

A Simple Strategy for Reclaiming Straying Members

[Written for Professor David J. Valleskey, P.T. 358A, November 18, 1991]

By Daniel Witte

I never met Randal and Mary Johnson.¹ They were members of Beautiful Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church in Marietta, Georgia all the while I vicared there, but I never made their acquaintance. As far as I know, the Johnsons never came to worship or any other church function. And none of our leaders seemed to know why.

Nobody knew why the Smiths had stopped coming, either. For a while John had been our stewardship chairman, but he and his family had gradually drifted away from Beautiful Savior. Every once in a while a member ran into John while shopping at Home Depot, but that was the only contact we still had.

Then there were Kathy Franklin and her teenage daughters. They had worshiped with us off and on during the winter and spring, when they were taking Bible Information Class. But after they were baptized and received as communicant members their attendance was even more spotty. I only saw them in God's house once all summer.

How can you help such people?

For Pastor John Guse and me, the answer to that question appeared complicated. We didn't seem to have any time to contact the Johnsons and the Smiths and the Franklins. Pastor Guse tried to enlist the assistance of our elders, but it took months to train them. Meanwhile, none of us made any visits to the inactive families, and Pastor Guse and I both felt more and more guilty.

How can you help such people?

Researching that question recently has also made me feel as if its answer is complicated. Dr. Alan F. Harre's *Close the Back Door*² contains over a hundred pages of theory and practice on "ways to create a caring congregational fellowship."³ His scholarship is obvious, but it is also somewhat imposing.⁴ Our own Synod has just published "a study of back door losses with recommendations for ministry to inactives," *My Brother's Keeper*⁵ It too is full of facts and figures, with many practical suggestions.

For a novice like me, however, just these two works have more than enough information to further my fears and perpetuate my paralysis. There seem to be 101 good, godly answers to the question "How can you help such people?"

That is why this paper is entitled "A Simple Strategy for Reclaiming Straying Members." The problem of reclaiming straying members may be complex, but that should not keep us from the actual work of ministering to the straying. In this paper I will offer some simple guidelines for reaching out to people like the Johnsons, the Smiths, and the Franklins.

Simple Biblical Truths

1. The danger Straying members receive all sorts of labels: "inactives," "delinquents," and the like. A vital one for us to keep in mind, however, is this: "those who are neglecting Word and Sacrament."⁶ The real problem with straying members is not that they are bad for morale or that large numbers of them make a congregation look poor on the annual WELS Statistical Report. The problem is that straying members are in

¹ Because I don't expect this paper to be widely distributed, I will use people's actual names. [Although the last names in this paper have been changed by the editor], we must keep in mind that "straying members" aren't just nameless, faceless examples of a pastoral problem. They are real people for whom our Savior shed real blood, and they are heading for a real eternity in heaven or hell.

² His study was "developed in cooperation with the Board for Evangelism Services, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod" (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 3.

³ This is the book's sub-title.

⁴ For instance, Harre lists thirteen broad areas ("Retention Through Careful Initial Assimilation," "Retention Through Significant Experiences and Personal Investment," eg.) on which we can focus in order to limit the number of dropouts.

⁵ The study was published by our Board for Evangelism. The editor was Norman W. Berg.

⁶ John M. Mahnke employs this terminology in "Dealing with the Neglector of Word and Sacrament," a paper presented to the WELS California Pastoral Conference on January 29, 1979.

danger of losing their faith in Jesus. “Faith comes from hearing the message” Paul writes (Romans 10:17). Conversely, if you don’t hear the message, your faith will fade away.

Jesus used a picture of a grape vine to state the same truth. “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:5-6). Without contact with the gospel, God’s means of grace, faith shrinks and dies. That is why we try to reclaim the straying. We want their faith to grow, so that they remain in Christ now and forever.

2. The love of God Our God cannot stand sin and rebellion. The Bible shows that it especially bothers God when his children stray from him.⁷ But we also read over and over of God’s great love for his straying children.⁸ Jesus’ parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son remind us how patiently and diligently our Lord works to bring sinners into his fold. Each soul is precious to him: “There is rejoicing in the presence of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

3. The love we show It is this love of God our Savior which compels us to seek the straying.⁹ In addition, Christians are the Body of Christ, and therefore, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). The result is that every Christian will want to follow Paul’s instruction: “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him... Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2). The law of Christ is love!

4. The pastor’s role Leaders in God’s church are particularly responsible for ministering to the straying. Ezekiel is a good example. The LORD told him, “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel” (Ezekiel 3:17). Then he commanded Ezekiel to warn the people to turn from their evil ways. The Apostle Paul felt the same kind of responsibility. “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). Pastors today will feel a similar concern for straying members.

5. The purpose of discipline One last point to observe is the purpose of Christian discipline. It is not to pare off the “deadwood,” and it is not to punish. If a sinner persists in his ways, we discipline him in hopes of winning him back to the Lord and to eternal life. Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15). Similarly, Paul commanded the Corinthians, “Hand this man over to Satan, so that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Simple Steps for Action

1. Begin Reclaiming the straying may never seem as urgent to a pastor as Sunday’s sermon. Straying members don’t usually call up the pastor to request a visit, either. But don’t be fooled. Don’t put off the task. Procrastinating will not help you, or the straying member, or the Lord. The only one it will benefit is Satan. Today is the day to phone for an appointment. Today is the day to drop by the straying member’s home. Today! As the saying goes, “The best way to begin is to begin.”

2. Be prayerful An old German hymn advises: “With the Lord begin thy task, Jesus will direct it. For his aid and counsel ask, Jesus will perfect it.”¹⁰ When you’re about to contact a straying member, first put your heart, your ears and your mouth in the Lord’s hands. And pray earnestly. Don’t fall into the “I’ll just dash off a

⁷ For example, God said through Isaiah, “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard [Israel]. What more could have been done for my vineyard that I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland” (Isaiah 5:3-6).

⁸ For example, God said through Hosea, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath” (Hoses 11:8-9).

⁹ “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ...So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5:14,16).

¹⁰ *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), hymn 540.

prayer as I pull in the driveway” temptation. Pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Pray specifically. Your humble prayers for the salvation of someone’s soul are the kind of prayers our Lord loves to answer.

3. Be personal It may seem easier and more efficient to write letters to people who are straying, especially if there are dozens of them in your congregation. But letters are a poor way to communicate when members are straying.¹¹ Even if they read your letter, they cannot reply immediately—so there is no real communication. You cannot listen to what excuses straying members may be clinging to; nor can you try to decode their “body language.” Also, with a letter of this sort you are more likely to be perceived as a condemning authority figure than as a concerned Christian friend (even if you write evangelically).¹² When souls are hanging in the balance between heaven and hell, don’t we owe it to people to speak with them personally?

4. Be quick The Teacher writes in Ecclesiastes, “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak” (3:7). When someone is neglecting Word and Sacrament, it is the time to speak. Don’t let ten or twenty weeks go by before you finally let someone know that you noticed they haven’t been at worship for a while. Act quickly. Four to six weeks is not too soon.¹³ An even shorter span of absence will demand action if the straying members used to come every Sunday.

When your congregation is faced with many straying members, you may have to make a tough decision: “With our limited amount of time for visits, whom should we see first?” Go to those who have been absent for six months or less. Statistics indicate that such people are more likely to become active again than those who have been absent longer.¹⁴

5. Be attentive It’s the big moment. You finally made it into Joe and Jane Straying’s living room. The conversation turns to church things, and you sense the time is right to point them back in the right direction-regular worship. So you back up your dump truck filled with pertinent Bible verses and catchy analogies, and you pull the lever. BAM! A half-hour later you’re on your way again, confident that you spoke masterfully and that your conversation with Joe and Jane will bear much fruit.

If your visit doesn’t seem to achieve any results in the long run, perhaps it is because you forgot one of the most important purposes for visiting Joe and Jane. You didn’t listen.¹⁵ Listening builds trust. Listening allows you to probe behind the excuses to the real issues. Listening gives you the ability to speak law and gospel specifically. The adage about why we have two ears but only one mouth surely fits here. Listen!

6. Be persistent Nutrition experts warn people who are overweight not to go on crash diets, because most people who lose weight quickly put it on quickly again. A problem that took a long time to develop doesn’t get solved overnight.

¹¹ Pastor Jim Radloff’s “Tele-touch: A Phone Outreach Strategy,” (unpublished) contains the following “communication hierarchy”:

- face to face conversation
- phone call from a person known and respected
- personal letter from a person known and respected
- audio-visual presentation
- audio (cassette, eg.) presentation
- phone call from a stranger
- personal letter from a stranger
- printed materials from a person known and respected
- printed materials (form letter, eg.) from a stranger

The first type of contact, face-to-face, is the most likely to have impact. Each type of contact after it tends to carry progressively less weight.

¹² Kenneth Haugk says bluntly, “[Letters] do more damage than good. They drive people away; they give people further reason to stay away.” Quoted in *My Brother’s Keeper*, 43.

¹³ Research by John Savage indicates that potential dropouts tend to give their fellow members six to eight weeks to notice that they are moving out of the mainstream of congregational life. If the dropouts were not contacted, they begin to find other activities to fill the void left in their individual lives.

Harre summarizes Savage’s findings in *Close the Back Door*, 59-61.

¹⁴ *My Brother’s Keeper*, 41-42.

¹⁵ Norman Berg points out that some of the keys to good listening are 1) not immediately challenging the comments and reasons given by inactive members, 2) restating what you have heard, and 3) truly seeking to understand. *My Brother’s Keeper*, 43.

The same is usually true of the problem of the straying member. Don't expect one visit to straighten everything out. Be persistent. Norman Berg advises that up to six personal visits, with up to ten hours of listening, may be necessary.¹⁶ A reason for hope: a 1988 Gallup poll revealed that one-half of all Christians who strayed from their congregations in their teen years returned within ten years.¹⁷

7. Be wise There are probably a hundred errors you could make when speaking to a straying member, but one of the worst is not talking about Jesus. The straying member may need to air his gripes about "the church," but the most important thing to talk about with him is his relationship with our Savior. In comparison, nothing else matters.

For that reason, don't ever take for granted that a person believes the gospel. Present it. Apply it. If the person confesses his faith in Christ, the next step is to remind him how important the means of grace are. The gospel in the Word and the Sacraments are the only way we remain connected to Christ and grow in our faith. Emphasizing these things will put your appeal to attend worship again in the proper light.

In speaking about our Lord and his means of grace, you will use words from Scripture. Why not have the other person read some of the verses from his own Bible, out loud? Involving his eyes and mouth as well as his ears may help him pay better attention to the Word.

8. Be in several places at once Be in several places at once? If you have many straying members, that may seem necessary. Otherwise you'll never have enough time to see everyone. The solution is to train others to reach out to the straying. In that way, you truly can multiply yourself.

Here again, the time and effort involved in training lay people to call on the straying may seem too much.¹⁸ This is supposed to be a simple strategy, isn't it? One way to proceed is to choose a man who is mature in his faith. Take him on a few calls; then take another man, and another. Once you have a few evangelical, experienced men who have learned to listen and speak effectively, then you may want to organize and draw up a structured program.¹⁹

Simple Preventive Measures

1. Take worship attendance Passing around a tablet during worship so that everyone can sign their names, etc., may seem bothersome or even legalistic. But "friendship registers" can be a good tool for gospel ministry. Some pluses: 1) They help worshipers find out the names of those sitting near them so that they can greet each other. 2) They help the congregation's evangelists know who were the guests and what their phone numbers are. 3) They help the elders track the attendance of members.²⁰

The attendance information we're interested in is not so much "who was there" but "who wasn't there." (Make sure the members know this!) Once the data is entered into the church's computer, it is easy to chart attendance patterns and to identify those who need personal care. The computer could even be set up to highlight members who have not attended worship for three to six weeks. Then you could see at a glance who needs attention soon.

2. Make pastoral calls If the only time you make calls on members is when someone is sick, someone is a shut-in, or someone has a problem, you're not alone. The days when pastors could make frequent visits to members' homes may be past. Life in America has never raced along faster than today, and pastors have never been expected to serve their people in so many ways.

On the other hand, the old saying "a house-going pastor makes a church-going people" isn't completely out of date. The more you are in your members' homes, the more you are able to detect troubles before they become disasters. And the more you are in your members' homes, the more likely they may be to listen to your

¹⁶ *My Brother's Keeper*, 43.

¹⁷ *My Brother's Keeper*, 43.

¹⁸ In *Close the Back Door* Harre includes an admirably detailed plan for training lay visitors. However, it involves six training sessions before anyone is visited, and 16 sessions overall. See pages 92-118.

¹⁹ This insight comes from Wayne Mueller's "Keys to Evangelical Congregational Development," a paper presented to the Wissilowa Pastoral Conference on April 22, 1985, p. 15.

²⁰ Some other possibilities for taking note of attendance: watch who picks up the materials in his or her mail-box and who doesn't; have the ushers check off all those in attendance on an every-member listing (this would only be feasible in a small church).

counsel. Can you rearrange your schedule to allow at least a couple personal calls each week? Can you use the phone to keep in touch with members on a regular basis? There is no substitute for knowing your people well.

3. Wake up sleepy groups Here is how Norman Berg describes those most likely to drop out of activity or membership in the first five years of membership:

- Those who have made less than three new friends in the first year
- Those who have not joined at least one small group (Bible study, choir, support group, etc.) in the first year
- Those who have not been given a meaningful responsibility for congregational service within two years²¹

The implication is clear: members must become assimilated into the congregation. The topic of assimilation is a hot one lately, and there is much to say about it. For our purposes we may just note that groups and committees need “new blood” all the time if they are to serve in assimilation, and therefore, retention. Make sure someone doesn’t have to have been a member for ten years before he or she can be on the usher team or the altar guild!

Also, consider whether new groups could help retain some of your newer members (and be of service to others). Would a “Mother’s Morning Out” program be helpful? Or a volleyball team? Or a group of literacy volunteers? Or an early-morning prayer circle? The possibilities are as wide as your church’s imagination and interests.

4. Stake everything on the Lord Jesus prayed that Peter’s faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). We need to do the same, even when no crisis seems imminent. Pray for your strong members, that they will not grow weak. Pray for your weak members, that they may overcome Satan’s many obstacles. Pray for your new members, that they may continue to grow in the Lord. Pray for yourself and the other leaders of your church, that you may have a heart for the straying like the Lord’s. The Father answered Jesus’ prayer for Peter. He will answer yours too, to the eternal glory of his name.

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²¹ *My Brother’s Keeper*, 45.