

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Member Care: Reconnecting

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series

Version 1.0 - 11/23/10



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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iFOLLOW

www.ifollowdiscipleship.org

Member Care: Reconnecting

This presentation is designed for people who desire to serve Jesus Christ and help lead others to Him.

Learning Objectives

1. Learn why people become disappointed with the church
2. Recognize unrealistic expectations and encourage realistic ones
3. Understand some specific tips for dealing with common problems
4. Begin to understand the “dropout problem” and what can be done about it

Content Outline

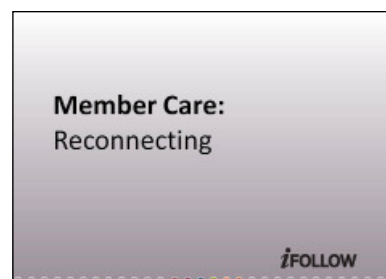
1. Disappointments and delusions
2. Unrealistic expectations
3. Realistic expectations
4. Common Areas of Difficulty
5. If they leave
6. What to do next
7. Pagans and tax collectors

Background Material for the Presenter

Disappointments. Unfulfilled expectations. Unwelcome surprises. Very often they result from unrealistic expectations and vague hopes.

Sometime they hit us broadside, when we should have seen them coming. Think of the Children of Israel, month two. They're out of food and water, and they thought freedom was going to solve all their problems! Now they're angry and ready to go back to slavery! Did they think the “Promised Land” was only a week or two away?

Sometimes we even get warnings but we don't quite believe them. Think of the disciples on that darkest of all Sabbaths. The Messiah dead. Didn't He tell them He was going to be put to death? But not to worry, it was only a



brief interlude. He would rise again the third day? Somehow they couldn't even hear Him through their happy expectations of the soon-to-be-established Kingdom, and their own jockeying for top spots in His court.

Think of the Millerites on October 23, 1844. Talk about disillusioned! But there was at least a core group with the right idea. They went back to their knees and back to their Bibles.

Unrealistic Expectations

Remember the day you were baptized. Did you think you would never sin again, that all of your troubles and trials were over now? Some of us think we'll be such great Christians now, everybody will love us and all of our friends will want to be baptized, too.

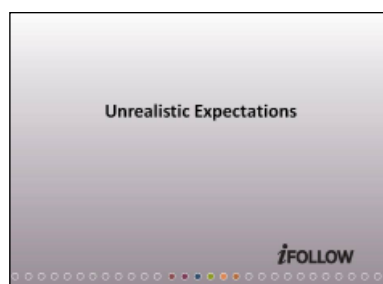
Did somebody forget to tell you that becoming a Christian would make the devil so mad, he'd assign a couple of extra demons to harass us? Or did we just miss the warning? You might be surprised how many people start out thinking church people are perfect saints. They're often the same ones who wind up thinking all Christians are hypocrites, so they walk away.

Part of the problem is "company manners" in church and the fact that we seldom see each other outside of church. Visitors don't see us as we truly are from day to day. They don't know our faults and failings. They view us as the "saints of God": pious, holy, the ones who've "got it all together."

This is another reason why small groups are an important part of a healthy congregation. There people can become well enough acquainted and comfortable enough with each other to let their guards down and be real, honest and vulnerable with one another.

Another good plan is to assign mentors to all newcomers, sort of a "big brother" or "big sister" in the church, a well grounded spiritual advisor of the same gender as the new member. This person need not be elderly, nor even highly trained (although, of course, she or he may be), just very real, honest and close to the Lord.

Many visitors and prospective members (sometimes even our own young people) believe that becoming full-fledged members of the church will turn them into the pious saints they presume us to be. When it doesn't work out that way, some of them get discouraged and quit trying, loaded down with guilt and doubt. Many times this pushes them right out the back door, especially if they don't have at least a few strong friendships in the church, people to call on when things aren't going well. Research has shown that new members who do not make at least six friends in the church during their first year are much more likely to drop out of the church in the second or third year.



Maybe there should be a lesson in the baptismal class entitled, “You thought you had troubles before? Look out now!” One young pastor made himself very vulnerable to his congregation by confessing his shortcomings and asking them to pray for him. Not that he was guilty of gross sins, but wanting God’s help in keeping his priorities straight, using his time well, maintaining loving Christian conduct in dealing with difficult people and frustrating circumstances and resisting the temptation to indulge in the idle chit-chat that so easily leads into spreading rumors. He quickly became a favorite with those members who were not used to thinking of pastors as “one of us” with trials and troubles they could relate to.

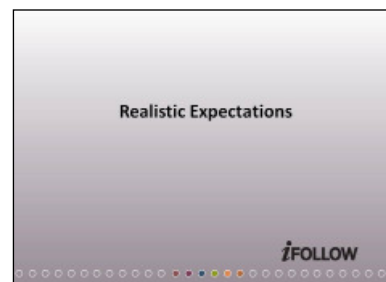
Realistic Expectations

Jesus did promise us peace, didn’t He? Yes, He did (John 14:27) but the peace He offers is not to be confused with a trouble-free life. He also assured us that in the world we would have troubles (John 16:33). His peace is the inner kind that carries us through the turmoil.

He also promised us victory, but not instant, all-encompassing victory. Remember that the apostle Paul spoke of ongoing struggles in his walk with Christ. (Romans 7) We are all still infected with the disease of sin, and therefore our “natural inclinations” are toward sin, not holiness. Jesus spoke of the need for a “new birth” experience (John 3:3), and newborns always have a lot to learn! They don’t just automatically walk and talk and feed themselves without a lot of trial and error and bumps and scratches. Paul even spoke of new Christians needing the milk of the Gospel, while acknowledging the need to move on from there to “adult food,” chewing on the disciplines of Christian living and the deeper, more abstract topics of spiritual understanding.

Jesus promised us abundant life too. (John 10:10) But many believers must live most or all of their lives in pain or poverty. This is one big clue that He was talking about spiritual, not physical, life. In fact, the original Greek word used in this verse is zoe, not bios, which designates the physical life, as in “biology.”

The best gift Jesus promised is the Holy Spirit, who brings us the precious gift of love in all its manifestations. Joy is love celebrating; peace is love resting; patience is love waiting; kindness is love serving; goodness is love obeying; gentleness is love sympathizing and comforting; faithfulness is love trusting, even when things are hard and hard to understand; self-control is love growing up into the fullness of the stature of Christ. Even mature Christians still have trouble, because we have an angry adversary prowling around looking for someone to devour.



Common Areas of Difficulty

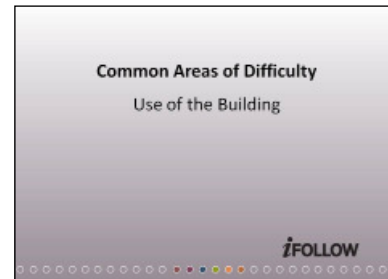
1. Use of the building: One thing that may cause problems in a congregation is the use of, and/or behavior in, the church building.

There is a small (three rooms and two bathrooms), simple church on an Indian reservation. It was built by volunteers. The foyer and kitchen have been used for classrooms, rather than crowd all ages of children into one room. There is a weekly fellowship meal. Folding tables and chairs that stand against the walls during services are quickly set up in the children's classroom and foyer; food is spread on tables in the kitchen, and even in the sanctuary, if there is a larger crowd for a meal. The children of the neighborhood come to church for Sabbath school and the potluck, and there is often a lot of happy, playful noise. On one occasion, two or three toddlers were having a merry game of tag around the tables, in and out of all three rooms. An older, long-time member of the congregation questioned whether their game should be barred from the sanctuary and limited to the other rooms. The head elder replied that they were too young to understand the difference in the rooms, especially as the sanctuary was being used as a dining room at the moment, adding that at least they would grow up knowing it was a good and happy place where they were welcomed and loved. Good point. Some of the adults around about are even learning it is a place where they can find help in times of personal need; where they are loved and accepted and not censured.

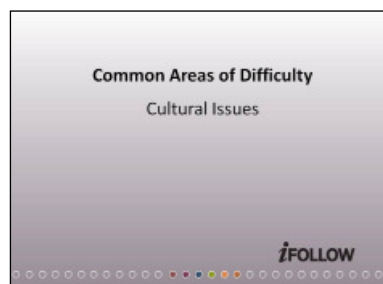
A few weeks later, Pastor Lee Gugliotto was the guest speaker, and made a point of the fact that the building is not the church; it is only the place where the church meets most often. The church sometimes meets elsewhere for various activities. He went on to say that the building is just a building when it is empty, it is only holy when God meets there with His people; it is His presence that makes it holy, not the sign out front that declares it to be a church.

Some members may be uncomfortable with this concept, but it is a concept worth pondering on and praying over. Every child and newcomer will still need to be taught reverence for our holy God and His worship and service. They need to feel respect for His property, and to show proper respect for the persons leading out in His services, but where the church property is limited and the building being rapidly outgrown, some careful, prayerful decisions need to be made, and again, unless a solution that everyone can agree on is reached, some members will leave the congregation.

2. Cultural issues: Many potential problems result from the different cultural backgrounds of the members. Interactive sermons are common among some people-groups: The "preacher" is regarded as more of a teacher, questions from the pulpit are **not** rhetorical, someone is expected to answer, and if someone doesn't understand a point, he or she is free to ask for clarification. If a member of the congregation feels "Spirit-led" to share a point or example that adds to the understanding or richness of the sermon's



topic, everyone will gain an added blessing. This can be disconcerting to those who are used to a “preacher/audience” style of church and may seem too “Quakerish,” but may very well be more Biblical and apostolic than not. These different cultural styles should be explained to visitors (especially those who have been invited to be guest speakers), but those coming from outside the local culture need to keep an open mind.



The **one** thing every Christian must keep in mind at all times, but especially when problems, misunderstandings and disagreements arise, is that Jesus said the most important law is **love** and Paul echoed that we must “tell the truth in love” and to do all things in love. It is our purpose that those who come to our congregation know it as a safe and happy place where they will be accepted and loved.

A similar problem arises when new members come from a different church background. The new style of worship can easily seem too stifling or irreverent or out-dated or formal, in some way uncomfortable or at least not completely satisfying.

This can happen to teenagers who’ve been raised in the same congregation, but have been exposed to different styles of worship at summer camp, camp meeting or visits to other churches. This discontent can even come from watching various religious programs on television or the Internet.

Both of these situations—the new member from a different background and the teenager exposed to different approaches—may result in worship expectations that are not being met by the church. These expectations can be handled in the same way. When the problem is first voiced to or detected by a mentor or friend, ask if you may bring this topic to the pastor. In the ensuing conversation the pastor may agree to meet with the individual who is discontent and any other persons he or she may wish to have present.

This meeting, large or small, should give the opportunity for any or all of the participants to respectfully ask questions, state perceived problems, make comments or suggest possible solutions. In some areas where there are several Adventist congregations, it may be possible to merely introduce the new member or young person to several members of a congregation that has a worship style like the one that is desired.

If the current congregation is the only one within reasonable distance, some brainstorming is in order. If the style of music is the main problem, how about having 15 to 20 minutes of praise songs or contemporary Christian music before worship or 30 to 90 minutes (with a short devotional or testimony service) on Friday night or Sabbath afternoon?

Things other than music can become a “bone of contention” as well. Some may feel that sitting in a pew, listening to a sermon while viewing one person’s face every week is a little boring. Could the young people—junior to college age—do a short puppet show or

drama skit once or twice a month? Maybe even do a whole church service, traditional or contemporary, once a quarter?

Ask if some of these issues and suggestions may be brought before a general church meeting for a vote. This may involve some more brainstorming, but that's fine, the more people who get involved in the compromises and decisions, the smoother the implementations will be.

Sometimes it is possible to negotiate a compromise. For example, one Sabbath a month, or even every other week, could be designated a "Celebration Sabbath" or a "Back to Our Roots Sabbath." Maybe the best all-round solution is two services per week, the regular church service and a Friday night or Sabbath afternoon meeting. In farm country, or where a church is situated in the middle of several villages and people sometimes live far from the church, Friday evening might not meet with much success. On Sabbath afternoons, people can bring a lunch or have a potluck, or alternate.

The moderator for the meeting (pastor or otherwise) will need to use prayer, tact and good listening skills to keep the meeting friendly and productive. Someone who will know when to calmly say, "I could use a drink of cold water about now; why don't we take a ten minute break and let some fresh air blow away the cobwebs." Someone who can get most of the group to agree to at least give a try to one of the suggestions, the one with the fewest "nay" votes.

If it is not possible to find a compromise that everyone can agree to, it is almost certain that some members (new or otherwise) will drop out within a few months. (There is a unit on consensus process among the units in this resource on Small Group Leadership.)

The people who are most desirous of the change should be included in the committee chosen to implement the change. It may even mollify some of the reluctant ones to appoint them to help. The best way to avoid trouble is, if possible, have on this committee solid Christians who are good-natured and not too set in their way. Of course, the group must spend much time in prayer.

We all need to remember that it is God who gives us our different personalities and preferences, and He loves each one of us equally. Jesus said He wants us to worship Him in "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). He didn't specify a particular worship style, just requested that we be honest with Him (truth) and enthused about Him (worshipping in spirit). This isn't something you can fake. Either you are spiritually involved in the worship service or you are not. You may paste on a smile and fool some of the people around you, but God knows the difference.

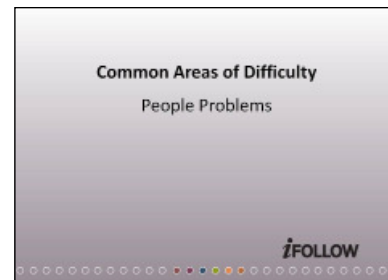
Many styles of worship are mentioned in the Bible. On the Day of Atonement, the Israelites worshiped with soul-searching and fasting. At Passover, they worshipped with certain invariable and God-ordained rituals and foods. Sometimes they came before Him in silence and sometimes, according to Scripture, a whole band was there. David worshipped

at least once with dancing, and it was not God who rebuked him, but his wife. Many of the Psalms suggest that we should come before Him with tambourines and drums.

So it doesn't behoove us to get too judgmental about the "right" or "wrong" way to worship. The point is to love each person who comes through the door, and to allow each the right and support to love God in the way they choose to do so.

It is important to remember the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have a set liturgy. Adventists have believed, since the beginning, in what is called "free" worship. Ellen G. White writes on many occasions that she and others were given "freedom" as they led in worship.

3. People problems: Probably the most important reason someone's disappointment with a congregation propels them all the way out the door is that they were hurt by another or others. This is much more easily dealt with early than late! If there is tension simmering, a gently and prayerfully facilitated conversation along the lines laid out in Matthew 18 will often nip the problem in the bud. Of course, someone in the church, most likely in the official leadership, but not necessarily, has to be paying attention to begin with. There is all too often a tendency to simply sweep problems under the rug, or lightly promise to "pray about it," while no one is willing to do the hard work of helping to mend fences and build bridges. If Jesus went to your church, what would He do? Our commitment in this congregation is to try to be sensitive to such needs and get involved as early as possible.



Research reveals that many people drop out of the church because of pressures and burdens they may never have revealed to another church member, even the pastor. One of the most common is their marriage breaks up. Another is they lose their job. For some reason people feel free to ask for prayer and support at church when they face physical illness than when one of these life events hits them. How many times have you heard a church member, during prayer request time, raise their hand and say, "I was fired yesterday," or something similar? There is shame involved. In fact some men are laid off and find it impossible to even tell their wives. This reality means that every congregation needs a network of people who develop their sensitivity and listening skills. There is a need for a kind of Christian "sensitivity training" in order to be able to minister to everyone in the congregation in the way that the New Testament directs, bearing "one another's burdens."

If They Leave

Here are some depressing statistics: In most Adventist Churches across North America, typical Sabbath attendance is equal to about 50 percent to 55 percent of the total num-

ber of members on the books. A number of churches have completed a name-by-name analysis of their entire membership list and found that typically a third of the members have not attended even once in the past 12 months. “Shut-ins” were not counted in this percentage.

A survey of active members found that 72 percent report that they have a relative or friend who used to be an active member of the Adventist Church but has since dropped out. Dr. Roger Dudley, director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, followed a random sample of 13 and 14-year-olds from Adventist families for 10 years, until they were 24 and 25 years of age. About 65 percent had left the Church over those ten years and only 10 percent had returned later, or a net loss of more than half of our young people.

It is estimated that there are one or two million former, inactive and “fringe” Adventists in North America and about 500,000 active members who attend at least once a month. Why do we have such a big dropout problem? Ten major studies have been completed by Adventist researchers since the mid-1970s and much has been learned that can provide some answers. Most grew up in the Adventist faith, and were not converts from evangelism. The most common “dropout” is an adult under 50. The median age of dropouts is 40. The median age of members is 51.

A survey of the general public conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry asked: “Have you ever heard of or read about the Seventh-day Church?” Seven in ten of those over 50 said “Yes,” but only 58 percent of those 30 to 49 years of age; 35 percent of those 18 to 29; and a disappointing **10%** of those under 18. Clearly, the Adventist Church is not connecting with new generations of Americans, even those raised in its own families and schools. And it’s likely that some of the above reasons, especially worship and music style, have something to do with it.

Another place where we’re clearly failing to minister effectively is when people face storms in their lives. Dropouts are three times as likely as active members to be divorced and remarried, and four times as likely to be divorced and single. They are more likely to report stressful life events and moves from one home to another. Yet surely the church is the place where someone facing a major life crisis can most expect to be truly heard, held, and comforted!

Six in ten former members had a non-member spouse as compared with 28 percent of the active members. Did members make a concerted effort to make friends with the non-member spouses, **without** making it look like they only wanted to add them to the books?

Here are some reasons these former members give for why they left the church: “There is too much politics in the Adventist church [and] church leaders are more concerned with the number of baptisms than the people baptized. The church has too many rules



and regulations. Adventists think they can work their way into heaven, and the church is too organized.” They did not feel accepted by the other church members. “The coldness of church members influenced them toward leaving the church, also bigotry, hypocrisy, and judgmental attitudes.” They may express a lack of Adventist friends, and a lack of visits from church members and pastors.

A significant number leave because of dissatisfaction with local church leaders; there is a perception of a lack of sympathy by church leaders for their problems.

In other words, no matter what the life crisis or the reason for leaving, the bottom line is, **dropouts are people who never bonded with the core group of their congregation.** Two out of three, while they were active members, did not have an office or volunteer role in the congregation. They report few visits by church members or pastors, even while they were still regular attenders.

Three out of four leave for reasons having to do with their relationships with people and groups; while less than one in five leave because they no longer believe in some teaching of the church. Often it’s for reasons that have already been outlined above. Problems arose which were not addressed, and the person just slipped away. The sad fact is, what most likely happened back at church is that people shook their heads, assumed the person “wasn’t really committed,” and continued to bring names up as prayer requests, but did not do anything.

What to Do?

Here are some hopeful statistics from the same studies: Most dropouts continue to have a strong sense of connection with the church. Only about one in six join a church of another denomination when they drop out of the Adventist Church, and four out of five say that they are likely to re-enter the Adventist Church. Only one in five have habits or lifestyle that would prevent them from returning to active membership. (How many of the people that Jesus spent His time with had habits that prevented “active membership” according to the Pharisees.)

In a survey of former Adventists, dropped from church membership, 37 percent said 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; 84 percent still have Adventist friends.

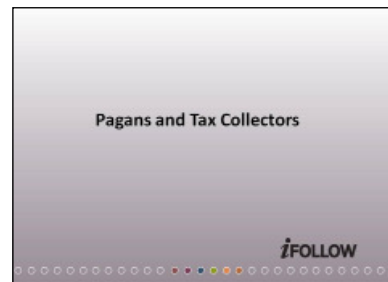
So what’s stopping them from coming back? First of all, there may be no one inviting them to come back. Or, they perceive that those who are asking may not really be interested in them as persons, but in the “numbers on the books.” Perhaps they, themselves, have joined the ranks of those who think they are “not good enough” to come back.



Pagans and Tax Collectors

The first thing for our churches to do is to implement the attitudes and actions outlined in the first part of this unit; be a church that cares. Be a church that acts like Jesus, that loves like Jesus, and that listens like Jesus. Let people have the freedom to make their own choices, and if they really want to go, let them go, but then, Jesus said in Matthew 18, “Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (NIV). And this is where we get messed up. We ostracize, criticize, and judge. We lock the door from the inside and claim to wonder why they don’t come back in. We forget who is speaking here.

How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? He ate with them. He talked to them. He listened to them. He healed them. He asked them to be His disciples, to the consternation of the devout. There is no evidence whatever that Jesus asked these people to change their lives before He asked them to follow Him, to be active members of His church.



In the handouts, as well as in other units in this discipleship resource, there are detailed programs to follow in order to learn how to reach out to people, listen to people, and love people as God loves you. And that’s the bottom line. How does Jesus treat you? How does He treat me? If I can be one-tenth as loving as He is, people will be drawn to me, and through me, drawn to Him, the only one who has made a lasting difference in my life, and can make a lasting difference in theirs.

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:16-20, NIV)

Just as soon as we begin taking that call seriously; just as soon as we commit to becoming a “prodigal-hugging” congregation, then the reconciliation and healing will begin.

Handouts in this Package

1. What Can Be Done?
2. Outline of a Typical Visit
3. Resources for Reconnecting Ministry
4. The Dropout Track



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Additional Resources

Cornforth, Fred and Lale, Tim (1995). *Ten Who Left*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association. This volume tells the true stories of ten individuals/couples who left the Adventist Church. What can we learn from these stories?

Lale, Tim and Habada, Patricia. (1998). *Ten Who Came Back*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association. This book contains the stories of individuals/couples who dropped out of the Adventist Church, and then came back to church. What happened? Who helped them reconnect?

North American Division of the General Conference (2009). *Reconnecting Ministry Quick Start Guide*. Lincoln, NE: AdventSource.

Nouwen, Henri (1994). *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. New York: Image/Doubleday. An in-depth meditation and study of the Bible parable by a noted Christian theologian.

Sahlin, Monte (1996). *Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church?* Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry. This is a summary of the available research on this topic.

Watts, Dorothy Eaton (1997). *When Your Child Turns from God*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association. This book shares the stories of more than 65 people who left the church and their parents who prayed for them unceasingly. In some stories, the children return, while in others they are still “in a far country.”

DVD and Video

Center for Creative Ministry (2000). *The Rendezvous* [VHS, DVD]. Available from AdventSource. A 15-minute video with a discussion guide that shows a dramatic story: What happens when active church members cross paths with those who drop out?

Richardson, P.; Nelson, W. and Rittenour, C. (1999). *Safety Zone* [VHS, DVD]. A training curriculum for the Reconnecting Ministry visitation team and church leaders, it includes four sessions on how to make visits and four sessions on how to prepare “a safe place” at your church for dropouts who try to reconnect with the Church. It includes training videos, overhead masters, an Instructor’s Guide and a textbook for participants.

Periodicals

Together Again is a free, quarterly newsletter for pastors and lay members involved in Reconnecting Ministry. Go to www.creativeministry.org and you put your name and Email address on the mailing list.

Ministry, the official journal for Seventh-day Adventist pastors published by the General Conference Ministerial Association, has published a number of articles on this topic. These can be found at: www.ministrymagazine.org/archive

Tools

Center for Creative Ministry (1995). *Welcome Home Guidebook*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry. This package includes a CD-ROM with six complete advertising and promotional packages; personal letters, response cards, newspaper ads, bulletin inserts and more. It includes guidelines for developing special Sabbaths several times throughout the year when members can be encouraged to invite former members and friends. It makes Sabbath morning an evangelistic event.

Resource Center

The Center for Creative Ministry is the official resource center for ministry with former and inactive members supported by the North American Division of the General Conference. The center can be contacted at (800) 272-4664 or www.creativeministry.org. The center provides a Help Desk where you can talk to someone who can help you with Reconnecting Ministry; help you find the materials you need, give you information and help you solve practical problems.

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Discussion Questions

1. Share some expectations you had when you joined the church that you later found were not met. How did you feel? What did you do?
2. Share a time when someone helped you and another person resolve some conflict or interpersonal difficulties. What did the person do that helped? What did they do that did not help?
3. What is your least favorite thing about your church? What do you think could be done about it?
4. What keeps you from leaving?
5. What is your reaction to this unit's commentary on Jesus' mandate to treat people like "pagans and tax collectors?" Have you ever thought about this verse in this way?

Group Activity

Purpose: To learn to recognize the signs of someone in danger of drifting away, and develop strategies to deal with it.

Preparation: Have several tables ready, with flipchart pages or other writing materials on them or perhaps a flipchart nearby for each table. Make enough copies of Handout 4 for each table to have one or more.

Assignment: Divide the group among the tables. If possible, have members of the same congregation at each table. If the whole group is all from one congregation, have the each table be from the same Sabbath school class, or board or committee, or other group in the church. Tell them to go over the Dropout Track and discuss and write down specific strategies for dealing with each stage.

At the first stage, some important questions to ask are: What kinds of ‘subtle attempts’ to reach out for help might be made? Do we know the members of our church or class well enough on a personal level to know for sure if they are facing stressful events? If not, what will we do about that?

Once the group comes up with specific kinds of responses, the next stage is to discuss: But if no one did that, and now we’ve reached this stage, now what?

After the groups have written some ways to reach out to people at each stage, have them stop for prayer and then go back over the list and see if any real names come to mind. Are there people in their church or group right now, that are in this danger? What will they do?

Debrief: If real names were listed, use good judgment about sharing them. Other than that, share reactions, ideas, and especially any personal stories or experiences that might illustrate or help this process of learning to be a “prodigal-hugging” congregation.

Time: Allow about 15 minutes for the first part of the exercise, listing specific strategies. Plan on another five to ten minutes for praying and seeing if there are real people that come to mind. Allow another 10 to 15 for debriefing.

Handout 1

The Dropout Problem: What Can Be Done About It?

1. Personal visits with inactive and former members. Conversations based on **listening**, not on telling. Half of the former who have been interviewed or surveyed in various studies report that their pastor came to visit them some time after they quit attending and before their name was dropped from membership. About a third say that another church member visited them. But the visits were ineffective.
2. Organize a strong visitation ministry, with elders, deacons, deaconesses and others willing to go through careful training. Assign regular visits. After five years of a pilot program called “Learning to Care,” an evaluation was done of the 35 churches that held a training event. It was found that half of these churches had continued with a regular visitation program, and the return rates of the inactive and former members who were visited ranged from 10 percent to 53 percent.
3. Develop and implement small groups to foster fellowship, Bible study and prayer. Start a Sabbath school class that has a non-traditional, open discussion format instead of covering the Sabbath school lesson.
4. Encourage more lay participation in worship and develop richer liturgy with more singing, sharing and Bible reading.
5. Appoint and train a Volunteer Ministries coordinator for the congregation and work to see that everyone gets involved in something based on their gifts.
6. Do not overemphasize teachings that are more rooted in culture than in Scripture.

Are You Ready to Make a Commitment?

Our responsibility is clear. As Ellen White observes, “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.” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, page 191)

HANDOUT

**Member
Care:**
Reconnecting

Handout 2

Outline of a Typical Visit with an Inactive or Former Member

1. Phone and set up an appointment; **don't** drop by unannounced. In the phone call say: "I am a volunteer at the _____ Adventist Church and we are making contact with everyone who has attended in the past just to listen and see what we can learn to improve our ministry to people. Would _____ be a good time when I could sit down and listen to you for a while?"
2. Handle resistance and anger by **not** arguing or getting defensive. Just listen and make reflective statements: "You have been hurt." ... "I know it may be hard thing for you to talk about this." ... "I just want to listen to you; I have no other agenda."
3. **Keep your appointment!** Don't disappoint them again.
4. Confirm appointment again at the door and re-state your purpose: "I am a volunteer We are listening to everyone who has attended in the past just to ..."
5. Quickly find a place to sit where you can have eye contact. Don't sit in his or her favorite chair. Look for items in the room that might give you a clue of questions to ask. (Pictures of children, or parents, etc.)
6. Spent five or ten minutes in casual conversation just to "break the ice."
7. First key question: "How did you happen to join the _____ Church?"
8. Resist the urge to **tell stories!** Bite your tongue! Just make reflective statements to clarify what you are hearing. Ask open-ended questions that facilitate the other person's storytelling. Listen to the information that they volunteer which you did not ask for; that will give you a clue as to what they want to talk about.
9. Second key question: "How long were you active in the _____ Church?"
Follow-up question: "When did you first think about not coming back to church?"
10. They will likely begin to tell painful stories. Don't argue! Don't get defensive! Don't correct their misunderstandings! Just **listen** and help them tell their story.
11. Third key question: "What are you feeling about _____ Church now?"
12. Don't argue or correct **anything** they say, no matter how outrageous it is! Take note of misunderstandings and negative feelings for discussion with your pastor later. Right now, concentrate on **listening** intently to the person.

HANDOUT

**Member
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13. Fourth key question: “Have you ever thought about going back to _____ Church?” Follow-up question: “What would have to change in order for you to come back?”

14. Don’t promise anything that is beyond your power to personally assure them! (You cannot change people. You cannot speak for the pastor or the church board.)

15. Closure question: “What can I do for you right now?” Closure options:

- A. Set up another visit; nothing is resolved at the moment.
- B. They want nothing more to do with the Church.
- C. They are willing to try a “half-way house” – a small group, etc.
- D. They are willing to come back and try it again.
- E. They need a referral to a pastor or a counselor.
- F. They are willing to connect with some other church.

16. If they agree to return to church or join a small group, offer to meet them outside when they come for the first time.

17. Have prayer and leave. Confirm their decision in the prayer and ask for God’s blessings on their decision.

Confidentiality is absolutely necessary! Be very discreet! **It often takes a number of visits equal to the number of years since they were last active in the church before they come to resolution.**

Handout 3

Resources for Re-connecting Ministry

All of the following resources are available through the Center for Creative Ministry, the official resource center for ministry with former and inactive members supported by the North American Division of the General Conference. It can be reached at (800) 272-4664 or www.creativeministry.org.

The Rendezvous – A 15-minute video with a discussion guide that shows a dramatic story: What happens when the paths of those who stay in the church and those who drop out cross?

Safety Zone – A training curriculum for the visitation team and church leaders. Includes 4 sessions on how to make visits and 4 sessions on how to prepare “a safe place” at your church for dropouts who try to re-connect with the Church. Includes training videos, overhead masters, Instructor’s Guide and textbooks for participants.

Welcome Home Guidebook – Comes with a CD-ROM with six complete advertising and promotional packages—personal letters, response cards, newspaper ads, bulletin inserts and more. Guidelines for developing special Sabbaths several times throughout the year when members can be encouraged to invite former members and friends. Makes Sabbath morning an evangelistic event.

Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church? – A groundbreaking research report by Monte Sahlin.

Ten Who Left – The true stories of ten individuals/couples who left the Adventist Church interviewed and told by Fred Cornforth and Tim Lale. What can we learn from these stories?

Ten Who Came Back – Ten more fascinating stories of individuals/couples who dropped out of the Adventist Church, and then came back to church. What happened? Who helped them reconnect? Interviews by Tim Lale and Pat Habada.

When Your Child Turns from God – This book shares the stories of more than 65 people who left the church and their parents who prayed for them unceasingly. In some stories, the children return, while in others they are still “in a far country.” Interviews and written by Dorothy Eaton Watts.

The Return of the Prodigal Son – An in-depth meditation and study of the Bible parable by the noted Christian theologian Henri Nouwen.

Together Again – Free, quarterly newsletter for pastors and lay members involved in Reconnecting Ministry. Just ask to be placed on the mailing list or go to the website and register.

Help Desk – You can talk to someone who can help you with Reconnecting Ministry; help you find the resources you need, give you information and help you solve practical problems.

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HANDOUT

**Member
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Handout 4

The Dropout Track

This is a long, slow process, not an abrupt change; it unfolds over six to 18 months.

1. A cluster of stressful events
2. Subtle attempts to reach out for help
3. Pastor and members do not respond
4. Hurting member feels angry at non-response
5. Involvement in church decreases
6. Pastor and members do not respond
7. Hurting member quits attending, expecting to be contacted
8. No one contacts them to ask why they dropped out
9. They try to forget the painful memories
10. They reinvest the time they used to spend at church

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