



The General Conference
Sabbath School &
Personal Ministries



TO

RECLAIMING THE MISSING

SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH 

Reclaiming the Missing is created by the General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department

Editor: May-Ellen Colon
Principal Contributor: Calvin Smith
Design: Linda McDonald

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RECLAIMING THE MISSING

“Did You Forget to Wash Your Face this Morning?”

A young lady wearing jewelry and makeup boarded a bus and sat by a pastor. When he identified himself as a minister she asked, “What church?” When he stated, “Seventh-day Adventist,” she leaned back a bit and defiantly said, “I used to be a Seventh-day Adventist.” Then turning to him she demanded, “What’s wrong with wearing jewelry anyway?”

She expected the pastor to prove to her what was wrong with jewelry, but he responded, “There are many things that are more important than the question of jewelry.”

Surprised, she asked, “Such as?”

“Well, our relationship with the Lord,” he replied. “Do you think that if Jesus returned today you would have the assurance of eternal life?”

She paused for a moment and said, “No, I wouldn’t.”

Within fifteen minutes, there on the bus, the pastor shared with her the good news of God’s plan of salvation and led this young girl to a new commitment to Christ. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she accepted Christ as her personal Savior and made peace with Him.

Then she told her story. She said she had gone to church one Sabbath morning wearing makeup. In front of the church an elderly lady stopped in front of her and said, “Oh, my dear, did you forget to wash your face this morning?” The girl turned around, went home and decided never to set foot in an Adventist church again.

“But I’m going home now,” she told the pastor. “I’m going to patch things up with my mother and I’m going back to the church. But oh!” she added, “I wish you could come on Sabbath and tell our church what you have told me today.”

What can we learn from this? Could this happen in your church? The chances of it happening are less likely if your Sabbath School members are in small groups, such as Sabbath School Action Units, where they are not just listening week after week to an all-knowing lecturer, but where they are interacting and thus learning to understand, love, and care for one another and how to reach out to others.

The pastor just mentioned told the writer of this leaflet, "I am convinced that if we would lead our young people into a true relationship with Christ instead of always trying to deal only with the symptoms, then ninety percent of our problems would be solved." Is he correct? Rules and standards are important, but if a tree is bearing bad fruit, can we cause it to bear good fruit by cutting off its branches? Of course not. Evidently, many of our "saints" with many years in the church, who are not in the habit of witnessing and who would say, "Did you forget to wash your face this morning?" do not have a living connection with the God who transforms lives from the inside out as they behold Him and respond to His love.¹ Could a first step in reclaiming the missing be to help them, as well as our young people, to commit their lives to Jesus and to know Him daily instead of cutting off branches? But before we deal with solutions we must acknowledge that far too many are leaving. We must also examine the reasons they leave and why we should be deeply concerned.

Christ Loves the Missing Members

Christ loves every one of them. He would have died for only one of them. He spent much time in His ministry trying to reach out and reclaim the dropouts. In Luke 15 He gave three parables which He used to teach a lesson to the religious leaders of His day. They taught that God rejoiced when a sinner or a backslider was destroyed. Christ showed by these three parables that God is waiting for the dropout to be found and reclaimed. He said that there is rejoicing in heaven when one lost sinner is found and rescued.

There are three types of missing members represented in Luke 15:

1. The lost sheep represents those who know they are lost but don't know how to find their way back. Someone must go and search for them and bring them back.
2. The lost coin represents those who don't realize they are lost, so they are unable to do anything about their condition.
3. The lost son represents those who know they are lost, know their way back, but are afraid they would not be forgiven and received back. Most of our missing members will fit into this category. We need to share with them a positive, reassuring message that our heavenly Father loves them dearly and is longing to forgive them and that He is eagerly waiting for them to return.

Our responsibility and His promise of success

Before Jesus comes, many who are lost will come back to Him. It is our privilege and responsibility to rescue those who once believed in Him but who have gone astray. "When the storm of persecution really breaks upon us, the true sheep will hear the true Shepherd's voice. Self-denying efforts will be put forth to save the lost, and many who have strayed from the fold will come back to follow the great Shepherd." ²

Best prospects for soul winning – four reasons why

Missing and former members can be the best prospects for future leadership in our churches. Here are four reasons why we should not neglect them:

1. The judgment day: With their knowledge, they will have the most to give an account of in the judgment day.
2. They believe the message: Most of them know and believe the message of truth we have to share with the world.
3. They will not be easily discouraged: In most cases, these individuals will not be easily discouraged or need the care

that a new convert without their background will need. They have been out in the cold world and they know that it does not satisfy.

4. They need little instruction: Although to make them strong in the faith they do need to review our message thoroughly, nevertheless, with very little instruction they can accept the whole message of salvation and in a short time be a powerful help in the cause of God.³

Why Do People Leave the Church?

Research indicates that most former Adventists did not leave the church because of doctrinal reasons. Some do, of course. But certainly not the majority. Most leave for one of the following four reasons:

1. A conflict with another church member or pastor.
2. Discouragement over personal problems and guilt because of an inability to live up to biblical ideals.
3. A growing disinterest in spiritual things because of a neglected devotional and prayer life.
4. A perception that the church is no longer relevant to life and does not meet felt needs.⁴

Now back to number one— *Conflict*. If a new member, especially—or any member—has a conflict with another member, the feeling of being treated unfairly can produce a tension that increases with time. If no one intervenes to help resolve the conflict, one may decide to leave the church because no one seems to care. The feeling becomes prominent in the mind that he or she doesn't belong.

Discouragement and guilt. When people don't live up to their convictions as to what the Bible says is the right thing to do, they feel guilty. They may feel that the easiest thing to do is to avoid the environment that accentuates their guilt. Marital conflict, working on Sabbath, or a moral lapse all create a sense of guilt, leading to a feeling of being under the disapproval of the church. This in turn leads to a desire to stay away from church. These

individuals need church friends who love, care, and can give assurance, not disapproval.

Disinterest in spiritual things. This often comes from a neglected devotional and prayer life. It is so easy today if one allows exciting TV, DVDs, Internet programs, etc. to monopolize the time so there is little or no time for getting to know and connect with Jesus. A direct connection exists between a meaningful devotional life and a vibrant spiritual experience with the Lord. If worldly excitement is predominate, the spiritual aspects of church will soon seem unattractive. Small Bible study groups in the homes during the week could be one means to get members excited about a daily devotional life.

A perception that the church is no longer relevant to life and does not meet felt needs. For some, traditional church and Sabbath School activities may seem boring and out of touch with modern real life. To these, church attendance may appear to be little more than a legalistic requirement which takes up valuable Saturday morning sleep time. They may simply give up the church. Dynamic interactive Sabbath School Action Units, where everyone becomes involved in and outside the church, could be a solution. Another would be seminars and discussion groups during the week and occasional sermons that deal with specific felt needs. (The worship service is about worship, so the sermon usually needs to focus on God.)

Three other major reasons people leave the church are: **divorce, lack of assimilation, and growing up in the church.**

- 1. Divorce is a major reason for leaving the church.** Many of our members are letting the devil trap them into infidelity or they, because of lack of love, can no longer put up with the idiosyncrasies of their mates. When a divorce takes place, in many cases, it makes the person feel separated from the teachings of the church. Because of our stand against divorce and remarriage without biblical grounds, the person who remarries cannot see how he or she can ever be right with the church. They feel cut off from God. This is especially true of those who are over 40 years of age. They do not try to come back because they

feel they are out of harmony with God and His church. Even the innocent parties may feel that church members are uneasy around them.

We must find a way to help divorced people understand that God is willing to forgive all our mistakes and sins if we accept His salvation, and through repentance come to Him for forgiveness.

- 2. There are many members who have not been assimilated into the church family.** They have left loved ones and friends to join the Adventist family only to discover that the people in the church don't seem to care about them, or are too busy to take time to help them make the transition into the church. These new members become discouraged because they have problems in their homes or jobs and no one is there to show loving concern. They carry their burdens until they feel that no one in the church cares or is willing to help. They quit attending and no one visits them. The devil persuades them that they are not worth anything anyway, so they turn bitter and forget the church and begin to doubt the importance of what they have been taught. Surely, they reason, if it were important someone would have shown they cared.

It will take a lot of love and Christian kindness to reverse their view of the church. We need to assist these individuals in finding a fellowship cluster that will help them get in touch with the Holy Spirit through study, reading, or listening. The Holy Spirit will create anew a desire to follow Christ.

- 3. Many missing and inactive members are those who grew up in the church.** A large number attended our schools. They learned Adventist doctrines and customs as taught by their parents, teachers, and others, but they were never able to make it their own faith. Teens often rebel in order to establish their own identities. Young adults must make choices to design their own lifestyle, occupation, marriage, values, etc. This happens at a time in life when many leave home, travel, or go away to school. Many Adventist churches do not have a young adult ministry, so it is easy for them to drift away. They

may feel that the Adventist faith is old-fashioned or inflexible because of attitudes they have seen in older church members.

You will need to help them discover a living relationship with Jesus and how Adventist doctrine is relevant to their generation and how to find up-to-date ways to live out their faith.

Excuses for leaving—the rest of the story

To figure into the equation of why people leave, here are concepts from the observations of one pastor who worked to reclaim the missing over a 25-year period. Most members have not left because the church is “cold and uncaring,” but because they do not want to make the self-disciplined commitment to Christ that active membership demands. Even though they state the church was critical, ignored them, etc., when you learn the “rest of the story”—when you investigate carefully—you find these things to be excuses for self-justification. Most fit into these three categories, described briefly here:

1. Some people say, “The same old people always run the church. I wanted to be a deacon, but they wouldn’t let anyone new into their little clique.” However, when one gets to know such people you find they had and still have problems with tobacco, alcohol, Sabbath work, or other side issues.
2. Some people say, “When you are down and out, the church won’t help you; they just kick you out.” However, with investigation you discover chronic financial, emotional, or other problems, and that the church helped them several times. But when they refused to help themselves, the church stopped carrying them.
3. Some people say, “I never felt welcome; no one paid any attention to me.” However, when listening to them, you may discover that their attendance was sporadic and that they made no effort to be part of the group, usually showing up five minutes before the sermon and leaving during the closing song.⁵

Not everyone fits into these categories, but when endeavoring to reclaim such, one should be aware of similar excuses. Still one must not condemn them but work patiently under the direction of Holy Spirit to do all that is possible to reclaim them. We'll discuss methodology later, but first let's look at four signs of waning interest that will help you detect backsliding tendencies:

1. Irregular church attendance. If a member's pattern of attendance changes radically with no apparent reason, something serious is occurring in the life.
2. A critical or ambivalent attitude toward the church and its leadership. Comments such as, "This church is so unfriendly," or "No one around here seems to care," or "The leaders are hypocrites," show a verbal distancing from the church.
3. A change in habit patterns or a return to old ones. Watching TV on Friday nights, withholding tithe, experimenting with tobacco or alcohol are all signs that things are not as they should be. One compromise leads to another, until faith is abandoned.
4. Increasing withdrawal from the fellowship of the church. A declining association with other church members is an indication of shifting interest. A member who skips Sabbath school, comes to church late, and leaves immediately after the sermon is a likely candidate to drop out. ⁶

Principles of Working for Missing and Former Members

In working for those who have wandered away from the church, there are certain fundamental facts we should understand:

Most still believe biblical truth. Most still believe the Seventh-day Adventist Church teaches the truth for this time. Even if they are not living in accordance with God's standard they have deep convictions concerning the correctness of our major teachings.

Most dropouts do not want, nor do they need, lectures concerning the standards of the church. To tell them they will die of

lung cancer if they continue to smoke will only make them defensive and rebellious. By pointing out their sins you focus their attention on their problem instead of pointing them to Christ who is the solution to every one of their shortcomings. As people dwell upon their sins and difficulties, they are magnified and seem insurmountable to them. As they look to Christ they gain courage and hope for victory.

The dropouts possibly have been hurt by their church or fellow members. In order to justify themselves they often will find fault with their parents, church, or fellow members. God has not appointed us to be defense attorneys for the church or anyone else. When we attempt to correct the missing members we are aligning ourselves with an institution or individual that they feel has offended them. We, in effect say, "We believe in these enemies of yours and not in you." Our job in working with the missing or former members is to win their friendship and confidence, not to argue with them or correct them.

Many dropouts have something they feel is too great for God to forgive. Many feel they have gone too far, that God is not willing to forgive and save them. This is not true and we must be positive in our presentation of God's willingness to forgive and His desire to save. Make certain that your heart is filled with God's love so you will have an abundant supply to share with the missing or former member who needs to find his or her way back to the Father's house. Claim this promise: "Christ will impart to His messengers the same yearning love that He Himself has in seeking for the lost." ⁷

The dropouts will not share their real feelings with you until they know for certain they can trust you. They may say and do things that are completely contrary to what they know to be right. If you show your disapproval or appear to be shocked they will take this reaction as a sign of your disapproval of them as individuals. This will destroy your ability to help them in the future. When they tell you how bad they are or how they feel, tell them that in spite of their past God loves them and longs to prepare them a place in His eternal kingdom. If you are a parent you can compare your love and patience with your children to God's love and patience

with His wayward children here on earth. And yet, God's patience and love is far greater than that of human parents.

How to Approach Missing and Former Members

Gain their confidence. Let them know you would like to become their friend before you begin talking about their relationship to the Lord or the Adventist church.

Many people are suspicious of strangers. When you arrive at the door of a missing or former member, they are going to be apprehensive about you and the reason you are there. If you announce at the very outset the purpose of your mission in so many words, they may reject it without ever understanding the great blessings you have to share with them. In order to get a fair hearing (so the fears they have about us and our mission may be disarmed) we need to be very wise in our approach.

Christ moved in a judicious way to win people's friendship. They were willing to listen to Him because they knew He was interested in them and desired to help them. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.' " ⁸

Notice the steps Jesus took:

1. "He mingled." He moved around, mixing with them, with one purpose. He wanted to do good to them, and wanted the best for them.
2. "He showed His sympathy for them."
3. "He ministered to their needs."
4. He "won their confidence." When their friendship and confidence were won, then
5. He gave them the invitation to follow Him.

We must use Christ's example in coming close to those we seek to help. If you don't want to get involved in caring for others,

then you cannot reach out to missing members as a worker with Christ because to reach people you will have to come close to them.⁹ “Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse.”¹⁰

Proper visitation is a major key in reaching missing members. Many former members cite the lack of a visitation program by the church as one of the reasons they left. “By visiting the people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them, you will win hearts. This is the highest missionary work that you can do. To do it, you will need resolute, persevering faith, unwearying patience, and a deep love for souls.”¹¹ Your congregation needs a strong visitation program.

Here are guidelines for visiting missing and former members, in brief: (This will be followed by an in-depth discussion.)

1. Go two by two.
2. Pray.
3. Utilize any information you have about them.
4. Remember the things you are not to do, such as argue, defend yourself or the church, or preach at them.
5. The first visit should be short. Use warmth, tact, gentleness, and no pressure.
6. Based on what they have said and the leading of the Spirit, decide if it is the right time to invite them back to church.
7. If they express interest in returning, do everything you can do to help them.
8. If you sense they are not ready to be invited to return, try to arrange more visits.

Guidelines for visiting missing and former members, in detail with variables

1. Go two by two if possible.

Use the trainer-trainee approach. If your trainee has no or little experience, it is usually wise to encourage him or her to let you do all the talking so you can effectively proceed step by step without extraneous input that is not appropriate and would distract from your chain of thought.

2. Pray:

Spend much time in prayer and have the church prayer ministries groups pray for you and the people you plan to visit.

- Claim the infilling of the Holy Spirit, His wisdom, and guidance.
- Claim Christ's love for the former members. "House-to-house work will be done by men and women who will realize that they can labor for the Lord because He has put His Spirit upon them. As they go forth in humble faith, Christ will impart to them grace that they will impart to others. The Lord will give them the same love for perishing souls that He gave to the disciples of old."¹²
- Pray before the visit and keep your heart lifted to God during the visit.

3. Study any information you have about the people:

Their age, when they joined, why they dropped from membership, present interests, etc. Memorize their names.

4. Remember the things NOT to do when visiting:

- Do not argue. You are a witness.
- Do not defend yourselves, the church, or anyone else. You are not the defense attorney. Defending will only ally yourselves with the hurt they have experienced.
- Do not preach by telling them they should look to Jesus and not to other people.

5. The first visit:

- It should usually be short. Don't wear out your welcome.
- Memorize the names and use them during the visit.
- At the door, approach them with warmth, tact, and gentleness. Don't use pressure. Be relaxed.
- Identify yourselves as members of your specific Adventist church.
- You might say, "Good afternoon! Is this where John Smith lives? Are you John Smith? (Don't explain to another person). Good to find you home today. We are from the _____ Adventist church. We don't plan to stay long, but we would like to visit with you briefly. May we step in for a few minutes? Thank you very much."

(At the door there is a possibility you will be met with resistance. If this happens, you may say something like this, "I'm really sorry for whatever anyone may have done or said to hurt you or let you down. We just wanted you to know that we still care. Would you be willing to briefly share your experience with us?" In this way you are not excusing nor defending what anyone may have done or not done. You are just expressing your sorrow over the hurt they feel and offering to listen.)

- Once they invite you inside, demonstrate love, acceptance, and genuine concern.
- Begin your conversation with topics of general interest. If you are not acquainted you may wish to use the "Family, Occupation, Religion, and Testimony" step-by-step approach. (FORT in English). Many people have found this simple outline to be a help in breaking the ice, getting acquainted, and winning friendships.

Family. The first thing you can easily talk to people about is themselves and their families. When you do this they will know you are interested in them and their interests. If you listen carefully you will learn about the various influences that have worked to mold them. Ask them where they were born, where they have lived, how many children they have, and what they are doing. This will relax them and

divert the mind from the fear of you and your mission. You will better understand each person as you hear about their lives. If you show you are listening, they will begin to feel you are really interested in them. In doing this you may ask about various pictures or art work displayed on the walls or elsewhere and express appreciation for these and their comments.

Occupation. Ask, “Do you work close to home? What is your occupation?” Getting them to talk about their occupations and what they do for recreation will help them to warm up and open up to you. As they share with you their interests you will become their friends. You will discover now that they will share other things with you that they would not have thought of telling you a few minutes before. You will learn a great deal by just listening to what they tell you and what they do not say.

Religion. We need to know their religious background to help them in their spiritual growth. You may start by saying, “Tell us something about your religious background.” This approach lets them start wherever they are most comfortable and it will give you the opportunity to ask other short questions that will give you a religious profile of the individuals. This is very valuable information as you will find out about their church membership, church attendance, whether they study the Bible, etc. This will help you adapt your approach to fit their spiritual needs.

If the following information was not volunteered under “family” or “religion” you may ask some of these questions, as appropriate: (Don’t ask too many.) “I understand you used to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Church regularly. Is that correct? How long ago was that? How did you happen to join the church? Were you raised in the church? Were both of your parents members? Did you attend church school?” If appropriate, “Did you marry a classmate?”

To help them remember with fondness the past, ask casually, as appropriate, “Who baptized you? Were you happy? Did you

hold any church office? What did you enjoy the most? How long has it been since you've attended church?"

By this time, listening carefully, you will probably have discovered what has happened and why they are out of the church at the present time. If you haven't discovered that, here are two options:

First, you may ask a question that will allow them to begin to share whatever they feel without giving them any suggestions as to what they should say. This would usually be the best. The question could be: "Would you mind sharing what caused you to become inactive?"

The other option may be used with a more hesitant person. It may not reveal their true feelings, as they may latch onto what you suggest. You may say, "I guess there are many different reasons people leave. Some may experience disappointment in their own lives, others are hurt by church members or a pastor, and still others feel the church doesn't meet their needs. What would you say weighed most heavily in your own decision? I am really interested in knowing."

Listen carefully. Ask questions. Don't act shocked at anything they say. Express appreciation for their honesty. Do not pass judgment on either the individuals or the church. Instead of condemning or agreeing with the charges or excuses offered, listen to what they are saying and be sympathetic. You must be neutral because you do not know if what is said is fact or fantasy. You may wish to use two phrases that many have found helpful in response to criticism or bitterness. Say, "I'm sorry to hear that," or "That's too bad." This way you are not judging or defending the people they are criticizing. This will help to give you a friendly relationship with the offended without them being able to say you believe the same thing they do.

In most cases, those out of the church and still believing the Adventist message will find excuses for their actions. They may not tell you on the first visit what the real reason is for leaving the church. If they are bitter or feel that the church or someone in the church has offended them, it will usually help if you apologize in behalf of the church or its members.

After they have thoroughly unburdened their hearts you might say, “Brother (Sister), I’m so sorry to hear what has happened to you. If I had been treated like you have told us you were, I would probably feel as badly as you do. As a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I want to apologize to you for anything that I or any other member has done that has discouraged you or caused you to feel as you do. Please forgive us. From the bottom of my heart I ask you to forgive us. Will you do that? One thing we are certain about is that God loves you.”

Listening and not making defensive statements will lance the boil and remove much of the bitterness.

Testimony. You have the opportunity to build a bridge by which you can now share with them a message of good news—love, acceptance, and forgiveness. You will not want to preach or exhort, but you can witness to your own relationship with Jesus and what He means to you. You may want to use texts such as Micah 7:18, 19; Hebrews 8:12; and I John 1:9 to describe the incredible mercy, marvelous forgiveness, and the power of Jesus to change your life. Try to fit your testimony to some felt need they have expressed. Show them by sharing your own experience in Christ how He has been the answer to a similar problem that you had in your life. Tell, in humility and not boastfully, how God helped you to solve it. This will encourage them to come close to the same Savior that has assisted you and it will help them feel a kinship to you as they identify with your problem and the solution you found in Jesus.

6. Now we have two options.

Usually it takes three or four visits before you go farther in pursuing a decision. Your first visit is just to form a friendship. However, sometimes at this point you may have friends who trust you and are anxious to forget the past and move forward. A few do return to church after only one friendly visit. You must decide. Don’t be fearful; but remember that each time someone says, “No” it is easier to say it the second time.

If you sense during the visit, through communication with heaven, that they are responding very positively (if they haven't already clarified this) you can say, "May I ask you a personal question? Do you still believe the message the church teaches is the message God has for the world?" or "Do you still believe the Adventist message?" If the answer is "Yes" don't pressure, but continue: "Have you thought recently of coming back to the church?"

7. If they say "Yes," rejoice with them!

Have a prayer of gratitude. Welcome them. Do everything possible to help them become strong members again. Offer to pick them up that Sabbath and invite them to your home for lunch and Sabbath fellowship. You must involve them and get them to read, study, pray, and share (more on follow-up later).

8. If at the end of the first visit you find they are not ready to return to church, what should you do?

If they are amenable, offer a closing prayer and try to arrange another visit.

In order for people to make major changes they must have a deep conviction about Bible truth and God's will for them. They must have a desire to make the changes necessary to be in harmony with the will of God. This desire only comes as the Holy Spirit brings conviction and conversion. We need to help former member(s) listen to what the Holy Spirit says. The Holy Spirit works through the Word, whether in print or by media presentations.

Therefore, at the end of the first visit leave a booklet, video, or DVD that will speak to their hearts from the Word with urgency. Say, "We enjoyed this visit so much that we want to see you again. Here is a _____ that has really been a blessing to us. We would like to loan it to you this week and get your opinion on it. We also have another we liked that I think you would thoroughly enjoy that we could drop by next week. Are you usually at home about this time? Great! We will look forward to seeing you next week at this time. God bless you and have a wonderful week." Pray all week for them and be sure to return as promised.

On the second visit continue to listen. Return with the promised material and ask how they enjoyed what you left before. Ask their opinion of it in general and ask specific key questions that do not offend but help to lead them closer to the Lord. If they finished reading/watching it you might like to pick it up.

You may share hopeful Bible promises such as Psalms 32:1, 8 and 40:1, 2. No doubt questions will arise during the visit. Tell them you have something that has helped you find answers and that you will be happy to bring it by next week. Loan them the material you promised the week before and arrange to see them the following week at a specific time. Have a prayer that includes God's blessings on the home and gratitude for His Word and the comfort and guidance it gives.

On the third visit deliver the material you promised, ask their opinion on the material you left, discuss it in more depth, and ask more penetrating questions. By this time you probably have formed such a friendship that you would be able to invite them over for dinner. And by this time also it would be wonderful to think about getting them involved in a regular weekly Bible study that covers the Adventist message. This will be a review of what they may have studied years before. What once made these people Seventh-day Adventists will help revive their desire to see the Lord and be prepared for His soon return. You may say that you have thoroughly enjoyed a new series of study guides and ask if you could bring a sample next week.

Now that the friendship has developed and it is evident they are moving forward, perhaps this would be a good time to return the material you loaned them the first week. If they enjoyed it, tell them you will be happy to make it a gift they can loan to a friend, family member, work associate, or neighbor. (Loaning helps assure use.) Getting them involved in sharing is vital and it may increase your Bible study group the next week.

If you can start a weekly personal Bible study series on the fourth visit, that is excellent. Depending on their attitude, you may now want to invite them to a church social or other church event. You may offer to come to begin the Sabbath with them in their home and if you see that the conviction to return to church is

there, offer to pick them up on Sabbath morning and invite them to the church service and Sabbath lunch at your home. But don't push too hard and too fast. Continue to ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and for the right timing.

Even though most former members say they believe Bible truth, they need a fresh review, especially if they have been away for a long time. The potential of the weekly Bible study time with them is tremendous. Here you will be able to refresh their minds of their great need of Jesus, and during the course of the series you will have the joy of uniting with them in a prayer of total surrender to Jesus as Savior and Lord. As they love Him anew and make Him the priority of their lives, you will be able to help them to establish a daily devotional life, which is vital for the stability of every member. You will also be able to assist them in sharing the joy of their relationship with Jesus with others.

You will then lead them step by step systematically through a clear and thorough understanding of the Adventist message, uniting with them in a decision at every study. Later when you invite them to a harvesting evangelistic series in the church where the message you have studied together will be reviewed again and they see the whole broad picture of God's wonderful truth, the Holy Spirit will draw them to an even firmer decision. God can then impress them of their need for rebaptism and reuniting with His remnant people.

You will want to invite them to join your Sabbath school class as soon as they are ready, even before baptism. If your class is an active Sabbath School Action Unit, of six to eight members, that is even better. These units are accustomed to providing a warm and caring atmosphere for the missing. One of the reasons for their existence is reaching out to missing members. In their outreach planning sessions, most Sabbath School Action Units make it their first priority to reach out to missing Sabbath school members and then missing church members. As they already work to reach the missing and former members they can provide the safest place of fellowship for the returning members. We will discuss the units in relation to prevention later.

If these former members are confronted with a Sabbath work or other problem, introduce them to someone in the church who had the same challenge and who with God's grace overcame it. Help them to form other friendships in the church as well. Six or seven good friends in the church who will treat them with kindness and gently lead them back will be a tremendous asset.

When they do attend church, reinforce their decision to attend by letting them know that others are really happy they are coming back. Personally encourage people who know them to call them and express their joy at seeing them again.

Persevere prayerfully and you will succeed. One day in heaven a former member will meet you on streets of gold and with tears will joyfully exclaim, "Thank you for your visit. Thank you for your care. Thank you for your extra effort. It is because of you that I am here." That will be all the reward you need.

Additional Reconnecting Ideas

- Send a warm caring letter.
- Make phone calls.
- Mail church bulletins and Sabbath school quarterlies.
- Send subscriptions to church papers and outreach magazines.
- Share updates and invitations by letter or telephone of church events.
- Provide attractive social events and programs such as:
 - A special Christmas musical
 - A visiting musical artist
 - A home-coming Sabbath

For home-coming Sabbath make sure the greeters are well trained. Put on a very special program including a fellowship dinner. Social fellowship is often the focal point for inviting former Adventists back to church. Many who feel uncomfortable about returning to a formal church service will attend social events.

- Conduct health or family related seminars.
- Have small groups that meet during the week. A congregation that has an on-going cycle of small group ministries provides many opportunities for former members to return. These small, caring cells provide a network of friendships, a web of relationships, where people openly share their prayer requests, their heart needs, and their spiritual longings. As such, these small groups enable each person attending to develop a sense of belonging and they can be encouraged to return to church.

Prevention

If you have a bucket and it is leaking, what do you do? Should you just keep pouring more water into it or do you plug the holes first? Many times we keep pouring more into the church with evangelism but neglect plugging the holes first. Here are eight ways to plug holes:

1. One basic reason Sabbath School Action Units were established around the world was to first care for missing members. The leader of the units of six to eight takes the first five minutes of the one hour class time to welcome everyone and to care for the missing. In large classes the teacher rarely notices who is missing. They may be missing for a year before anyone notices. But when there are only six to eight in the class it is very easy to notice who is missing. In fact in such a small group someone who is missing is really missed. His or her contribution to the interactive discussion of outreach and the lesson is greatly missed—immediately. And there is immediate action to change that regrettable situation. An immediate visit is arranged—not six months later when the member’s fervor for Sabbath school has evaporated—but immediately.

The secretary of the class usually passes a card around and each member writes a little encouraging note expressing how the person was missed. The discussion group leader asks who would like to take the card and call or visit the one missing that afternoon or during the week. This really works. And it is much easier than chasing after

people who have lost interest. Certainly God's first choice is for us to work together to retain so we don't have to reclaim.

2. All new members should be more thoroughly grounded in the message through Bible study and through the benefits that naturally come when they share Jesus with others. They should be assisted to establish a personal relationship with Christ and trained to share Christ so that nothing can shake them from His family.
3. Provide other services that meet the felt needs of the members. Missing members often refer to the church as being irrelevant to their needs. You might take a survey to help identify the needs. Arrange seminars by specialists on those topics. Hold the meetings at times when the members needing them can attend. You might extend the benefits of the seminars by organizing small groups that will deal with those relevant topics on a continuing basis.
4. Make the church into a loving fellowship. The principles of building a church family are the same as those holding a marriage or family together—speaking kindly, learning to say “I’m sorry.” Everyone should watch for those who are hurting and encourage them.
5. Greeters at the door should make everyone feel welcomed and appreciated. Make it a golden rule of your church that everyone who attends will be greeted by a smiling host or hostess. The pastor and other leaders should be part of this welcoming endeavor as often as possible. Ask how the week went and inquire about family members. Make everyone feel they are family.
6. Know who is in attendance and quickly visit those who are not. Here again, the Sabbath School Action Units are excellent for this purpose. There are, however, some who work in other divisions of the Sabbath School, and some who for health, or other reasons, may not be attending Sabbath school. Keep a record of attendance. When someone misses one Sabbath mail a note that evening. If

they miss two Sabbaths go visit them. Plug the holes immediately.

7. Organize and train a visitation team. Most of this leaflet has emphasized visitation because it is the key. The cry of many former members is, "How can the church say it cares about me if no one has visited me for 10 years? You can't love me if you don't know me." Sometimes visitation teams meet former members who have not been visited in 20 years since they left the church. Sermons, seminars, articles, and books on caring will not take the place of simply noticing who is in church and visiting them when they are not.
8. At minimum, review the entire church membership list every six months and find out who is missing. Each church board should discover which members are not attending and see that they are visited by those who are most likely to encourage them.

Accepting Erring Former Members

Sometimes the church has difficulty in forgiving and accepting former members who have made mistakes. Nothing can bring greater joy to the congregation than doing as Jesus would do: forgiving, forgetting, and accepting former members back into loving fellowship regardless of what they have done. In conclusion, here is a helpful story shared by world evangelist and church leader Mark Finley:

"Forgive as you are forgiven."

"Tension filled the room! Our elders had strong feelings about the point under discussion. Jacquie grew up as a member of the church. Twenty years earlier, while a member of this particular church, she had committed adultery, left her husband and married another man. Now she desired to be re-baptized. Appearing before the church board she sobbed out her repentance and asked for forgiveness.

"An icy silence ensued. No one said anything. They knew too much about her. They understood too well the hurt she had brought to the congregation. She had inflicted pain on so many.

She sat on one side of the room, with the board on the other. The chasm between them seemed almost impossible to span.

“I knew I had to speak. My words were calm but direct. ‘She has suffered enough. Let’s not give her any more pain. Paul’s counsel is for us: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). If God in all His perfection accepts and forgives us, we can forgive Jacquie.’

“With quivering lips, her voice cracking, she replied, ‘I know I have done wrong. For years I have felt guilty. At times the guilt has almost driven me crazy. Please accept me.’

“I noted a tear in the first elder’s eye. Then I realized that most of the church board was crying. Soon a chorus of voices responded in unison, ‘Of course, of course, we will accept you.’ Warmth, love, and joy filled the room. Board members reassured Jacquie of their love. Some hugged her. Others squeezed her hand in the warmth of Christian fellowship.

“I stood back, quietly recognizing again that our church was never more the church than at that moment. Here was the love of God in action. Here was Calvary demonstrated in the family of God.”¹³

Endnotes

- ¹ Calvin Smith, *Action Magazine*, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, April, 1994, p. 3.
- ² *Evangelism*, p. 693.
- ³ Don Gray, *Reaching and Reclaiming Missing Members*, December 4, 2002, pp. 6, 7.
- ⁴ Mark Finley, *Action Magazine*, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, March, 1993, p. 14.
- ⁵ John Martin, *Adventist Review*, "The Real Reason People Quit the Church," September 14, 1998.
- ⁶ Mark Finley, *They're Coming Home*. Hart Research Center, 1993, pp. 8, 9.
- ⁷ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 235.
- ⁸ *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.
- ⁹ Gray, pp. 7-9.
- ¹⁰ *Gospel Workers*, p. 193.
- ¹¹ *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 41.
- ¹² *This Day With God*, p. 115.
- ¹³ Mark Finley, *They're Coming Home*. pp. 18, 19.

Do you want to reach former and missing members of your church? This book is your guide to learning why people leave the church and how to bring them back into the fold. In these pages, you will find guidelines for visiting missing members and ideas for reconnecting with them. You will also learn how to effectively keep those who are currently attending your church. Discover how your church can become a safe place for everyone.

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