyond that initial contact their value is limited when it comes to establishing a relationship. Once the relationship is established they are part of the maintenance tools. Face-to-face contact is primary.

#### (4) Personal Contact

By personal contact I mean, genuine, selfless, non-demanding care. Why is it best?

(1) PERSONAL CONTACT treats the inactive as a valuable person, someone worth investing time in. When the inactive begins to feel valuable to the church, that may be the open door to a first experience of knowing their value to God.

(2) When PERSONAL CONTACT is genuine and caring, the inactive does not feel like an object to be collected. The focus is on the real person and that person's, needs.

(3) PERSONAL CONTACT clears misunderstandings by allowing for the ventilation of feelings.

(4) PERSONAL CONTACT works because it turns inactive strangers into friends. In other words, it builds relationships.

#### A. WHO VISITS: THE PASTOR OR LAYPERSON?

The **disadvantage** of having the PASTOR be the only one to reach inactive is ARITHMETIC. Take a congregation with 120 names of potential inactive, and 41 of those are actually inactive. At 5 minutes apiece to set up a visit and 1 and one half hours for each visit, including travel time = 65 hours for one visit of all 41. Further, creating a relationship takes more than one visit.

The **advantage** of a visit by the PASTOR is that it carries with it all the authority and credibility of the pastoral office. That may be appropriate and what the inactive may need.

If an inactive is feeling guilt or shame, for instance absolution may be received better from the pastor.

Also, the pastor is often perceived as officially representing the congregation. The pastor's saying "I'm sorry that this happened to you" for a hurt inflicted upon the inactive member might have a greater impact than from lips of layperson.

The one **advantage** to having a LAYPERSON reach out, on the other hand, is that the inactive might be more open and honest with a lay person.

People sometimes tell the pastor what they think he wants to hear. An inactive member also cannot dismiss a lay member's visit as "He is only doing this

because it is his job!" A trained layperson or pastor can visit with equal appropriateness and equal effect.

#### B. WHO DO WE VISIT FIRST?

**Question: Should we focus our efforts on those who have recently become inactive or on those who have been inactive for a long while?**

The medical concept of TRIAGE may be helpful here. Battlefield casualties in time of war or victims of large-scale catastrophes are hastily assessed and divided into three groups:

- (1) those who in all likelihood will live whether they receive immediate treatment or not;
- (2) those who will have a good chance of recovery if they receive immediate care; and
- (3) those who are likely to die even if they receive immediate care.

On the principle of maximizing the number of survivors, physicians will treat the middle group first. On the same principle, my advice is, concentrate on those who seem most responsive to an initial contact, regardless of the length of time they have gone. Those most recently inactive have the strongest emotional bonding to the church. The role of Providence in deciding whom to visit is not overlooked. Prayer, happenstance encounters, and accessibility to specific individuals all play a part in helping decide whom you minister to first.

#### C. HOW DO YOU SET THE STAGE FOR A VISIT?

**1. Call first.** Should you drop-in without Warning? Kenneth C. Haugk, pastor and clinical psychologist author of the best-selling book *Christian Caregiving--a Way of Life* surveyed more than 2,000 on the matter. He posed the question: Would they like to receive a call ahead of time? 80% said they definitely would; 20% said it made no difference. The odds are against just "popping-in" unannounced. You run too much risk of getting on the wrong foot if you "pop-in" unannounced, four-to-one that the individual you drop by to see will; be uncomfortable or offended. It is not a matter of personal choice, but a necessity. There are several reasons for the positive certainty of my answer. Do so because:

- a. It shows respect for the other person's time and schedule.
- b. You want more than just a couple of minutes to talk to the person, which is all you may get if you drop by without warning. The person needs to carve out a specific chunk of time for your visit.
- c. You owe them time to prepare themselves for your visit. Individuals who are put on the spot by your unexpected visit may tell you what they think you want to hear--"I'll be in church next Sabbath." If you have given the individual time to think, he is likely to be open and honest with you.
- d. You can be more certain of seeing everyone involved. In the case of married couples, their activity levels are often the same, so when one becomes inactive the spouse will often follow suit. Drop-in visits make it more likely you will miss one party or the other, or all.
- e. The TELEPHONE CONVERSATION itself can begin the process of bridge-building. If you conduct telephone-call; caringly, nonjudgmentally, and

nonmanipulatively, chances are that the face-to-face meeting will get off to a good, positive start.

**Question: Doesn't calling ahead of time to set up a visit give them too much opportunity to reject you?**

The issue is one of **control**. The lives of inactive members have already assumed an out-of-control air about them. If you don't even offer the courtesy of an advance phone call, all you are doing is reinforcing their own feelings of importance. This is the last thing you want to do. Just seeing the person is not what you are after. You are not "after" anything except the opportunity to relate to and care for the individual. That care begins with your respect and courtesy, which means it begins with the phone call you make to ask permission to visit.

**Question: In setting up the visit, should you mention explicitly why you are calling? Should you mention the person's inactivity as the reason for a visit?**

The reason you are getting in touch with the individual is because you care and because you are full of the love of Jesus. You want to contact that person in order to find out what is going on in his life. You are not calling about the person's inactivity; you are calling about the person. You might say, for instance, "I'm here to show care for you personally, not to get you back to church. But it is true that I would not be here except for the fact that your absence was noted." Saying this will keep you from seeming to have a hidden agenda.

**Question: What if the Inactive Member refuses to meet face-to-face?**

All things being equal, face-to-face encounters are definitely best. You lose a lot of information when the person is not present for you to see their facial expressions and body language. When you have no choice, you have no choice, and do your best on the telephone. The following points are adapted from the Stephen Series training module, "Telecare: The Next Best Thing to Being There" (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 1983).

1. **Listen carefully.** You have to rely solely on what you pick up by sound.
2. **Check out your assumptions periodically.** Because you have only sound to rely on, you can't always be sure what's happening. (Example: "It's difficult for me to tell right now how you are feeling.")
3. **Try for a "clean sound" environment.** Don't talk with the TV or radio on. Use another room if there is distracting background noise in the room you are in.
4. **Confirm your listening with verbal cues.** Remember, the inactive member cannot see you.
5. **Be conscious of the tones of your voice.** Communicate warmth and caring. Be clear, distinct in your responses. Make your voice lively rather than a monotone.
6. **As yourself, "Whose needs am I satisfying?"** Put aside your own needs and make every effort to address the needs of the inactive member.
7. **Keep the conversation focused.** You may have to bring the conversation away from chat and refocus on the purpose of your call, which is to

offer care to the other and discover what their needs are. (Small talk can serve a kind of "testing-the-waters" purpose for the inactive member, however, so don't be too quick to steer the conversation back to the "important stuff." For that person at that moment, the small talk maybe the important stuff.

**8. When it's time to say good-bye, say it.** If the active member starts to repeat, or seems to fumble for what to say next, end the phone call appropriately. Indicate your intention of calling back to check in, and be sure you follow up that intention. You certainly ought to offer once again to meet. (Example: "I still would like to get together sometime. Would you be willing to meet me for lunch?")

**Question: What if the Inactive says no to your request for a visit? How do you work with individuals who don't want to be worked with?**

**1. Lower the intensity.** Lower the threat. Lower the inactive member's defensiveness by avoiding foot-in-mouth style of relating. The real issue with these people is that they don't want to be "worked over," which is what they have come to expect. When you relate to them differently—with love, care, listening, and empathy—most will be willing to risk developing friendship with you.

**2. Be persistent, but not pushy.** Tell the person that you would really like to visit. Ask, "**Do you think I'm coming over to give you a hard time about church attendance?**" If the answer is "yes" then reassure them by saying, "**I'm just calling to check in with you and find out how things are going with you. If you want to talk about the church, I would be happy to do so. But if you don't want to, that's fine too.**"

**3. Listen to what the person is saying.** If the person says, "**I'm too busy**" (which may or may not be the true reason), you can say, "**That's okay. I'd like to check back with you later when things have slowed down.**" The individual might also be saying, "**I really don't want to be part of this congregation any longer.**" Does the person want you to relay this back to the congregation? Sometimes "no" means, "Coax me," but sometimes no means no, too. Back off for a while. Do try again later. If you've been turned down once, try in 2-3 weeks.

**Question: How do you deal with your own feelings if you get turned down when you call to set up a visit?**

**1. Pray about the situation and the individual.** Offer your attempt to God, and your feelings of rejection too. In your prayer, apologize for your shortcomings, known and unknown. Praise God in the certainty that His will for you and the other is for your mutual well-being.

**2. Check your own motivations.** If you have truly attempted to set up a visit with good intentions, to offer care and a desire to find out what is going on with the individual rather than to haul him back to church, you are perfectly justified in considering your effort as honorable. You've lived up to God's hopes for you.

**3. Recognize that you are a "person-in-process".** God is still working on you. You are not perfect. As you become more skilled through training and experience, you will do better in reaching out to others.

**4. Realize other people's autonomy.** You cannot control others no

matter how hard you try or how good your intentions. Others are in charge of their own lives, not you. This is one of the essential truths about process oriented relating.

#### D. WHAT TO DO AT THE BEGINNING OF A VISIT?

**1. RELAX!** Lower your anxiety level. How? Look at conversations with inactive as just an **interaction between two human beings!** This is not a meeting between an "active" and an "inactive" person, but between Andrew and Nathan, Laura and Ruth--between two people with names.

Mostly, anxiety about a first visit is related to having a **results orientation**. You have learned the futility of this method, so you can be freed from that burden. There is also the NORMAL ANXIETY that goes with any first-time meeting. Be as natural as you can in spite of your tentativeness. Talk with the inactive in same way as anyone else. Avoid the "Hi" routine greeting. Say,

"How are things going with you?" or

"How is life treating you?"

Certainly add, "It's good to see you," or

"It's good to meet you."

What do you say after you say hello?

**2. BE CASUAL!** Don't make a big deal of this. Simply be genuine. Be casual. I give guidelines rather than canned speech. FORMULAS for relationships are self-defeating. You feel unnatural. The other person hears the artificiality and feels unnatural, too. You are just two people getting to know one another.

The safest course is to focus on the other individual, having them bring you up-to-date on what's been going on. You have to be careful of making remarks such as "**I've missed you.**" Share it only if and when it's true, but recognize that a statement such as this can lack genuineness and trigger defensive feelings.

Get the other person to talk about themselves. Don't throw the church bulletin in the person's face, or a newsletter. Don't just "happen" to have a tithe envelope with you. Don't come with a planned agenda. You want to know what the other's needs are.

**3. TRUST!** As a way to break the ice, should I first ask the person why they became inactive? That is the exact opposite of what you should do. Starting there would be meeting your own needs, not theirs.

If you meet someone with a bad SUNBURN, would you opening remark be, "So how's the old sunburn?" accompanied by a hearty smack on the back?

If a family member who hasn't been home for 3 Christmases suddenly shows up, are you going to kick the conversation off by asking, "How come you haven't been home before this?"

Such openings are rude and inconsiderate--your native tactfulness has already told you that. First, build a relationship of trust, then you will have earned the right to be shared with, & the person will more than likely signal it by sharing with you.

**4. ZEAL!** Those engaged in this ministry need a high degree of zeal. But it has to be expressed in an accepting and loving way.

One example of misplaced zeal: sending an inactive person recently

divorced a postcard telling her about the next meeting of a single's support group. Why? A case of being full of your own agenda.

From the PASTOR'S vantage: knowing how positive and supportive the group was couldn't imagine such an invitation going amiss.

From the DIVORCEE'S vantage: "The church couldn't even wait until the ashes of my marriage were cold to try to get its hands on me!"

Being careful how you channel your zeal does not mean being apathetic, or totally letting the other person alone. Real care is not overpowering. If you confine yourself to listening and being actively present with the other, you will already have the safeguards you need built into the relationship. It will require patience and self-restraint.

**5. PRAY!** Three problems--(1) When an active member says, "**I'll pray for you**" to an inactive member, this can communicate a lofty air of spiritual superiority. In effect it may be interpreted by an inactive member as, "**You poor broken deprived individual, you need a lot of help and I am in a position to offer it to you because I have the inside track with God.**" The healthiest response on the inactive member's part might be to look the active member square in the eye and reply, "**And I'll pray for you, too!**"

(2) Such words can seem to dismiss whatever the real needs of the inactive member are. *I'll pray for you* sounds glib in many contexts. It sounds like the person who says these words is looking for a quick and easy way to dispatch the other individual's problems, without taking the time to listen, to empathize, to get involved. Such a perception of you is deadly to any relationship you would like develop.

(3) These words can be uncaring and manipulative, an attempt to bend the other to your will for him. Suppose an **inactive** makes some critical statements about the congregation. To respond, "I'll pray for you" might very well be taken to mean, "**I'll pray that you realize God wants you to quit complaining & get back to church.**" That's akin to the kind of prayer a CHURCH WELCOMER made for a new member who happened to be an excellent tenor, but wanted to serve as an usher. The choir needed tenors, so the welcomer closed his visit with this prayer: "**Lord, please open Jim's heart and lead him to do his part where the congregation needs him most. Enable Jim's ministry, wherever he serves, to be like music in your ears!**"

A prayer like that may make newly **active Jim** become **inactive Jim!**

But, please **DO** pray for the inactive member. You don't have to announce it at all, in fact, to do so would put you in league with the Pharisee who prayed publicly so all could see what a righteous fellow he was (Lk 18:10-12). But praying privately in your inner room as Jesus suggests (Mt.6:6), will be *good for both of you*.

It will be good for **YOU** because it reminds you that God is really the one Who is at work in the inactive member's life. It is good for **HIM** because Scripture tells us it is (1 Tim.2:1,3-4).

There is a time when offering a prayer with or for the inactive is very appropriate. When they are dealing with a specific struggle, and the two of you have been talking about it. Suppose there has been a death in the family or a major illness. Then to say, "I'll pray for you," shows your concern for the other, and will not be taken as an attempt to browbeat or cajole. The difference is that you took the time to listen first, so that you really understood what the other was struggling with, and demonstrated your understanding during this sharing.

## E. WHAT DO YOU DO IN THE MIDDLE OF A VISIT?

**Question:** How do you keep a visit from being just a social call?  
How do you move to in-depth discussion?

**1. Keep your MOUTH CLOSED and your EARS OPEN.** Inactive members, or anyone else will talk about all kinds of in-depth issues when they are ready. You have to respect their willingness and their sense of timing.

**2. Keep the focus on feelings.** Ask open-ended questions, which are questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no". **How** and **what** are markers that indicate these kinds of questions.

**3. Keep from in-depth issues of your choosing.** Remember also that if you try to yank the inactive along to in-depth issues of your choosing, you risk never finding out what the issues are that really concern them. Many times you think you know what's bugging them, in all probability you don't. The only way to find out is by **waiting** and **listening**. The inactive, in many instances, is just waiting for someone to come along who seems willing to listen. You can be that person.

**Question:** Should I ever ask an inactive member point-blank what his or her feelings are about the church?

**1.** Within the context of a relationship, yes, you can ask a question like that.

**2.** The relationship will take more than one visit to develop, so you would not ask the question on the first visit.

**3.** The chances are that the inactive will bring up the subject if you just wait.

**Question:** If you suspect the inactive person is not telling the truth, how can you encourage more honesty?

**1.** Defensiveness on part in inactive not the equivalent of dishonesty. You can expect defensiveness, and honor it by taking seriously whatever the inactive member says.

**2.** Respect the inactive right to let you in on what they are thinking and feeling after some testing to see if you are trustworthy. You work on trust in the relationship by being trustworthy yourself. Listen to the inactive's feelings. Try not to get defensive. Keep your promises. If you say you're going to call, do it. In short, make yourself worthy of their honesty and then hope for the best.

**Question:** Suppose I believe an inactive member is just telling me what they think I want to hear--what do I do then?

Clarify what you want the individual to do. You could say, **"I have an idea you're just telling me what you think I want to hear. But I am here to be honest with you, and I hope you will be honest with me."**

Tell the individual you want to know what is genuinely of concern to them. If you say, **"I really do not have any preconceived ideas of what is best for you, and I'm not looking for some painted-over, sugary niceness, I just want to hear the truth."** Then most people will tell you the truth.

How can you be convincing in saying this? Be convinced yourself of its truth. You can be a partner in the inactive's insincerity or genuineness.

If you see your role as simply being there to issue an invitation to come back to church, for example, then the inactive will pick up on that and may try to get rid of you in a hurry by saying, **"I'll be in church on Sabbath."**

If you flinch, glare, breathe heavily, or make a fist when the inactive gives an honest appraisal of some shortcomings of the church, the person will start to back away from further honesty.

If you start trying to explain away some hurt the inactive has experienced by offering a rationale for why it happened, the person is likely to back away. Mostly you want to listen and empathize, which means being actively present with the other whole they state concerns and explains feelings.

## F. HOW DO YOU FACE ANTAGONISTS?

What do you mean by an "antagonist?" Kenneth C. Haugk defines antagonists in the following terms:

**"Antagonists are individuals who, on the basis of non-substantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity."**

- Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict, Augsburg, 1988

How do you treat an antagonist who has become "inactive"?

A difficult question because it is fraught with ethical overtones. Every congregation needs to address this issue for itself. Here are some QUESTIONS that will serve as guidelines:

- \* **How long has the individual been behaving like this?**
- \* **Does the person's behavior tend to build up or tear down?**
- \* **How has that individual's behavior affected the overall ministry of the congregation, looking at effects to members and effects on outreach?**
- \* **How has the environment or atmosphere changed since the person left?**
- \* **If the person returns, are you willing to have the same conditions prevail?**

If the individual is a true antagonist perhaps the most caring, loving act--for everyone--is to let them go! Assuming that when the conflict first was evidenced the prescription of **Matthew 18:15-17** was followed. Make one visit as part of an inactive member ministry. But if the individual is still spewing venom and it is likely that the Body of Christ will be injured, let go. Jesus let JUDAS go.

Antagonists are not going to be very receptive to ministry. Left unaddressed, antagonists can cause others, tired of the bickering, to leave, or join another church. The presence of antagonists can cause anxiety and a host of other emotions--sadness, dejection, and frustration. Who wants to be part of an environment like that? Healthy people don't.

There are certain levels and manifestations of antagonism:

## 1. Defensiveness

Don't make sudden moves. Maybe you think I'm joking, but I'm not. The relationship between you and an inactive member is loaded with potential for defensiveness. Be as gentle and as gingerly as you would with a SQUIRREL in the park that you were retrying to entice to take a nut from your fingers.

### What causes inactive people to have defensive reactions?

When they perceive the active member is:

- \* **evaluating them**
- \* **attempting to control them**
- \* **operating from more than one motivation, or from ambiguous motivation;**
- \* **being dishonest by pretending to be neutral;**
- \* **giving an impression of being superior; and**
- \* **acting certain of the rightness of his or her cause.**

(See Jack R. Gibb, "Defensive Communication," in *Messages: A Reader in Human Communication*, ed. Jean M. Civikly. New York: Random House, 1974)

Equipped with a **process-oriented** approach to inactive members rather than a **results-oriented** approach, you will be sheltered from many mistakes because the latter increases defensiveness.

Nevertheless you are bound to run into it. Be prepared ahead of time. Watch out for your own tendencies to get defensive in the face of defensiveness. Common reaction. Be conscious of the messages you are communicating, both verbally and nonverbally.

## 2. Criticism.

Always a prickly situation requiring careful handling, especially if the criticism is constructive. So what do you do?

Oftentimes all the person who is criticizing needs is a sense that his criticism is being heard. You do not have to defend or rush to agree with the person. Your primary role is as a listener. Simply reflect what you hear to make sure you have it right and to verify for the inactive member that you understand. Then you might say,

**"I understand what you are saying, and I appreciate your comments. I will look into this matter and see what can be done to improve the situation or avoid this in the future. I'll get back to you."**

Be sure you follow through. Do take the criticism back, do make sure the matter is discussed, and do get back to the inactive member. If you appear to dismiss the criticism, the inactive will feel you are trivializing whatever is shared. Don't hasten to suggest that the inactive should "forgive and forget"--making it seem as though the problem was the inactive.

In some ways, welcome criticisms. The fact they are shared proves

yourself worthy of trust. This feedback can be a positive challenge for a congregation for improvement.

As a preventive strategy, criticism can be avoided if open communications is established ahead of time. If changes are taking place, good communications prepares the way for those changes; bad communication or none at all makes the changes disruptive.

### 3. "I'll be back when they have a new pastor!"

The classic response is a lecture to the individual about the need for commitment to Jesus and to the congregation as the earthly community of believers. Lectures are rarely effective.

### 4. "The pastor is not a good preacher."

Point out that while preaching is important he may have other abilities that much more than compensate for his lack-luster sermons. Now, assuming that you have verified this perception with others, particularly those who are not chronic complainers ... have one or two individuals who are close to the pastor sit down with him and lovingly communicate the problem. This is not a prescription for browbeating, bullying, or witch-hunting. You are not licensing the "strongest" members of the congregation to barge in to "straighten the pastor out."

### 5. "We are not being fed spiritually!"

The first thing is to get them to talk further. What do they mean when they say they are not fed spiritually? Listen for any other specifics as you can. As you listen to what they are not receiving, you will also be picking up valuable information about what they want to receive, what they need in order to be nurtured spiritually.

You need extensive knowledge of what ways your church has available to feed people spiritually. Sermons and worship are not the only sources of nurture. Talk about possibilities within your congregation. Be positive. Do not try to convince them that they, without realizing it, actually are being nurtured. Do not try to persuade them that the burden is theirs to take advantage of the plenty available in your congregation.

The person who feels spiritually hungry may in fact need an opportunity to discover their spiritual gifts. "Not being fed" may be an inaccurate diagnosis. That hunger may be instead an unrecognized need for more meaningful service, a need to experience what the priesthood of believers is all about. Obviously you're not going to confront and say, "You are inactive because you have not yet found service that is meaningful to you." But your listening may enable the inactive to discover it for himself.

### 6. Doctrinal disagreement.

Fordyce Detamore affirms, " ... few become backsliders because they were poorly indoctrinated. This ... is the charge I most often hear at institutes ... But this is not the case. Only a small fraction give up because of doctrinal

**misunderstandings or disagreements."** *Seeking His Lost Sheep*, p.5

It is rather what we have said or done to them. Detamore tells the story of late night knock at his door. (A stranger.) "You are a Seventh-day Adventist minister, I understand. Well, I came to see if you could conduct my brother's funeral."

"Saturday night my brother had been drinking, and he with seven others in the car was speeding down Page Boulevard when he collided with another car and was killed instantly; in fact, his heart was cut right in two.

"Years ago he and I attended the \_\_\_\_\_ Church. One Sabbath morning when my brother and I were seated up in the balcony, a deacon got after him for being noisy, saying, 'Listen, if you can't keep quiet, get out, and don't come back.'

"So he got up and went out, and he has never been back in a church these thirty years or more."

As I conducted that funeral, the thought kept haunting me, "His heart was cut in two." But when? Back there 30 years before in the balcony of our church a tactless deacon had cut a boy's heart in two.

**7. Hurt Feelings**

(1) Go to the individual, make personal contact, and listen. Get the person to talk about the hurt. After a time you may be able to assess how realistic the hurt feelings are. Many times the feelings will be a quite reasonable response to what happened; sometimes, though, the individual might have perceived hurt when none was intended.

(2) If it is the PERCEPTION of the individual, often just talking about the incident or issue with someone who obviously cares, is enough. Don't follow the tactic that caregiving in conflict situations means blame has to be assigned, the one who is at fault has to be identified. Frequently that's unnecessary. The fact of talking allows the individual to clear the feelings from the system and move on.

(3) Avoid minimizing the hurt. Don't tell the other to forgive and forget, or to get over the feeling, or that they shouldn't feel that way. That incites further resentment and anger. Instead of opening the door further to truth, you have in effect asked the inactive to lie to you the next time.

(4) Bring the parties together for a reconciliation. You may be able to bring together the inactive and the other individual or group that was the source of the hurt. Better yet, with due caution, have the individual who caused the hurt make contact with the inactive to apologize, or at least listen.

Caution is in order because there is always the possibility of reopening wounds and renewing old disagreements rather than participating in a reconciliation.

**8. Lost Election.**

Patiently and persistently keep in contact with the individual. Give them time to work through their pain, and be available to help. It not a question of "no amount of caring works", rather, that *this amount* of caring hasn't worked. Active and inactive members perceive caring differently. What has often gone on in the

name of "caring ministry" has been:

**trying to talk inactive into coming back to church,  
telling them they shouldn't feel hurt,  
perhaps sprinkling a platitude or two, and  
icing it all with intimations about the inadequacy of the inactive's  
faith.**

Plainly this is not caring ministry.

Another key point: causes of *inactivity come in clusters* ... one precipitating event, but that could be the last of a whole chain of circumstances creating stress in another's life. This explains why the inactive' strongly expressed feelings so often seem out of proportion to the reason for inactivity first advanced. Yes, talk about the precipitating event, but ask plenty of open-ended questions and do much more listening before you can be content that you understand all the causes.

**9. Anger and Resentment.**

Expressions of anger are a positive sign. Deep feelings means deep care.

**"Alas why gnaw you so your nether lip?  
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame;  
These are portents; but yet I hope, I hope,  
They do not point on me." - Othello**

(1) I know no other way but to get the feelings out. The more they can vent feelings, the better. You can be a kind of sponge that soaks up the feelings that spill over.

(2) Avoid temptation to argue. You might think you are called upon to issue stern, moralistic warnings about forgiveness and "loving your brother." If your goal was to shut the inactive up, this might work, but that's not your goal. Preachments show you as insensitive and lacking understanding--you have not tried on the shoes of the inactive. Your greatest gift is the capacity your listening and acceptance of their feelings.

(3) Allow them to have their own opinion. Say, "I respect your right to believe this way, but I happen to think differently." Let the inactive be himself. That's a real gift to give someone. By listening patiently, you stand a good chance of participating in one of those beautiful moments with which God blesses us, when a person lets down barriers and lets you in to his innermost self.

When the anger is out, what do you say? Thank them. Say something like, **"To show your anger like that is risky. Thank you for trusting me enough to share it, and thank you for the care you must still have for the church, to be that outspoken."** A formerly inactive member recalls the way she received a similar affirmation:

**"The first time I ever shared *the whole story* of why I became inactive was some 5 years after I returned. After my sharing, the person I was talking to said, "Thank you for sharing that. You must be a very strong person to have been able to go through all of that." Wow,**



**what affirmation and acceptance! That comment had curative power."**

### 10. Rude and hostile.

If they lash out at you. Wait it out. Respond with love and internally with forgiveness. Very often when individuals have a chance to express their feelings in an accepting environment, feelings of hostility dissipate. It is easier to absorb hostility when your own motivations are very clear in your mind. You may feel that anger directed at you is unfair, but if you are clear about your desire to help bring God's healing, you will see the hostility of the other as a necessary step to move forward from anger. Then you won't take it personally.

The one exception to this recommendation for absorbing anger is if the other person is persistently and deliberately antagonistic. Such a person is usually mentally disturbed, and no amount of love, compassion, or gently absorption helps. Rather, the opposite--such behavior feeds their hostility. It is extremely unfortunate, but with such individuals only firmness, strength, and sometimes an early goodbye are effective.

### G. ENDING VISIT: TO INVITE OR NOT TO INVITE

Inactive members aren't proportions and statistics, but people with names. They are among the nones to whom JESUS was referring in His parable of lost sheep: Matthew 18:13-14.

**Question: Do you ever give up on an inactive?**

When no spark is struck and no interest evident--back off. Even in this case, I might try again in 6 mths. Your absence may result in a gap in the person's life that they would welcome having filled again naturally, so put the person on your prayer list.

**Question: Do inactives decide by themselves to return?**

One hundred percent of the time. You delude yourself if you think you can make as decision for them. If they return from a misplaced desire to please you they will not be there long. The inactive must own his decision. The best you can do is create a loving-caring environment within which individuals are able to make decisions that are healthy and positive.

**Question: How do you go about inviting an inactive member back?**

The question is not HOW, but WHEN and WHETHER. In the context of a relationship, the "how" will take care of itself--if it's appropriate at all.

And there's the rub. In most instances, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to actually issue an invitation to return to church because the inactive will do it for you--if you wait patiently, listen carefully, and determine correctly what the person's needs are.

How can you be so certain that this is the case? Because your very

presence, with the inactive knowing full well that you are there out of concern and as a representative of the church, is all the invitation they need.

You must wait because the inactive's own mention of a desire to come back to church is the indicator that shows the individual is ready to consider it. Issuing an invitation too late will not do much harm, if any. Issuing one too early may spoil the relationship you have developed.

**Question: How do you overcome the inertia of inactivity?**

**Don't try to climb a wall  
that is leaning toward you;  
Don't try to kiss someone  
who is leaning away from you.**

If the person is leaning toward--based on what they say, invite. You don't have to keep climbing. Conversely ... just continue caring.

Here's an instance where an invitation was timed correctly:

**"The new pastor of our church had called on me, saying, "I heard you used to be very active at FIRST CHURCH, and I just thought I'd like to meet you." As we talked, I found myself sharing the skeleton of the story about why I was inactive. At the end, I said: "I'd like to come back, but, you know, this has just become a bad habit and I don't know how to get out of it."**

**He answered with a very simple statement that has stuck with me: "If you want to come back, you have to start someplace. I'd like you to come back this Sabbath."**

**Later, much later, I realized that the reason my pastor's invitation to return to church was so powerful."**

**Counsel:** Care for and relate to the person, and wait until they say something first. With these qualifiers you can make the decision less threatening.

(1) When time is right suggest the person accompany you to a low-profile event rather than starting off with the worship service. For example, ask, **"Will you come with me to hear this choral group next Sabbath afternoon?"** or **"Would it be easier for you to 'get your feet wet' by going to the Friday evening service we've started offering during the summer months."**

(2) You could conceivably offer to do something besides church with the individual. This would deepen your relationship and make it natural for you to invite the person at a later time to accompany you to church.

### H. INCORPORATION: WELCOMING THEM HOME

Many inactives would like to come back to church but are fearful and embarrassed. What are some of their fears? Inactive members wonder:

- \* **What will everyone think?**
- \* **Will I be accepted?**
- \* **Will people still consider me a Christian?**
- \* **Will people recognize me?**
- \* **Will people make jokes at my expense?**
- \* **Was I missed?**
- \* **Will people look down on me now?**
- \* **Will anyone talk to me?**
- \* **Will people make too much fuss over me?**

Probably their worst fantasy would be someone standing during the worship service to introduce them to the entire congregation: "**Here's good old so-and-so, who hasn't been here for a while, but has seen the light at last.**"

**Question:**      **How can we actively welcome members back without embarrassing them?**

Be friendly without being overly friendly. Don't blow the individual's return all out of proportion--don't make a big deal out of it. Envision yourself walking in the other person's shoes, and relate to them in the same way you would like to be related to. Here are some appropriate suggestions:

- \* **It's good to see you.**
- \* **How have you been?**
- \* **How's your family?**
- \* **I'm happy to see you.**

Be careful about saying "**I sure missed you.**" What that statement says between the lines is, "You shouldn't have been gone." Other statements to avoid are:

- \* **Where have you been?**
- \* **Oh, you're back.**
- \* **Its about time you got your act together.**
- \* **Since you're back, let me sign you up for ...**
- \* **Good grief, the roof's going to fall in!**
- \* **It must be Christmas if you're here.**
- \* **Are you new here?** (Followed by guffaws)

If you really are uncertain whether an individual is new, say instead, "**My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I don't believe we've met.**" That is an "I" message, not a "you" message. Notice how many of the objectionable statements are "you" messages.

## CONCLUSION

To sum it all up, the following minimum reclamation measures should be implemented.:

**1. A call by the pastor. This very act shows concern and may be a major step in helping inactive members to develop positive attitudes toward the church.**

**2. Calls from members of the parish. This has the added value of telling the inactive that fellow members who are doing this on a volunteer basis also care about them.**

**3. Learn to listen. Don't approach these people with the attitude that their reasons for nonattendance are invalid.**

**4. Attempt reconciliation. This may take many forms, but usually involves bringing together people or ideas that may be in conflict and then searching for ways to resolve the differences.**

**5. Find ways of helping inactives to serve. It may be appropriate to suggest ways in which these folks can make unique contributions to the life of the church. Perhaps they have skills that would be valuable. Sometimes people drop out of churches because they feel they are only spectators and are never given the chance to really become involved.**

**6. Don't neglect the power of prayer. This may mean public liturgical prayers for inactive, or your own private prayer prior to visiting them, or even a prayer during the visit.**

If we think of our churches as a body through which God shares His love with humans, then the mission of the church is to follow Christ's example and to reach out to others in love. If people have stopped coming and feel their needs are not being met, we all have to seek ways of being more effective channels of God's love.

**The heart in wonder like a lonely Wren will sing a while  
and then be still as long.**

**He waits an answer ere he sings again  
who sings for love and not alone for song.**

**The bird shy pipe will falter in the end,  
the heart's voice sicken if it be not heard.**

**They seek the absence of beloved friend.**

**Song is for lovers whether heart or bird.**

**So if you hear me, tell me that you hear,  
lest I grow weary and forget to sing.**

**As in this sweet green season of the year,  
the bird that hears no answer lifts his wing  
and faraway dejected and remote  
tries other woodlands with his lonely note.**

- Robert Nathan

### APPROPRIATE SCRIPTURES (NIV) FOR RECLAIMERS/GREETERS

You are the presence of Christ:

**"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives Me receives the one who sent Me."** Mt. 10:40.

**"If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, he will certainly not lose his reward."** Mt.10:42

You relate to them not as superior to inferior, not even as equal to equal, but as servant:

**"The greatest among you will be your servant. For whosoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."** Mt. 23:11-12.

When you serve, you are serving Christ in the person to whom you are reaching out:

**"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."** Mt.25:40

Empathy, compassion and expectant:

**"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."** 1 Cor. 15:58.

Join in sharing the load of hurt:

**"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ."** Gal.6:2

Perseverance:

**"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..."** Gal.6:9-10

Humility:

**"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."** Phil.2:3-4

Discover their needs:

**"Be tactful with those who are not Christians and be sure you make the best use of your time with them. Talk to them agreeably and with a flavor of wit, and try to fit your answers to the needs of each one."** Col. 4:5-6 (Jerusalem Bible).

The nature of relationships with inactives:

**"We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."** 1 Thess.2:8

**"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in**

**fact you are doing."** 1 Thess.5:11

### Commission:

Outline a strategy for reclamation. Review again the causes your former members gave for disaffiliation in the previous commission. Does your strategy address these causes?

## Chapter Four PREVENTION: HOW DO WE PREVENT THEIR LEAVING?

A denominational magazine that will remain anonymous features the drawing of a congregation at worship. Ten arrows point to people and activities within. At the end of each arrow is a bit of advice to congregations. If they take it, they can help assure that decline and loss of vitality are ahead. Note the captions:

- \* **Don't post worship times on outdoor signs, so visitors have to work hard to find out when to come. Also, describe the church as a "family" church to discourage singles from worshipping.**
- \* **Never help newcomers lost in the order of worship. It's good for them to flounder.**
- \* **Make sure that only men serve as worship leaders so that women, young people, youth and children feel left out.**
- \* **Sermons should: use words that people who didn't grow up in the church can't understand. Use scholarly language that can't be understood by any except seminary graduates. Use exclusive language, such as "mankind," so certain people feel left out.**
- \* **Welcome only people of your own race or those at or above your income level. This will keep your congregation "homogeneous." Be especially friendly to lawyers and doctors.**
- \* **Crowd in to back pews so visitors have to be ushered up front and be stared at.**
- \* **Only official greeters should welcome visitors, because that's their job.**
- \* **Make building access difficult, to discourage the disabled from attending.**
- \* **Stare and glare to make newcomers feel uneasy and unwelcome.**
- \* **Never involve children and youth in the worship or church life, a the church is only for adults.**
- \* **Members should gather in tight groups, and ignore visitors.**

You get the idea. Most congregations have this advice down cold. Very cold.

A congregation that is working with deliberate intent to prevent inactivity is one that is saving itself and its people a lot of grief. This same congregation is doing more, though, it is also creating for itself an environment in which ministry and mission can flourish. Prevention is not a series of negative, forestalling moves, but a positive building up of the church to be GOD'S HOME--a place within which the world marvels, "**See how they love one another.**"

### What are the best ways to prevent inactivity?

There are as many ways to prevent inactivity as there are ways to create wholesome, homelike, healthy environments. Here are five of the most powerful:

#### 1. Emphasize Quality Worship.

What is quality worship? An experience that leaves the worshipers feeling closer to God and challenges them to ministry, or "worship that passes the goose-bump test." One author says:

**"There should be an atmosphere of community, a sense of unity of purpose in worshipping God where the people come with the expectation that they will be in the presence of God and leave with certainty that God has delighted in their presence."**

In Christian worship the message of the Gospel in all its "for-you-ness" should come through, and the service should be conducted "in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor.14:40).

Edward T. Horn describes the human centered approach:

**"There is .. a tendency abroad in certain quarters to provide Christian worship with an 'atmosphere' which is almost theatrical in its techniques. Worship is 'built' around a theme ... Sentimental worship, ... spotlights, ... sentimental poetry ... all are carefully planned to make the worshiper feel as though he were drifting in a gondola along the lagoons of the river of the City of God! ..." - Altar and Pew, pp.18.**

Avoid the two extremes: an anthropocentric emphasis leads to a neglect of God's presence; conversely, an unbalanced concern with God and His presence leads to neglecting human need. Four guiding principles will help us to avoid these antithetical preoccupations:

(1) **Worship is God-centered.** The basis of Christian worship is not utilitarian but theological. Worship begins not from our end but God's. We come to God because God in Jesus has come to us; we love Him because He first loved us; we ascribe to Him supreme worth because He has showed Himself to be worthy of our complete homage, gratitude, and trust. Worship is essentially a response, man's response to God's Word of grace, to what He has done for us.

(2) **Worship springs from the activity of the Holy Spirit.** A recital of God's saving acts through liturgical forms will evoke a response by the inward testimony of the Spirit".

(3) **Worship is a corporate activity; it is not the act of isolated individuals, but of the whole church.** It is the corporate approach to God of the

people of God. It is a family activity. "When ye pray", Jesus said, "say *Our Father*.."

**(4) Worship is the preparation of the church for its work and witness in the world.**

A German Mystic suggests that, "What we become in the presence of God, that we can be all day long." -- instruments of God's saving activity in the world. So, effective witness depends upon sustained worship.

Archdeacon Harrison says:

**"What matters is not whether worship makes us feel good or happy; what matters is whether it makes us Christlike, whether men take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus."**

Bishop William Temple says:

**"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God,  
To feed the mind with the truth of God,  
To purge the imagination with the beauty of God,  
To open the heart to the love of God,  
To devote the will to the purpose of God."**

## 2. Equip people for ministry.

This equipping is two dimensional: internal & external.

(1) INTERNAL: Education and training of as many as possible in the congregation for real ministry within the Christian community. This is another way to prevent inactivity. When the priesthood of all believers is made a reality in people's lives, it is relatively much more difficult for them to entertain the notion of becoming inactive. Individuals whose discipleship has been enabled gain a reason for existence that only the church provides. One obvious specific for this equipping is retaining in caring for inactive members. Ellen White suggests that "**spiritual feebleness**" -- the precursor of inactivity--will result if we don't:

**"So long as church members make no effort to give to others the help given them, great *spiritual feebleness* must result." - 7T 18**

**"The members of the church, trained to rely on preaching, do little for Christ ... They put their hope in the preacher and depend upon his efforts to keep alive their weak faith ... Church members that are thus looked after and labored for become *religious weaklings*." --6T 434,435**

**"The churches are withering up because they have failed to use their talents in diffusing the light to others ... we are years behind ... not one hundredth part has been done or is being done by the members of the church, that God requires of them ... There are scores who have real ability, who are *rusting from inaction* ... instead of developing, the church is left to be a weak, dependent, inefficient body ..." - MS 151, 1897**

Conversely, Ellen White suggests activity is a guard against backsliding:

**"Every ray of light shed upon others will be reflected upon our own**

**hearts. Every kind and sympathizing word spoken to the sorrowful, every act to relieve the oppressed, and every gift to supply the necessities of our fellow beings ... will result in blessings to the giver ... The pleasure of doing good to others imparts a glow to the feelings which flashes through the nerves, quickens the circulation of the blood, and induces mental and physical health." 4T 56**

**"Doing good is an excellent remedy for disease. ...Their soul shall be satisfied in drought, and they shall be like a watered garden, whose waters fail not." 2T 29**

Training ought to be offered congregation-wide, but it also ought to be made available in depth for selected groups for caring in particular ways to particular segments of the congregation.

The parable of the GOOD SAMARITAN shows 4 types of caring:

- a. ANTIPATHY: the Robber--active hate
- b. APATHY: the Priest--indifference
- c. SYMPATHY: the Levite--uninvolved, look but not touch
- d. EMPATHY: the Samaritan--two hearts tugging at the same load

Congregants involved in ministry should not work alone. Individuals with similar gifts and ministry interests should be matched so that they can "tug" at the same load.

(2) EXTERNAL: Preparing the congregation for Evangelism. Carl Wilson in *With Christ in the School of Disciple Building* contrasts two strategies of fulfilling the Great Commission:

**"Suppose Timothy, exercising considerable evangelistic ability, won to Christ an average of 3 people per day--slightly more than 1,000 in a year. At the end of 15 years of this fruitful activity he could have been pastoring an enormous congregation of more than 15,000 people, all of whom would be looking to him to teach and lead them.**

**"On the other hand, suppose he won only 12 men to Christ and then disciplined them for a period of 3 years. At the end of three years, each of them would be capable of discipling 12 new converts. Following this plan for 15 years would give Timothy 371,291 well trained disciples--a veritable army, ready to entrust the Scriptural truths to another generation of more than 350,000,000,000." (p.52)**

Ellen White endorsed non-clericalism when she wrote:

**"Every soul should take an active part in advancing the cause of God. Whatever our calling, as Christians we have a work to do in making Christ known to the world. We are to be missionaries, having for our chief aim the winning of souls to Christ." *Messages to Young People*, p. 226**

## 3. Assess Needs of the Congregation.

Be interested in the needs of every member, and take steps to find out what

those needs are. Ask-by means of surveys, visits, informal conversations--each person what their needs are. Then tailor programming and services in your congregation to those discovered needs.

What is a **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**? A process of **identifying** and **analyzing** the gap between an **existing condition** and a **desired condition**. In the church there are various levels of needs:

Local and Community,  
Organizational,  
Individual and Personal.

Be sure, however, to distinguish between "needs" (a deficiency) and "wants" (conscious desire). Wants and interests vary widely from time to time with the same individual.

### Why should we conduct a Needs Assessment?

1. To find out *what* the present level of performance is. By establishing a "bench level" of present behavior (performance), we can measure change over time.
2. To determine *why* present performance is what it is. Why are our members performing/behaving as they are? What reinforcers are maintaining their behavior? What contingencies and constraints are preventing better performance, both positively and negatively? What can be done to increase the positive and reduce the negative?
3. *To find out who the members are.* What entering behavior do they bring to their membership? What strengths can we build on? What deficiencies do they possess? How universal are these?
4. *To assess the organizational climate* the church within which the member fellowships. Will it support and nourish the behavior we want in our congregation or will it discourage and cause it to die? What can we do to improve climate? How can we prepare the members to maintain a supportive climate?
5. *To examine the systems and procedures* employed with a view toward identifying ways of working smarter instead of harder. Can steps, tasks, forms, etc., possibly be eliminated, resequenced, combined, simplified to produce better behavior?
6. *To establish behavioral objectives* . . . measurable, observable, specific performance goals that each member must achieve and/or whatever other changes (e.g. organizational, motivational) you identify as essential to producing and maintaining the desired behaviors.
7. *To establish policy and make decisions* regarding the length, scope, format, location, cost, frequency, etc. of training members for new positions. Examples of these decisions: initial vs. continuation (i.e., how much or how little to teach initially vs. subsequently); formal vs. on-job-training (i.e., "vestibule" and classroom vs. training by supervisor on the job); make vs. buy; head vs. book (must

know "code" vs. can look up or ask someone); centralized vs. decentralized training; individual vs. group (self-instruction vs. group-based), etc.

8. *To involve line managers* and others in your organization whose support and whose inputs are important to the success of your training efforts, (e.g., the pastor (s). By getting them ego-involved at the start and forming a "partnership" with them you can rely on them to promote and self train (or make changes in procedures, systems, reinforcement schedules, etc.).

### Sample Questions for Needs Assessments

1. What is the biggest problem/issue you face day to day that prevents your from performing the way you know you can perform?
2. What is preventing you from \_\_\_\_\_?
3. What is the problem/issue?
4. What problems do you foresee with the implementation of this new system/process?  
Cite an example.
6. Please elaborate on your answer.
7. Where can more evidence be found?
8. Why is it a problem/issue?
9. What problems/issues do you foresee occurring?
10. What are the symptoms/causes?
11. Who is affected?
12. How are you impacted by this problem?
13. Where do you need help?
14. How do you recommend we solve it?
15. Do you feel education/training will solve the problem?
16. What has been done before to solve this problem/issue? Why was it not effective?

### Systematic Needs Assessment Process

1. Establish purpose of assessment. Find out *why* you are doing it.
2. Devise an overall strategy. Action plan. Know what your mission statement is. Where should we go according to senior expectations.
3. Select assessment technique. (choose more than two techniques).
4. Collect all data.
5. Analyze and interpret data.
6. Present your findings. To whom? Trainers. Complete the loop.
7. Reach agreement. Why? Achieve outcomes.
8. Recommend action or inaction.

### Why Needs Assessments often Lead Us Astray?

- based on assumptions rather than facts
- data gathered from wrong sources
- too few or biased data sources
- data was not timely
- wrong interpretation of data
- asked wrong questions
- data not validated

### Basic Needs Assessment Methods

1. observation
2. consultation/interviews
3. questionnaires/surveys (See **Kirk Questionnaire**)
4. task forces/committees
5. work samples
6. nominal group process

### Nominal Group Process

The nominal group process has gained recognition as a method for generating ideas, identifying problems and their potential solutions and establishing priorities. It is a special technique useful in situations where individual judgments must be tapped and combined to arrive at decisions which cannot be made by one person. It is particularly useful when the consensus of several individuals or groups must be determined.

The nominal group process is a structured process which seems to be ideally suited to curriculum determination through group decision making.

The process may be summarized as follows:

1. **Each participant (content-expert) independently generates a list of ideas in response to a stimulus question.**
2. **Round-robin feedback from group members is recorded in a concise phrase on a flip chart. This listing continues until all members indicate they have no more ideas.**
3. **Each recorded idea is discussed for clarification. This discussion is structured so that each idea is examined prior to independent voting.**
4. **Each participant then votes on the list of ideas. The group decision is mathematically derived through rating or order of preference.**

The nominal group technique is often employed with task forces and committees. Because it is a specialized process, requiring adherence to a specific set of rules, it can serve as a very structured needs assessment method.

The originators of this technique, Andre Delbert and Andrew Van de Ven have provided empirical evidence that nominal groups can generate twice as many ideas as conventional groups. Much research has been done to compare the relative effectiveness of nominal groups versus interacting or conventional groups. In these comparisons three important measures have generally been used and these have a bearing on the use of nominal groups by education directors. They are:

1. **the average number of unique ideas**
2. **the total number of unique ideas, and**
3. **the quality of the ideas produced.**

For all three measures, nominal groups have proven to be superior to interacting groups in generating information relevant to a problem. This is particularly important for education directors planning to use a group as the source of information on member needs. The nominal group process might be the strategy of choice if your objective is to promote and cultivate creative thinking where individual differences of opinion are protected. Both staff and volunteer leaders will be more likely to accept the outcome and recommendation of a nominal group than a conventional group or committee. The process elicits participation from all group members, both weak and strong and develops group ownership of commonly acceptable ideas.

At the organizational level, nominal group participants focus on what the educational professional development needs are and how they can be met by association programs. The use of a nominal group approach at an early phase of program planning can force clarification of short-term and long-term objectives. It is an excellent means for involving top association leaders both volunteers and staff, together in program planning.

The goals of the needs assessment will determine whether nominal group technique is an appropriate strategy in any given situation. Nominal group must be considered in terms of its effectiveness and efficiency relative to other assessment mechanisms. Five primary advantages of the nominal group process are:

1. **Committee member involvement. All group members share equally in generating the group ideas and decisions. Members are generally very committed to the plan when it is completed.**
2. **Leadership commitment. As with the general membership, the association's leadership become involved and can dedicate their efforts to seeing a plan become reality.**
3. **Time. The nominal group process is time efficient. Although the time participants spend is about the same with an interview or a committee meeting the time spent collecting information from surveys or in testing questionnaires is saved.**
4. **Relevance and quantifiability. The reliability of the information gained through the nominal group process is high because of the number of people participating. Care must be taken, however, to select appropriate and generally diverse participants. Diverse ideas have a better chance of being included for group consideration.**
5. **Cost. Costs are relatively low in comparison to a major survey or telephone campaign. They are close to that of scheduling a committee or task force meeting.**

As with any method, nominal groups techniques have their shortcomings. First, the group facilitator must know the rules and demonstrate good interpersonal and group skills. If no staff or committee member has such skills, or if the situation makes staff or leadership involvement inappropriate, an outside facilitator consultant should be retained.

Second, if the nominal questions are poorly formulated, the group can waste time clarifying the questions. If questions are not pre-tested, useless information may result.

Third, participants must receive timely feedback. If they feel their ideas have not been utilized, future use of the nominal group technique will be hindered.

Finally, the nominal group technique is to the method of choice for simple problems which could be resolved with a less structured interacting group.

This involves a ...

### SEVEN-STEP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

1. **Identify the Problem or Issue**
2. **Analyze the Audience**
3. **Develop a Set of Objectives (outcomes)**
4. **Select the Content and Methods**
5. **Deliver the Program**
6. **Evaluate the Program**
7. **Revise the Program**

Asking once is not enough. There are always new people within a congregation who need to be listened to. There are changes in people's lives and changes in the circumstances of the church that raise new needs.

#### 4. Provide Open Channels of Communication.

People need a convenient and healthy way to share feelings--this is one aspect of open communication. If frustrations and hurts can be aired within the context of a listening, caring congregation, for example, there is much less reason for people to remove themselves from that context by becoming inactive.

#### 5. Foster Meaningful Relationships.

There ought to be social opportunities--times for fun-in plenty. There also ought to be SMALL GROUPS, both task-oriented and RELATIONSHIP ORIENTED. Most have the former, few of the latter. Remember that bonding and a sense of continued importance are both important parts of why members stay active. If members have significant relationships within the church, they are far less likely to become inactive.

#### 6. Designed Assimilation.

Ensuring that returnees feel welcomed and valued is essential to their retention. In smaller churches fostering inclusion takes place informally; in medium sized and larger churches the program has to be carefully designed and monitored so that new people don't fall through the cracks.

#### How do we do a good job of providing an inviting and welcoming atmosphere for people who visit our buildings during the week?

- \* Leave outer doors open all day, every day, as a nonverbal invitation to enter.
- \* Provide meeting space for community groups.
- \* Offer a variety of programs that are open to the public.
- \* Make available informative printed materials about worship services and church programs.

Caution: Although these efforts prove effective in attracting people to Sabbath morning worship, follow-up studies indicate that many newcomers will not continue to attend for more than a few months because they felt **unnoticed** and **unimportant**.

**How do you change this situation?** The answer is to establish what William

Glasser, MD, describes as a "**needs satisfying environment**" - one that meets the basic psychological needs of people in community with each other. Dr. Glasser has written extensively in the fields of mental health and education espousing the theory that each member of any group or community needs that community to "**See me. Hear me. Know me. Accept me.**" These needs are universal and hierarchical; they are present in all of us and they occur in that specific order. If these needs are ignored, no amount of processing, programming, or systematizing will be effective. Methods for attending to these needs differ depending upon the size of the community. What follows is a description of a program that can be developed.

#### "SEE ME"

During each worship service, verbally at announcement time and in written form in the leaflet, returnees are invited to make themselves known to a greeter at the conclusion of the service. The greeter, who is stationed in a prominent location, gives visitors packets of information, answers questions, and escorts them to the "guest luncheon". Elegant name-tags are awarded each guest.

A follow-up process, lasting from six months to a year, begins when the returnee indicates that their return is serious. During this period returnees are given opportunities to meet others in the congregation and learn about the church so they can make an informed membership decision.

1. A week or so after their first visit, returnees receive a phone call from a greeter welcoming them to the church and asking if they have any questions or concerns.

2. They are added to the mailing list so that they will receive all church mailings. A gratuitous subscription to the Union paper or in certain instances *The Adventist Review* is a persuasive "seeing" strategy.

3. They are invited to attend a four-part renewal series conducted by the pastor in his home. This series is doctrinally but relationally based. The 27 fundamentals can be presented under the following classifications: Soteriology, Eschatology, Ecclesiology, and Pneumatology. The series is designed to reintroduce Jesus in Christ-centered presentations. Besides being useful in an informative sense, the series fosters a sense of belonging between the returnee and the church.

4. The returnee should be appointed a guardian, a companion.

#### "HEAR ME"

The first session in the RENEWAL SERIES brings together returnees, selected parishioners, and staff members for a reception in the pastor's home. After ample time for chatting everyone gathers so that people can introduce themselves to the group, say how long they have been attending church, and share what brought them there. This exercise has proven to be entertaining, nonthreatening ice-breaker--and an excellent equalizer! It doesn't matter whether the speaker is a returnee or a long-time member, the reasons for their initial visits are surprisingly similar. The pastor then gives the first synoptic doctrinal presentation. The evening ends with light refreshments and a prayer of blessing by the pastor.



## "KNOW ME"

The need to know and to be known is symbiotic in nature; the church community, and the returnees are enriched and shaped by their relationship with each other. The second RENEWAL SERIES addresses this relationship by offering a lively overview of the history of our denomination as well as the historical background and local customs of the congregation in which the returnee is being assimilated. While it is a helpful review for "cradle" (lifelong) Adventists, the information is especially valuable to the returnees who may not have born and bred in this location. This second meeting will take place in the church. The pastor's presentation can take place in the pastor's study or some other suitable location in the church. The meeting concludes a tour of the building to familiarize people with the location of classrooms, restrooms, meeting rooms, and offices.

The format of the third RENEWAL SERIES will also take place in the church enables returnees to learn informally about church programs by browsing through a display of posters, photographs, and brochures. Members and departmental leaders and staff are present to answer questions and solicit suggestions. A brief slide presentation and question/answer period provide additional information about worship, fellowship opportunities, educational programs, congregational events, and service projects. The pastor makes his presentation in the sanctuary and the session ends with dinner, which gives those present further opportunity to become better acquainted. People linger long after dinner is over to continue their conversations.

## "ACCEPT ME"

The culmination of the RENEWAL SERIES comes on the fourth Sabbath during a regular morning worship service when all participants are welcomed into the congregation--whether they have taken official steps toward membership or not. That is a choice each individual must make in private consultation with the pastor. Their names are listed in the service leaflet and they are introduced to the congregation. The pastor uses the service for his final doctrinal presentation. A potluck luncheon which includes the entire congregation is in the returnees honor.

Not every return will participate in the RENEWAL SERIES, even though they are given several opportunities. Participation in the series is not a prerequisite for membership; it's simply a tool to ease people's transition and reentry into the congregation. If returnees choose not to participate, that decision is respected.

Follow-up continues after the RENEWAL SERIES by inviting returnees to take part in the planning and staging of any upcoming congregational event (picnic, dinner, service project) or to join a committee or group that focuses on something that interests them. Small group involvement is critical in maintaining a sense of belonging.

The concept upon which this model is based can be a useful standard for evaluating the components of any returnee program. Inclusion methods vary from one congregation to another, but verbal and nonverbal messages to returnees must be **"We know you are here and we're glad you came. We hope you will come back and ultimately join us."**

## 7. Pastors Lead As Servants

Various studies confirm that pastors contribute significantly to congregational growth and membership retention. Researchers have identified a long list of leadership characteristics that mark successful pastors. They are competent and warm. They generate enthusiasm, project hope, and affirm personal faith. The quality of preaching and worship services, pastoral prayers and pastoral care is high. They are good managers.

Servant leadership is the key. Servant leadership draws members to the heart of a congregation. It energizes church members to reach out in service to each other and to the world around them.

In *Servant Leadership*, Robert Greenleaf tells the story of a band of men on a mythical journey. A servant named Leo "does their menial chores, but ... also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears.... The group falls into disarray and abandons the journey." Without him, the journey fails. Years later a member of the party joins the order that sponsored the journey. Then he discovers that Leo is its titular head, "its guiding spirit, a great and noble *leader*."

Greenleaf defines a servant leader as one who leads in order to serve rather than one who serves in order to lead. Servant leadership serves the highest priority needs of others and prizes the valuable contribution each person makes to the whole. This describes the pastors who retain their members. Servant leaders are not doormats. They are strong leaders for others.

There are several skills that cluster around two qualities in these leaders. They are (1) Leadership in Mission Achievement, and (2) Responsiveness to Others.

**(1) Leadership in Mission Achievement.** This involves planning, coordinating, organizing, and managing the life and activities of the congregation. It helps members be productive in the church's mission, sees possibilities for the future, and motivates others to respond to that vision. It assesses the talents of self and of others and assigns responsibilities to them with confidence that they can accomplish their tasks.

This quality includes eight skills in order of their importance: strategizing, organizing, guiding, visioning, focusing, persuading, delegating, identifying resources. These are leadership, executive, or managing skills.

*What does Working with Strategy mean?* Programs should relate strategically to next steps in a long-range plan unless they are meeting an immediate need. It gives the congregation a sense of direction. All activities must be channeled to fit those strategies.

*What does Delegating involve?* Basically, shared leadership--delegating both responsibility and authority. "The more you hold close, the less can be done." "Ministry happens only when you give it away." One parishioner testifies about his pastor: "He trusts us and gives us free reign to do our jobs. He believes in us, advocates for us, affirms us, and helps us to do our thing. He is always available when staff members ask for advice."

**(2) Responsiveness to Persons.** This involves understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, seeing things from their perspective, accepting them as they are without judging, manipulating, or dominating them, and treating them with unconditional respect. It includes responding to them appropriately and placing them ahead of one own fulfillment or advancement.

This quality includes six skills, listed in order of their importance: empathy, listening, collaboration, service, understanding individual growth and style range. These persons are person-oriented and have relationship, and group-building skills. One parishioner testified of her pastor: "He models ministry for us. He tells us that everyone needs to know how to love. He loves everybody and affirms people all over the place. He continually sends handwritten notes of appreciation, so we do too."

These pastors also give very high priority to identifying and encouraging the use of members' gifts and talents. They are also spiritually authentic. Their life and witness are congruent. Willingly they own their own vulnerability as human beings. Enthusiastically they share their faith as growing Christians. Authenticity comes out of the crucible of living by grace.

Henri Nouwen speaks of the wounded healers. They draw upon resources that enable them to care for their own wounds as well as the wounds of others. They make their own wounds a major source of power. They have entered into the vulnerabilities of their fellow human beings. Through pain and self-denial, they have been willing and able to articulate their faith in such a way that it is available to those they serve. They have entered "the promised and dangerous land" and can thus tell those who are afraid what they have seen, heard, and touched.

## CONCLUSION

When the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky was imprisoned in Siberia, the only book allowed him was the New Testament. As though repenting for having embraced the socialist atheistic position, he read it at every opportunity. He rediscovered Christ and found spiritual sustenance in the Gospels. Only Christ could raise the sinner, comfort the fallen, and promise the humble of heart a new life on earth. His faith brought him a serenity and assuaged the bitterness of prison life. Not long after his release he wrote to a woman who had befriended him during this period. He said:

**"To believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more manly and more perfect than Christ, and not only is there nothing but I tell myself with jealous love, there can be nothing. Besides, if anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth."**

His incarceration ended, Dostoevsky returned tamely to Soviet social life. He wrote in rapid succession *The House of the Dead*, his prison memoirs, followed by *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. All are solid classics still in print.

But Dostoevsky never seemed to grow as a Christian. He was careless with

regular worship. Bible study was not a solid discipline with him. No mature Christian took him under his wing and taught him how to live the Christian life. He began to drink too much. A wife he took died a slow death of consumption. He had an affair. He became a compulsive gambler and lost so much money he was all but bankrupt. His book publishers granted him author advances that were quickly spent. He fled Russia to live all across Europe, and he was always just one step ahead of his creditors. His writing became gloomy; hopelessness pervaded his plots. Studying a succession of his pictures, one sees that his countenance changed from eager, bright refinement to a hollow, haunted, driven look. Only in his death mask is there a look of peace.

Dostoevsky died a broken, penniless waste in Saint Petersburg in 1881. He was a fellow sufferer of ours in this fallen world, a gifted writer, and a Christian convert. But he was never discipled in Christ. As wise King Solomon has said in Prov. 5:23, "He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is lost.

To read Dostoevsky today, to study his life, is to be impressed with what he was. But it is further to be haunted--haunted by **what he might have been**. That same concern haunts every congregation that earnestly seeks for the reclamation of the inactive, "What might have been" if ...?

We can move into this ministry of RECLAMATION with confidence! Why can we be so sure of the outcome? Because we are partnered in this ministry with One Who told three success stories which are recorded in Luke 15--

JESUS sketched three types of "inactives" who were successfully reclaimed--

- (1) The **CARELESS SINNER** - lost because of his stupidity  
The Lost Sheep returned to the fold.
- (2) The **IGNORANT SINNER** -lost because of someone else's stupidity. The Lost Coin reclaimed by its owner.
- (3) The **PRESUMPTUOUS SINNER** - lost because of his wilfulness. The Lost Boy reunited with his father.

Why are these success stories? Luke says of Jesus "this man receiveth sinners" (15:3). Thank God! That's the glory of the GODHEAD -

GOD THE SON: Is the **shepherd** Who goes out to seek and find.

GOD THE SPIRIT: Is the **candle** in the hands of the church seeking those in its own borders.

GOD THE FATHER: Is waiting, longing for returning sons and daughters.

The accusation of the Pharisees is true! Jesus not innocent of everything! Thank God He was guilty! The church, His Body, will likewise receive and restore the sinner.

**If the lost sheep is not brought back to the fold, it wanders until it perishes. And many souls go down to ruin for want of a hand stretched out to save.**

—Ellen G. White

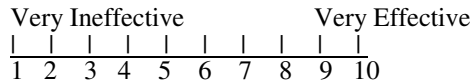
*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 191

### KIRK QUESTIONNAIRE

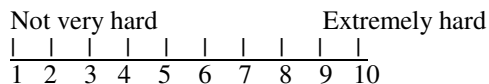
1. How many years have you been a member of \_\_\_\_\_ church?
2. What are the things about this church which you find personally satisfying and rewarding?
3. What positive contribution does \_\_\_\_\_ church make to \_\_\_\_\_ (community)?
4. What changes could be made at \_\_\_\_\_ church which would enable it to meet your needs and the needs of your family.
5. If you could change two things about this parish what would they be?
6. What three or four words best describe your feeling about this church?
7. Indicate your personal priority (in the sense of relative importance) by numbering in the order of your preference the following church activities:

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Worship**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Church School**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Youth Ministry**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Adult Education**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Ministry to Community**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Adult Fellowship**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Family Activities**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Music**

- a. Which do you think the Church Board would pick as top two?
  - b. Which do you think the congregation would pick as top two?
  - c. Which do you think the minister would pick as top two?
  - d. Any other items you would add to your priority list?
8. How effective is the church Board in problem-solving and decision-making? Put a mark on the scale wherever it belongs.



- a. What factors would help their effectiveness?
  - b. How about hindering?
9. How hard do you work for this church? Indicate on the scale.



What sort of changes or additions in this church might interest you in working harder?

10. What contributions could you make to the life of this parish?