

Speaking the Truth Lovingly and Effectively To the Straying and New Sheep

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Introduction

As I began to gather material for this paper, I became concerned that I not simply rehash old ground. Perhaps that is, at least in part, impossible. I began quickly to find that this is one area of ministry that has been covered extensively. I would refer you to the bibliography, where you will find a list of material available for you to read. Of particular help were the books by Dr. Alan F. Harre and Prof. Joel D. Heck. In addition I discovered the rather thorough research done by our Synod's Board for Evangelism and published by Northwestern Publishing House in 1991 entitled: "My Brothers' Keeper." I am sure that most if not all of you have either read or browsed this study.

For all the material written on the reactivation of the straying and assimilation of the newcomer, there is an important aspect about which I was asked to write. How do we carry out the task of assimilating new members and of reactivating the straying and the lost in and from our churches.

There was one thing that I feel constrained to point out at the outset, Much of what is available in the studies of the problem of assimilation and delinquency was done by groups overtly connected with the "church growth movement." They seem to be one group particularly interested in asking questions like: Why do people leave the church? What would make them return? How can we prevent such losses from occurring? Does a member assimilation program really influence 'back door' losses? Because of this, I asked myself: Is their research invalid because it comes from a perspective with which we disagree?

I think not. True, we must use it discriminatingly or with discernment of the spirits, as St. John would advise. A little later in the paper I will pick up on my use of the word "effectively". It seems to be a red flag for so many of us, including myself. Suffice it to say here at the start that we need to seriously consider what is happening in our churches concerning the retention of "all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers" (Acts 20:28). The question before us this afternoon is whether we as a church are doing what our title entails:

Speaking the Truth Lovingly and Effectively To the Straying and New Sheep.

If we are to deal with the question of "speaking the truth lovingly and effectively," then we must understand the problem that we face. Let's begin then by taking a look at the truth that confronts us. As a church body we are no exception to the realities that face others. A universal problem of straying and inactive sheep that all visible churches have had to face is our challenge as well. Let us realistically look at the statistics that pertain to us so that our vision of what confronts is pertinent to us.

I. A Look At the Stats

We will look at some of the statistical evidence gathered by the Board for Evangelism and edited by pastor Norman W. Berg. Before that however we need to look at some general statistics drawn from an article by David A. Roozen.¹ According to Roozen using data from a 1978 Gallup study 40% of the country is unchurched. Interestingly over 90% of these were at one time affiliated with a church or some religious organization. Of these, 60% claimed to be regular in their attendance in church or Bible study. Generally Roozen estimates that 50% of Americans are dropouts.

A look at the "Stats"² reveals that between 1986 and 1989 the average loss of the sample congregations was between 3 & 4%. Some congregations, experienced up to 10% back-door losses and others experienced no

¹ David A Roozen, "Church Dropouts: Changing Patterns of Disengagement and Reentry," *Review of Religious Research*, XXI, 4 (Supplement 1980), 427.

² Drawn from "My Brothers' Keeper"; NPH, Board for Evangelism of WELS, 1991.

such losses. Just for your information a check of the Statistical Report of the WELS for the years 1986-1993 reveals that in the Central Conference of WWD, our congregations experienced on the average a 1% loss for the last eight (8) years.

Some good news here would be the statistic released in the December President's Newsletter (Amalgamation news insert) showing an increase from 1961 to 1993 in Bible class attendance from 9,275 to 33,976—a more than 350 % increase. Yet, as noted above, for '86-89 our back-door losses have remained pretty constant.

While we might wish for a simple picture of those congregations who lose members through the back door and those who don't, no such simple picture is available. As is pointed out often in the Synod's study, the reasons for losses are often unique to each congregational situation. We can however offer some general observances that are worth our consideration.

The problem that we see outlined is one apparently that has some relationship to the congregation's size and location. Statistically it goes like this:

- Large congregations (300+) seem to lose at a proportionally lower rate than small congregations (less than 100); and
- Congregations in metropolitan areas or on the frontier districts of Synod lose proportionally more members than congregations in rural settings and in the core districts of Synod.³

None of those statistics are surprising. They, upon reflection, say 2 commonsense things. The first is that where you have a large amount of support and a great variety of programs to involve people, then you will be more "successful" in retaining members. Second, where there is a more stable group of people with longer religious traditions, then they will be more reluctant to break with it, especially if families are present and involved in their religious situation.

Therefore the reasons for leaving that were given to the poll takers who spoke with "124 'former, inactive and active' members in 22 selected congregations"⁴ are also logical. In asking the reason they were inactive or had become "former members" of a WELS congregation, the following responses were given:

- relocation because of job, retirement or going away to school: 1 out of 6;
- problems with the congregation: 1 out of 6;
- personal and family issues: 1 out of 3;
- problems with church teachings: 1 out of 4

Some thoughts are in order on the statistics gathered and worked with in our Synod. "Back door losses are neither unnoticed nor unremembered in the WELS" as Pastor Joel Gerlach⁵ writes. Regarding the last category, it is obvious that we cannot change the teachings of Scripture. However we can do considerably more in reaching out to those who have personal problems with the congregation. The Scriptural mandates are too numerous and too urgent for any of us to ignore this area of concern in our ministry. I do not believe any of us is not touched by this very real congregational problem.

At the same time it must be noted that the data we have explains only 25% of the differences in congregations. In other words 75% of the differences that affect backdoor losses in a congregation are due to "unique circumstances" in the congregation for which no data was gathered.

Many of the families that leave our congregations are "hurting" families—drug and alcohol problems, incarceration, unwanted pregnancies, child abuse, extra-marital affairs, etc. They need Gospel answers to real life problems. Are we giving those answers to them? To put that another way, Are we so declaring the wondrous love of God in Jesus so that it draws people to Christ in a living way? Does this Gospel ministry of ours translate into Gospel lives among our members? Are our members what Paul desired of the Corinthians when he wrote: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show

³ **Core Districts:** Michigan, Minnesota, Northern Wisconsin, SE Wisconsin, WW Wisconsin; **Frontier Districts:** Pacific Northwest, A-C, South Central, S Atlantic, N Atlantic; **Plains Districts:** Dakota-Montana, Nebraska.

⁴ "My Brothers' Keeper", op. cit., page 5.

⁵ op.cit. page 13.

that you are a letter *from Christ*, the result of our ministry, *written* not with ink but *with the Spirit of the living God*, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." II Cor. 3:2-3 (emphasis added).

We lose too many life-long WELS members and we lose them in a miserable manner. They lie inactive for years until they or the congregation decides to sever the nominal tie of church membership. That is a sad, tragic way to lose those of our flocks "of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseer" (Acts 20:28). It ought to be obvious that we are at times less than faithful in guarding those over whom we have a charge to act as their shepherds.

Add to this that fact that statistically we lose the greatest number of members among those who are brought in by evangelism outreach. In other words proportionally we lose more from that group that we would call "new members". It seems to say that we do not do a good enough job of assimilating these new members into our congregational life.

Finally there is also little Synodical loyalty among WELS members. I always thought that that was an advantage in the sense that we are attempting to tie the hearts of our members to the LORD and His Church 3/4 the *Una Sancta*. Are we perhaps missing the boat in this regard by forgetting that by God's grace at this time in history, God desires to use our Synod to reach people with the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we not called upon to help our members—new and old alike—appreciate what God has given us in the human organization called WELS? If we do that, can't God use that appreciation of Synod to give people the opportunity to evaluate more carefully the reason or excuses for becoming inactive in the life of one of its congregations?

Ought we not to take an increased awareness of the real problem we face? None of what has been pointed out is said to create a "guilt trip" among us. I insert that thought at this point because we do become rather defensive about what we have been doing in our ministry in this area. So defensive at times that we will not consider what others are saying about improving our ministry as it affects the straying and the newly received members. The data that we have looked at is to be taken in the spirit in which it is presented—a trumpet call to examine what we are doing in the areas of reactivation and assimilation.

II. Attitudes and Their Effect on Ministry

Attitudes have their effect on our ministry. Our attitudes do change or inhibit what we will do, what we will try and how we go about changing our ministries. Below I have listed some assumptions that we make that have a negative impact on what we do in reaching out to those who are straying from active service in Christ's church. They are presented in abbreviated form:

- Pastors and lay leaders dislike calling on inactive members. It is just not a pleasant call to schedule because of the defensive atmosphere and the hurt we might encounter. All of us deal with enough hurting people in our ministry that it might seem obvious that we will not go out of our way to confront more "pain" among our people. In addition we or those we send often find such calls to be difficult because they may have no answer to give to the expressed hurts and complaints of the straying.
- Stereotypes are too simplistic.

"Actives"		Labels, Stereotypes, Barriers, Misunderstandings	"Inactives"	
How they see "Inactives"	How they feel		How they see "Actives"	How they feel
dropouts delinquents do-nothings inactive lazy backsliders sinners complainers	frustrated fearful anxious worried hostile suspicious full of pity sympathetic			hypocrites do-gooders nosy fussy nitpickers bossy "in group" judges

excuse makers	puzzled embarrassed		high and mighty meddlers	having failed apathetic no longer caring ⁶
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From the material in the chart above, one begins to see that stereotyped attitudes about people get in the way of effective outreach to the straying. When active members consider a brother or sister who is falling away a "burden", a "drain on the resources of the church", a "diverting nuisance" to the work of the congregation, then how will the church tend to approach these members who are weak, hurting and immature in their relationship to Christ? The answer is obvious and self-fulfilling in its results for as we consider the "inactive", so we may force them by our attitudes to live down to our expectations.

- The best and brightest lay members are used for 'survival goals'—raising money, keeping physical plant in good repair, keeping existing groups going, etc. That is a reality that I would doubt many of have seen contradicted. We employ all too often in our congregations those who are gifted and willing to serve in roles that simply maintain what we have. Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that such service is neither desirable nor unimportant. I only point it out because of its effect on our efforts to assimilate and reactivate. When we place a secondary emphasis on reaching the straying and in assimilating new members, are not the consequences of that decision a less than scintillating track record of renewal among the straying?

These assumptions speak about barriers to our ministry to the straying. Dislike inhibits a key component—loving contact. Our allocation of our best to maintenance or survival goals inhibits what we use to reach to the wandering and the new. Attitudes about the wandering inhibit doing things that may help overcome the barriers.

Perhaps we need to listen carefully to what George E. Sweazey describes in the life of many a congregation:

On that melancholy evening when the church officers meet to purge the roll they are likely to be in a critical mood—"These people never kept their vows; they were unfaithful." In all honesty it is more likely to be the church that broke its vows and was unfaithful. If we treated newborn babies as carelessly as we treat newborn Christians, the infant mortality rates would equal the appalling mortality of Church members. The obstetrician must be followed by the pediatrician. As William J. McCullough sagely says, "I never saw a bassinet without sides."⁷

It is no surprise then for us to note that there are barriers that we need to remove in our thinking and in the thinking of the active members of our congregations. In the following list I have tried to set down some of the more important barriers we need to remove:

- We erect a barrier when we or our lay members assume that the new member or the reactivated member is solely responsible for their inclusion in the activities and ministries of the congregation. When we consider all the other barriers that someone might face upon entering our congregational fellowships, is this really an attitude that we would wish to carry regarding the new or reactivated member? I think not!
- We erect a barrier when we or our lay members assume that new members or reactivated members know all they need to know. These for the most part are young Christians or immature Christians starting to grow in their faith. Why do we assume they will act in a mature way in their participation in the congregation? Often they not only know little about their Christian faith, but they also lack knowledge about local congregational customs, the proper procedure for communion attendance, the worship of the congregation including times of worship and when communion is served, who is serving on which board of the congregation, what the various functions of the boards or committees are and so on.
- We erect a barrier when we or our lay members assume that new members will make their way into the groups of the congregation without invitation. This is an assumption we often do not say but act as

⁶ Haare, p. 52.

⁷ Sweazey, George F., *Effective Evangelism* (New York, Harper & Row, 1953); page 207.

though it was inevitable. A simple announcement in the bulletin or newsletter is at times assumed to be all that is necessary for a new member or a formerly inactive member to become involved. Then we are disappointed when they do not come or do not join in the activity of the group. Personal invitation by personal contact can't be ignored. Maybe we need to develop a chain of contact by which requests for involvement are extended by personal invitation.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned that I had purposefully used the word "effectively" in the title for this paper. In changing the attitudes that people have that result in the erection of barriers to the new member and the reactivated member, I believe, we have been speaking about being more effective in our outreach and more improved in our incorporation of the new member. To some, including myself, such expressions seem to get in the way of our reliance on God's power through the use of Word and Sacrament. Not too long ago I again ran across this passage. It struck me that Peter was speaking about being more effective in our Christian life and ministry. II Peter 1:5-9 For this very reason make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone, does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."

It seems to me that Peter is indicating what we all know—it is possible to hinder the effectiveness of the Gospel in our lives and as we reach out to our world and our members. You do not need to be a rocket scientist to realize that a sourpuss attitude will hardly gain for our presentation of the Gospel a very receptive audience; whereas a person who lives and breathes "brotherly kindness" will gain more opportunities for the Gospel to be presented. An awareness that we need to reach those who are becoming less and less engaged in the life and work of the congregation before they are totally alienated from the family of believers is just commonsense wisdom about people. It in no way, in my thinking, implies that the Gospel cannot reach their heart if it comes to them long after the optimum time in which to reach such members. This is how I am using the word "effective".

I therefore share a presupposition with Joel Heck (page 9): "God's Word and Sacraments are the only means by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith. Various methods of assimilation are effective to the extent that they bring people into contact with these means...also effective to the extent that current members demonstrate genuine Christian love to the new members in their midst."—Again I will say it, "This is just Christian Common Sense!"

Thus I hope that you will see throughout this presentation that I am in no way advocating a "church growth" mentality in the suggestions for a more effective ministry to the new and straying members. I am simply saying that if these observations will prove to be helpful to you and your ministry and to your congregation, then of course use them in the spirit in which they are intended.

III. Toward a More Evangelical Approach

Before we talk about the specifics of what we can do and how we can do it to reach the wandering and assimilate the new member, there are some premises that lead to more "effective" ministry. These are the same as premises toward a more evangelical approach. We need at this point to compare the differences between a "law" approach and a "Gospel" approach to this aspect of our ministry.

The Law Approach and Its Effects

Law does "reactivate" some. Fear caused by the threats of God's punishment may compel some to be re-engaged in Christ's family. After all, fear is a powerful force in our lives. The speeder who takes his foot off the gas pedal roaring down I-94 because he thought he saw a police cruiser up ahead is a testimony to what fear

can do. Thus fear may work more effectively in a society where church involvement and activity are generally valued by the surrounding society.

Think back if you will to the historical example of the boom of the 50's in church attendance and activity. Was it because of peoples' love for Christ that after World War II people flocked to churches? If it was, then why the great hypocrisy of that era—a hypocrisy that turned off a whole generation of people as they watched parents get drunk on Saturday night and then turn up in church as paragons of Christian virtue on Sunday morning; ...as they watched their parents mouth the pieties of the congregation, and then turn around on Monday to cheat their business associates? But I digress. The point is that church involvement that came because it was an expected part of society produces no real life in Christ. Indeed Paul maintains that it is powerless to do so. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so..." (Rom. 8:7b-8).

Still the law does produce superficial activity that is statistically satisfying. The Pharisees, who went out to John the Baptist, were not drawn there by the love of the Messiah about whom John was preaching. So John delivers some scathing words of rebuke: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance..." (Mt. 3:7b-8). I am sure John could have produced some amazing "stats" about the people he was reaching, including in that number the merely curious and the openly skeptical, and the effect he was having on them. I am also sure that John never would have done that, but that he would have insisted his ministry was concerned not about church growth, but about personal repentance, preparation and responsibility.

Law's result is lasting deadness. Jesus' lament about the load that the Pharisees load on their converts, and it is a load of 'law'! (Mt. 23:2-4) "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." Clearly Jesus would have all his listeners be warned about these purveyors of the Law, these guarantors that the Law can save them. The Law doesn't save, as Paul points out in Romans 8 "...for what the Law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering..." (v. 3), rather the Law can only kill (II Cor. 3:6—"the letter kills..."). Indeed without the Gospel as the motivating force, no real life is possible for it is the "Gospel tree" that produces fruit. Indeed only the Gospel—what Paul calls "the ministry of the Spirit"—will produce that which lasts. (Read II Cor. 3:7-11).⁸

We are compelled to ask at this point: What is the role of the law in the "reactivation" of inactives and dropouts? Does the Law have a role in member reactivation? The answer is a resounding: Yes! The Law's role is essentially to make the comfortable sinner uncomfortable, to break the fallow soil to allow planting of the Gospel seed, to crush the proud and arrogant spirit that turns a stony heart toward God's love in Christ Jesus, to cause the self-satisfied to hunger and thirst after a righteousness not their own. Thus the Law must be carefully and properly applied as we approach the wandering brother or sister in Christ. Certainly it is there to convict the heart of its sinful neglect of God's means of grace. As I like to put it at times, it is there to punch holes in the philosophical roofs of people so the rain of God's truth can pour into their seemingly safe sanctuaries.

It is there to get sinners, one and all, to feel the sorrow, the contrition that characterizes the penitent heart.

The Gospel Approach and Its Effect

I must confess, that the Gospel does not appear to work as well as the Law in reactivating an inactive member but in fact is the only power able to truly reactivate an inactive member. To many it may appear to be casting

⁸ Especially these words from this section caught my attention: "...if the ministry that brought death,... engraved in letters on stone...will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men...the ministry that brings righteousness!...how much greater is the glory of that which lasts."

the pearls before the swine, as one layman put it. I believe that takes into account only the surface appearance of a Gospel centered approach to reaching out to the delinquent, the straying, the inactive and the "dropouts".

I find the suggestion—that it is the Gospel that draws hearts back to God's family—in the parable of the "lost son" in Luke 15. What was it that finally and ultimately brought the prodigal home? While we might be tempted to respond: his need sent him home, I believe Jesus' parable specifies a different drawing power. In the son's head and heart, Jesus put these words: "...How many of my father's hired men have food to spare," To me that simple statement expresses a realization of the Gospel—specifically: of the mercy and undeserved love that the son hoped to find in his "father's" house. Jesus then goes on to reinforce that picture of gracious love in the full acceptance that the Father gives his wayward son. There in the son re-robed, re-sandaled and feted we have the picture of what God would have us faithfully minister through the Gospel to those who are straying from the "Father's house".

One thing however I believe is certain: Using the Gospel to motivate the inactive member is much more time and energy expensive than using the "Law". It takes big chunks of time to carry out this type of reactivation ministry. The reason for this is demonstrated in some assumptions made by Lyle Schaller:

that this listening is more likely to require six to ten hours, rather than two or three hours, if we are serious about getting beyond the veneer of excuses and discovering the basic reasons why this member is now inactive;⁹

we assume this process will probably require several visits, and it is unlikely to be accomplished in one or two visits.¹⁰

Time is needed to develop a real level of communication, to understand the real hurts, and to apply the Gospel to specific hurts or misconceptions. Because an evangelical approach, another name for what we have been talking about, is time expensive, it requires a serious level of commitment and involvement. Under some suggestions I hope to clarify this section a little more.

Finally the Gospel and only the Gospel will produce long term result. Jesus' illustration of the vine and the branches indicates that the implied Gospel connection will result in long term fruitfulness. Indeed the opposite result is also mentioned there: "...apart from me you can do nothing..." (15 :5c). Add to that Jesus' call to Gospel-motivated activity in these much-loved and remembered words: "Come to me...and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:28,30). Other passages such as Eph. 2:10 and Titus 2:14 simply make the case for a connection between the Gospel and long term fruitfulness even more obvious. Nonetheless it is a vital concept to hold on to during our discussion of a proper approach to reactivation and assimilation.

But let us go from the general to the particular. First, I believe it ought to go without saying that there is a "must" for each congregation. It "must" have as its primary motivation the Gospel desire to demonstrate by its every action and reaction that it is a functioning part of the body of Christ. Second, the individual congregation has the responsibility to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all who are outside the faith and to invite them to affiliate with the congregation. Third, an individual congregation goes about its tasks of "good newsing" people who are not Christians and "discipling" members when the power of God is brought to bear on all such people through the Gospel. Here the term "Gospel" is used in its technical, narrow Lutheran sense as juxtaposed to the "Law". Dr. Haare's words are particularly pertinent here:

When a congregation promotes membership on the basis of considerations like its success, the social class of its members, its clever programming,, and a variety of other claims to fame, that

⁹ Haare, pg. 58 - Assumption #7.

¹⁰ Haare, pg. 58 - Assumption #8.

congregation is communicating a gospel of cheap grace much more reminiscent of the way of the world and its standards than of the costly grace which under girds the Gospel message.¹¹

IV. An Evangelical Approach to Reactivation

The idea of reactivation is a scripturally mandated concern. That is basic. Jesus expresses that concern often times in parabolic form. Two examples are found in, what some have called the "lost" chapter. It is in Luke 15—the parables of the lost coin and of the lost sheep. Without going into a detailed study of each of these parables, it is sufficient for our purposes here to point out that in each energy is expended and concern is expressed. Both parables make it plain that to the one who had lost the object of its search, they were willing to expend the effort that is used to regain that which was lost. One other thing we need to note. In each story there is tremendous joy at their recovery, a joy that is automatically shared with their associates. Now let's also realize that the joy of seeking and finding is not always shared by our associates!

Isn't it interesting that as Jesus' presents the idea of a Gospel motivated return of a wandering son, there is in the same story another character in whom we can see many of the barriers that we find in our congregations. The "older brother" is the type of a person filled up with barriers to the wayward and the new: we read of him in Luke 15:28-32.

The older brother was angry because of the inclusion of one who had not been faithful. The false premise that faithful service to the "father" somehow makes that person more eligible for blessings than simply the "father's" grace is a barrier we see in our congregations. It is the barrier of exclusion, of cliquishness, of a cold and uncaring attitude fostered by a feeling of superiority. The son does not possess the awareness of the father's spirit because he can't celebrate the simple truth of God's grace: "...we had to celebrate and be glad, because 'this brother' of yours was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found " (Lk. 15:32).

Above all then the barrier of self-righteousness must be dealt with in our congregations. It is incumbent upon us to point out that we are all children of God's grace. That all we possess as part of God's family is ours solely in the undeserved giving of our Father in heaven. When we are able to fully and completely convince our active members of that truth, then we are on our way to creating a different, an evangelical atmosphere in our congregations. Still there are more barriers.

The workers in the parable of the vineyard illustrate another common barrier to reaching out to and incorporating the wayward and lost.¹² Throughout this parable Jesus sets up and gives voice to a feeling of superiority. Those who have been faithful view that faithfulness as an addition to God's grace. They harbored the feeling that they were deserving of recognition that sets them apart from the rest. That idea led them to feelings of insult and anger at the Master's great love. The Scriptural motivation for seeking the lost and incorporating the new is clearly one of grace and immense mercy. As the parabolic master asks: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v.14-15)

Suggestions About Reactivating the Straying

Having looked at the "why" of reactivation, let us look at some of the "hows". What I am about to give you is just a sampler of the score of suggestions that are present in various books. My propose here is to point out some of the more important ideas without becoming bogged down in the details. Besides which it would be impossible to suggest those things which would work in every congregational situation. Since each congregation is unique, you must choose those suggestions that would prove to be helpful in your situation.

To deal with the problem of backdoor losses, you must have a clear recognition of who is dropping out and why. In a small congregation this first part may pose little problem. The pastor simply sits down on a regular basis, goes through the membership list and notes those whom he has not seen for the last month or so.

¹¹ Alvin Haare, op.cit., p. 8-9.

¹² Matt. 20:10-15.

He phones the individual and schedules a meeting by which he discovers what has been hindering their participation in the body of Christ. No fuss, no muss, it is a straightforward and simple pastoral call.¹³

With increasing size comes the problem of tracking the congregational member's involvement in the life of the congregation. It is too easy for 'inactive' members to drift away lost in the crowd. How then do you "faithfully" seek the straying in a "large" congregation? Here are some suggestions:

1) Increase the size of the pastoral staff with one of the pastors to keep track of what is happening with the members in worship and communion attendance. Even if your congregation can devote that kind of resources to this ministry, a way of tracking is also needed. Therefore:

2) Use a computer to help you do the tracking. There are all sorts of database programs available or adaptable to the tracking of member participation. This assumes of course that you have in place some form of registration (cards, attendance journal, etc.) whose data can be placed in the database. Modern databases have a variety of powerful "queries" that can produce reports to track those who have been absent over the last 6 weeks, whose communion attendance shows a decline in frequency and who give other indications that something is hindering their spiritual life in Christ.

3) Develop a team of visitors—because they, as you grow, will become all the more important in reaching quickly those who are dropping out. It is a matter of Christian common sense again to realize that no single pastor or group of pastors, no matter how faithful, will be able to visit the straying as frequently nor as quickly as is necessary because;

4) Time is critical. Dr. John Savage notes that "...dropouts consciously or unconsciously give the local congregation only six to eight weeks once they have dropped out to call on them..."¹⁴ Research will tell us that we must get to a delinquent member before 6 to 9 weeks have passed. The longer the initial visit is delayed, the more likely the member will think that either the congregation does not even know that he is missing or that the congregation does not care. Neither case may in fact be true, but the impression is left and it is difficult to remove.

5) Finally we must rely on personal visits simply because there is no substitute for them. While a letter may impart some useful information to the member who is becoming inactive, it must be used in connection with a personal visit—either by the pastor or by a lay member.

But what if a straying sheep will not be turned from his path of abandonment of God's call to be involved in the life of the group of believers represented by the local congregation? What if the contacts are scorned and rejected, what do we do then? Or what about the member whom another member sees in a sin that obviously puts at risk their relationship with Christ?

Excommunication—An Act of Love

Excommunication is the ultimate act of love for a congregation. Dr. Haare's book has a fascinating study of this whole area of ministry as he looks at Matthew 18:15-18—the classic text on church discipline.¹⁵ There are two extreme views of this section. On the one side: "...loving concern for fellow Christians necessitates that no discipline at all is to be exercised by the church..." "...only legitimate proclamation is the Gospel." On the other side are those who maintain that "...discipline is a mandatory activity of the church." While we would have no objection to that bare bones statement, they take church discipline to the extreme. They include all sorts of adiaphoristic behavior (for example: the wearing of cosmetics, dancing, playing cards, going to movies, etc.) as cause for church discipline.

There is a biblical side that does not drift to either side of the spectrum. Dr. Haare offers 16 assumptions, concerns and judgments that you can read on pages 68-70. There he gives a variety of thoughts that deal with some misconceptions about church discipline including:

¹³ Even in the scenario above he is setting himself up for problems as the congregation grows by not establishing lay involvement in dealing with the straying.

¹⁴ Dr. John Savage, L.E.A.D. Consultants of Pittsford, NY (book: *The Bored And Apathetic Church Member*)

¹⁵ Haare, op. cit., pg. 67-87.

- the church's lack of a recognition of specific sins,
- the view that congregations that discipline are unloving and legalistic,
- that church discipline is counterproductive
- that there is a lack of interpersonal relationships in the church that makes "church discipline" difficult if not impossible.

Of particular concern to us this afternoon is #15—"Confusion exists in many congregations concerning what is the primary purpose for exercising church discipline." Haare quotes one person who lists the purpose of church discipline as:

1. To maintain the authority of Christ.
2. To keep the purity of the Church.
3. To save the sinful brother.¹⁶

That listing is upside down in its priorities. To listen to Christ in Matthew 18 is to hear the spoken or expressed concern for one caught up in impenitence. Throw into the confusion about the purpose of 'church discipline' the contention of Dean Kelley. He contends that a church that disciplines will grow. In doing so, Kelley offers a kind of rubric for church leaders to misunderstand and misapply church discipline. As Haare observes: "Church discipline is exercised not to make churches grow but to be careful stewards of God's people."¹⁷

Let us now turn our attention then to Matthew 18:15-18. At this point let me share with you the thoughts of Dr. Haare.

The context for this teaching is important. The opening verses of chapter 18 speak plainly that humility, not pride, is what distinguishes a disciple of Christ as great. Since Jesus here uses a child as an illustration of greatness in God's kingdom, there is a warning about offending such a believer and causing that little one to stumble. Concern for the "little one" is likened to a shepherd's concern for the lost sheep. All believers will be concerned for the straying and the lost of God's family and the key word in verses 15 is "gained".

Immediately following the verses on church discipline, Jesus makes it plain to Peter that this concern for the lost is always ongoing for in answer to Peter's question about how many times one must be ready to forgive "...Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times...'" The chapter concludes with the parable of the unforgiving servant and makes the point most strongly that we are compelled, that we are drawn to forgive by the forgiveness of our God.

As we turn to verses 15-18, we come to what we could rightly term:

The Four Steps of Christian Love

Step #1 is to be a personal step as is also encouraged in Gal. 6:1-2. Jesus directs that our first step-conversation is to be: "...between you and him alone.." Please note here that the words "against you" are not contained in some MSS and are certainly not present in Luke 17:3; Gal. 6:1-2 or James 5:19-20. It would be and should be the exception where this step is ignored or passed over as in the case of an openly know and recognized sin done in public. All of which suggests that you do not have to wait around when a brother sins until they offend you directly or that we must wait for a pastor or church leader to act. In fact the word "brother" suggests a deep and loving concern for that individual by all believers. In a moment the outcome of this first step, but what if he does not repent. What do you talk about? You talk about the sin you have seen. Eph. 4:15 where Paul advises: "...speak the truth in love,..." does not avoid confronting a sin—lovingly speaking truth can be painful, but it is still loving!!!!

Step #2—"take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" This second step is often, I feel, misunderstood by our lay people. It is imagined that Jesus is saying: 'Take a couple of guys along and catch him in his sin. Then you'll really have the goods on him and it will be much easier to throw the bum out.' That is not Jesus' intent at all.

¹⁶ Haare, op. cit., pg.70.

¹⁷ op. cit., pg. 70.

You are to take along other believers with you so that the truth of God's word may be confirmed in the thinking of the one who has offended (so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'—verse 16). Their presence there is to impress on the offender the seriousness of his offense and that his original accuser is not alone in recognizing this as a sin.

Since their presence is to add seriousness to this act of love, it is also necessary that the brothers/sisters you take along are to be recognized Christian leaders, whose integrity and Christian lifestyle are well known (such as an elder/s?). Again the point is that out of love for the straying brother, one will go to great lengths to establish the reality and seriousness of that sin and the need for repentance. Again one asks: 'Well, what if this second step also fails to win the brother to repentance,' then you must go on to...

Step #3 Jesus directs us to "tell it to the church." As in the previous steps the weight of witness is now increased to the maximum amount. The church is to speak its unanimous condemnation of the impenitence that is found in this straying brother's life. Always remember that it is not the specific sin that causes these steps of witness, but the impenitence of the individual at fault. The failure to recognize the need for penitence and to put away the sin is what impels our concern for this erring believer. It impels us even to...

Step #4—This is the final and last step, separate from Step #3 although it may indeed happen that very night. It is not inevitable that this fourth step will be taken so that the third step is merely done so you can get to the final casting out and "handing over to Satan," as Paul explains in I Cor. 5:5.

In all of this the question remains as to the 'Why' of these disciplinary steps. For what purpose will one expend so much time and energy? The one answer is love—love in the form of "gaining" your brother, "you have won your brother over" (Mt. 18:15). That and that alone is the motivating engine behind the reaching out that is to occur in "church discipline"!

If we can gain this perspective of Jesus' words, then even His concluding "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" are an invitation and a command not to ostracize him, but to consider him a prospect because the church has now sadly discovered that the assumed fellowship no longer exists. As Dr. Haare puts it: "Lapsed brothers are not to be ignored, shunned, or forgotten. They are to be evangelized."¹⁸

Throughout the words of Matthew 18, I believe, Jesus is appealing to the church of every age to consider as precious the souls of those who are in the church and who begin, for whatever reason, to wander away. If we believe that, then we must share another presupposition: "It is better to try to prevent a problem than to try and solve it after it occurs..."¹⁹ Or as George Sweazey would put it: "A guard rail at the top of the cliff is better than an ambulance service at its foot."²⁰ On then to...

V. An evangelical approach to assimilation

Since the reactivation of straying sheep is tantamount to evangelism outreach, it is also necessary to consider seriously how to so assimilate them into the congregation so that inactivity does not become a problem again. It makes no sense to reclaim the inactive and dropout just to see them go through it again. And it also makes no sense to draw new members into the congregation if we will simply lose them out the back-door in the near future. If there is an evangelical way to reach out to the straying and I believe there is, then there must also be an evangelical approach to the assimilation of new members.

Again I go to a shared presupposition with Joel Heck in his book: "New Member Assimilation." "God's Word and Sacraments are the only means by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith. Various methods of assimilation are effective insofar as they bring people into contact with these means...also effective insofar as current members demonstrate genuine Christian love to the new members in their midst."²¹

¹⁸ Haare, op. cit., pg. 74.

¹⁹ Haare op. cit., pg. 74.

²⁰ George Sweazey, *Effective Evangelism*, (New York. Harper & Row, 1953), pg. 207-8.

²¹ Joel Heck, *New Member Assimilation, Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*; Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. ; pg. 9.

Is this a Scripturally mandated concern? To answer that, one must look to God's Word and ask: Are there any Scriptural pictures that express that mandate. Christ's pictures from His teaching ministry assumes that the natural course of Christian church growth will be accompanied by the assimilation of new members.

I offer as Exhibition #1 the picture of vine and branches in John 15:1-17. The illustration is one of connection. Jesus points out that "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing..."(v. 5). If we all as Jesus said "remain in him" then we are by association involved with one another as well. It is interesting and instructive that in the section following this, Jesus goes into great detail about our need to "love each other as I have loved you." Involvement with one another is an integral part of what I envision assimilation to be.

As Exhibition #2 I point us to the picture of the sheep and the shepherd in John 10:1-18. Here Jesus again asserts the inclusion of all true believers into the group of his sheep. While the assertion can be made that this only refers to the Church, that is the Holy Christian Church, and not to the local congregation, I believe, it carries with it the basic premise that must live in our churches—an ongoing concern for other believers and the involvement of one believer with another especially in the congregational unity with which we are all familiar. Unity here in the *Una Sancta* implies the narrower association that is the central concern of this paper just as Eph. 4:3-6 makes the point that we are to work at unity with the spiritual energy and common sense that God gives His children everywhere.

We will also include in this picture, the picture of receiving back the wayward son to inclusion in the family in Luke 15:11-21. The picture of the son received back speaks of assimilation in a compelling way. The giving of the "best robe...ring...sandal...celebration" all say that here is one to be included in all the activities and privileges of God's family again.

The active member can take no other position in his relationship with the wandering. We are reminded of that by these words from Martin Franzmann:

Forgiveness is the ground which the disciple walks on, and the air he breathes; he exists only in terms of forgiveness...The disciple who will not live toward his fellow disciple by the forgiving word which he has heard from his God has forfeited the forgiving Word of God. If he violates the fellowship with the brother whom God has placed beside him, he forfeits his fellowship with God.²²

There is a more closely related picture to which we can refer in our discussion of assimilation as an essential task of every Christian congregation. Paul's picture of the body of Christ in I Cor. 12 and its various parts assumes assimilation and involvement. Paul's argument about the diversity of people and their gifts (diversity of gifts makes people different from one another) would fall flat if he was not also arguing that we are to be part of the same body and involved in the functioning of that body. Especially Paul's presentation in verses 14 through 27 there is a compelling statement that no one can deny to another or to himself the realization that each is necessary for the function of the Body of Christ.

I believe that Christian common sense assumes the assimilation of everyone called into the family of faith. In fact there is a dire warning in Heb. 10:25—"Let us not give up meeting together, as some in are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." There are 2 major theological reasons for concern: 1) a realization that people are incapable of edifying themselves; and 2) that withdrawal means that people are caught up in a self-centered piety that fails to take seriously how important their gifts are for the well-being of the whole fellowship.

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching." (Heb. 10:25) The writer of Hebrews would warn the wandering Christian, the Christian who has absented himself from the fellowship of the body of Christ, that

²² Martin Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis, Mo., Concordia Publishing House, 1961), page 154.

he is running the risk of losing his connection with the only fellowship that will endure in the face of Christ's coming and that he is withholding from the body of Christ something that he has no right to withhold—himself!

What then is initial assimilation? Assimilation literally means "to make similar." We assimilate when we help new members acquire similar knowledge about our Christian beliefs and our congregation, similar attitudes about Christ and His church, similar feelings of belonging and similar patterns of behavior...²³ I also quote this for its emphasis on the spiritual gifts of the new member as Joel Heck notes: "Therefore assimilation is simply the process of welcoming a person into our church family and allowing that person to assume in the body of Christ that position for which the Holy Spirit has gifted him or her."²⁴

For a moment let us turn our attention to some things that may help this assimilation process. Many have pointed to the helpfulness of ethnicity. It is pointed out that it can be a help when those being assimilated are of the same ethnic background; but it can also be a hindrance when they are not! This, in short, is a two edged sword that must be used judiciously—applied where it helps, but avoided where it hinders and excludes.

What is more important is the factor of friendship in the assimilation of new members. We often overlook that "the new convert to Christianity loses many of his former friends when he comes into that new relationship with Jesus Christ and alters his previous life style."²⁵ It becomes important for the new member to develop new friendships within the congregation for encouragement and support in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Friendship is recognized by Scripture as important for believers in reaching unbelievers. The following Scripture references are listed for your thought.

In Mark 2:13-15 Matthew (Levi) is about to cut himself off from his former associates, disparagingly referred to by the Pharisees as "'sinners' and tax collectors". Yet his association with other tax collectors and "sinners" is used to reach them with the presence and teaching of Christ. The dinner, he served, was used to bring them into contact with Jesus.

In John 1:40-41 Andrew brought his brother to Jesus and in John 1:44-45 Nathanael is brought by his friend Philip to Jesus. In both cases there is a natural audience for the message of discovery and a natural tendency to listen more closely to what is being said. Granted Nathanael objects to the thought that Jesus of Nazareth could be the Messiah, yet Philip uses the power of being confronted with Jesus as the avenue by which his friend is won for Christ.

In addition to those examples, there are a multitude of examples where entire households were brought to faith: see Acts 4:49-53; Acts 10—Cornelius; Acts 16:12-15—Lydia's house; Acts 16:23-24 jailer at Philippi.

There is nothing mysterious about this assumption that a friend has a better chance of exposing another person to the Gospel than does a stranger. The friend already has his confidence and trust; and friendship may be used by God as the open door to reaching a heart yet unwon for Christ. Nor is any of this a denial of the power of the Gospel. The Gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), and it is the only such power.

What is involved in ongoing assimilation? Give them opportunity to meet and make new friends in the congregation. Involve them in the workings of the congregation as quickly as possible. One writer considered this so important that he argued that if your constitution has a provision that excludes new members for a time from holding office, you should delete it. While that is certainly a provocative thought for many of us, it does merit a comment. I am not so willing to take that step because I see the first years as a time to learn the atmosphere and working of the congregation. Also a new member often, but not always, is a young Christian still maturing in their faith. I consider it unfair to that new member to be thrust into the limelight of holding an office in the congregation at that early stage.

Let me also at this point confront our thinking about the level of lay involvement in the congregation. Joel Heck presents data to determine the connection between the number of tasks done by members and the growth of the church. The results were:

Declining church—averages 27 offices/tasks per 100 members.

²³ Joel Heck, pg. 10.

²⁴ Not sure where this quote came from.

²⁵ Heck, pg. 25.

Plateaued church—averages 43 per 100 members.

Growing church—averages 55 per 100 members.

Now let us grant that numbers can mean relatively little in the scheme of things. Let us also grant that involvement will not "make" a church grow, only God can do that. But it seems to me that it is just spiritual common sense to observe that the greater the involvement of the members in the congregation, the greater the opportunity for Christian growth among those involved and the greater their sense of being needed and involved. Members who have invested themselves in our congregations are the ones who will be there for the long-haul. Even a cursory study of Jesus' teaching finds a continual reference to action and doing in the life of those who follow Him.

Moreover what can this say about our congregations. First, it indicates spiritual growth in the congregation. To a large extent it means that spiritual maturity has relegated cliques and other closed groupings of people to the category of unproductive and hampering groups. Also it disavows those barriers that make it difficult for people to assimilate into the congregation. In fact the Gospel-love motivation that is involved in an ongoing assimilation effort is simply the fruit of a living faith. Indeed assimilation speaks of an openness that is both healthy and effective in making the newcomer feel at home. It speaks of a spiritual maturity about new members when we realize that "the new member has a lot of catching up to do."

VI. Concluding Thoughts

What I have presented is only a sampling of the suggestions that various writers have for assimilating new members and reaching out to the straying. If you look into Chapter 3 of *New Member Assimilation—Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*, pages 33-42, you will find a plethora of ideas for assimilation. Each must be looked at with your congregation in mind.

It was pointed out to me recently that there is another side to keep in mind. In our visitations with the straying we should not wear out our welcome. That is a valuable thought. We must go to the delinquent member with a specific purpose in mind, and it is not to win them back into the congregation. It is to gain a brother. That means that our overriding purpose is the evangelical desire that they once again trust in Jesus and walk in life as his disciple, that they will from that point on make progress in worship, witness and walking as a true disciple of Jesus!

It must be stated that nothing is mandatory in this presentation, "except the continuing debt to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). For those who are cautious about changing what has been done in the past. I would share with you a thought by Dr. Haare: "Raising cautions is prudent behavior when it causes people 'to count the cost before building the tower,' but cautions which become rationalizations are paralyzing."²⁶

Ultimately the success of all that we do rests in the LORD'S hand. I hope that attitude and feeling has been prevalent throughout this paper. So I refer us all to two complementary and closing thoughts by Paul: "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant...men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been give a trust must prove faithful" (II Cor. 3:6 & I Cor. 4:1-2).

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²⁶ Haare, pg. 90.

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