

HOW TO REACH THE LOST: A CASE STUDY ON DIFFERENT METHODS THAT ARE
USED FOR REACHING INACTIVE MEMBERS

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ABSTRACT

Irregular worship attendance remains one of the most persistent and challenging pastoral concerns in ministry. Congregations today have a wide range of strategies to reconnect inactive members and encourage regular worship attendance, including digital communication, small-group ministries, volunteer engagement, and peer-driven accountability systems. Each of these approaches offers genuine value for strengthening congregational relationships. This thesis will explore many ways a pastor can reach out to those who are inactive in worship. With a biblical foundation, pastoral interviews, and practical ministry experience from those who are interviewed, this study will explore how multiple outreach methods contribute to member retention, yet finds that personal presence rooted in Scripture remains the most effective means of addressing the deeper cause of inactivity.

INTRODUCTION

It's the end of another church year. Now comes the time when the pastor's report needs to be formulated and presented to the congregation. The pastor sits there at his desk, and he can't help but be grateful for the blessings the Lord has showered upon his congregation. The new preschool has just been built. The remodeling of the church sanctuary has just been approved, and the building process is about to begin. Then the minor things. The copier needs to be replaced. The vacuum that is used to clean the narthex needs to be upgraded. Bible classes are in full swing, and the people are excited to learn and grow as a family of believers. The pastor has a great group of members who help out when they can. He can just look at all of these blessings and see how God has truly blessed his ministry.

As the pastoral report is just getting finished up, he gets to the dreadful end when it is time to insert the numbers. Offerings had not yet hit the mark, but then there is that generous donor who uses their gifts to get the church back to even. Everything seems to be working out until the numbers are calculated for worship attendees. And here is where those blessings that the Lord has given become more and more forgotten. There stands a congregation with three hundred members. Praise be to God! But only one hundred of them come to worship. It is hard for a pastor to look at that number and not ask himself, "What am I doing wrong?" The pit of despair is a lot easier to fall into. The pastor sees this problem and may go to his fellow brothers in the circuit, but more likely, he keeps it to himself because he is embarrassed by the number of

inactive members that he has. The pastor then goes through his checklist of everything he has been taught over the years to find that he is already doing everything he was taught. Confusion starts to sink in. The pastor reminds himself that the Lord is in control, yet after weeks, even months, those numbers of inactive members do not change. It is easy to remember that the Lord is in control. It is easy to remember that God has given each of us different gifts for the use of his kingdom. But to honestly believe that is another story.

It would be easy for the pastor if his worship attendance were one hundred percent. The pastor's ministry may be a little less stressful if all of the sheep were in the sheep pen. Who wouldn't want that? But the reality is we live in a sinful world, and of course, there are going to be sinful people. The question is, how does the pastor deal with his sheep in a loving way that reflects both law and gospel? How does a pastor reach out to his fellow inactive members? How does a pastor deal with his straying sheep without showing them that he is better than they are?

In the pages that follow, we will hear from pastors who serve at different congregational sizes across the United States who will explain their methods and knowledge on how to get the lost sheep to come back to the flock. These interviews have given wonderful applications for pastoral ministry dealing with inactive members. Throughout this paper, the problem of delinquency will be examined under a microscope to help pastors, God willing, see the joy of the pastoral ministry even through the numbers reflecting worship attendance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many resources have been published on dealing with inactive members. Throughout this process, a handful of those resources helped shape the thoughts behind this paper. The resources used will help identify the root cause of the process for dealing with inactive members. Not only that, but these findings also helped bring to light the work of a pastor and how he can craft this art in understanding people's attitudes toward worship attendance.

The resources: "Pastoral Visits: Are They Worth It?" by Gene Bradbury, "Understanding People: Deep Longings for Relationship" by Larry Crabb, "Matthew 18: A call for Communication Not Excommunication" by Nathen Hollenburg, and "Building Relationships through Pastoral Visitation" by Bradford Lyle communicated a solid foundation that led to the research provided.

There are many other resources a person could use to help identify the core issue and methodology for reaching the lost. A person may look into what others have written about this topic. "Overcoming Obstacles to Member Visitation in the 21st Century" by Marques Nelson and "The Mechanics of Member Visitation" by Philip Zarling also hinted at the idea that inactive membership is a problem that a pastor will face throughout his ministry. A person may also find the resources available in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library useful. There are also pastors with various years of experience who have insight to share. Presented below are findings from literature resources and congregational interviews.

METHODOLOGY

The following information was gathered through interviews with pastors and lay members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). Each pastor has given helpful insights on dealing with inactive members. The pastors who were interviewed serve in different regions and provided feedback on matters specific to their respective ministries. The churches that each of these men serves vary in size, ranging from one hundred and fifty members to about seven hundred members. Throughout this paper, specific categories mentioned in the interviews with the pastors and some of their laypeople will be presented.

The central theme that emerged across the interviews, and what will be the focus of this paper, is that the ministry to inactive members is challenging. I pray that the insight gathered from these men throughout this paper will serve as a valuable tool in ministering to inactive members in the church.

PASTORAL THEOLOGY: SEEKING THE LOST

Care for the Sheep

The parable of the lost sheep is one that is well known by all. It explains a concern that all pastors have for their sheep. When one of those sheep wanders away, the one becomes the main concern. If a pastor sees his lost sheep “will he not leave the ninety–nine and go look for the one that wandered off?” (Matt 18:12). The pastor serves as a shepherd of a congregation who has a desire to do all that he can to care for his sheep, more importantly, Christ’s sheep. “The pastor, the under-shepherd, also has the opportunity to help his congregation become familiar with the voice of the Good Shepherd. The pastor will do this through preaching and teaching in the church building, but he will also seek to become familiar with his congregation, the sheep of God’s flock.”¹ Before any of this can be done, the pastor must be reminded of what it means to be a shepherd. “Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). This passage helps the pastor understand that he too is a sinner and a “deep appreciation for grace which was reached down to save the sinner from guilt and doom and worked in him the miracle of faith.”² To be a shepherd is an undeserved privilege.

1. Nelson, Marques J. *Overcoming Obstacles to Member Visitation in the 21st Century*. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. 2016.11-12

2. Schuetze, Armin W., and Irwin J. Habeck. *The Shepherd under Christ: A textbook for Pastoral Theology*. Milwaukee: Northwestern. 1981.

Pastoral Faithfulness

There are many qualifications rooted in the role of being a pastor. One of those qualifications that will stand out in this paper is faithfulness. Scripture shows that this theme of faithfulness is common. “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Cor 4:2). Faithfulness is a term that has been echoed throughout all of pastoral training. The Lord has blessed many different men with many different gifts! What an incredible privilege that the body of Christ has these many different gifts. However, there is a temptation. It is easy to get caught up in focusing on others’ gifts. This is where the term faithfulness becomes a comfort for all people. “Faithfulness is a comforting term, for it indicates that the Lord does not expect any one pastor to match another in ability or accomplishments, but rather to do only what he has been made able to do.”³

Faithfulness is what is at the core of pastoral ministry. “The pastor who is faithful to his Lord will also be faithful in making the maximum use of what the Lord has entrusted to him.”⁴ There are many things that have been entrusted to the pastor. One of those things that the Lord has entrusted him to do is seeking the lost sheep, as it is heard in Matthew 18. The purpose of seeking the lost sheep is to bring the person back to the flock. They may be going through one of life’s biggest crises. They may need their priorities checked. It is the duty of a pastor to care for his sheep. “It ought never be looked upon as an irksome duty which must be performed or undertaken to give the offender a tongue lashing for the irritation he has caused, or to parade one’s own superiority. Above all, its purpose must not be simply to get rid of a troublesome

3. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, 13.

4. *The Shepherd under Christ*, 14.

member.”⁵ It is easy just to let the sheep wander. It is easier to let them slowly drift away into the ways of the world. But is that what a pastor is called to do?

The way a pastor goes about this process is an important one as it must be done in a way that is “recognizing ones own weakness and sinfulness, and yearning to help a fallen brother even as one would want his brother to help him if the situation were reversed (Gal 6:1).”⁶ It will be beneficial to have this in mind when ministering to inactive members. If the pastor were to find himself drifting away at any point, he would hope that his fellow members or brothers in the ministry would correct him back to his original place. Carrying out this correction for inactive members is one way a pastor can show love for his sheep.

Irregular worship attendance is often a misplaced desire for relationship, which only God can fulfill. “As image-bearers we long for relationship. As fallen image-bearers, we turn away from God to look for it.”⁷ Relationships are what people long for. People want to be part of something, and if they do not feel that the relationship is there, they are likely to try to find it elsewhere. Therefore, for a pastor to minister to his fellow image-bearers he “must know his people in order to best apply law and gospel to their lives.”⁸ It is through this proper distinction of what a shepherd is and how the shepherd can use the tools that he is given that he can properly minister to the inactive members in his church.

5. *The Shepherd under Christ*, 169.

6. *The Shepherd under Christ*, 169.

7. Crab, Lawrence J. *Understanding People: Deep Longings for Relationship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. 1987. 112.

8. Nelson, Marques J. *Overcoming Obstacles*.. 9-10.

THE NATURE OF MINISTRY TO DELINQUENTS

Determining what qualifies as irregular worship attendance is challenging among congregations across the nation. The cultural reality, which will be expressed later on in this paper, is that people struggle with time. Because of this cultural reality, some do not attend worship as often as the pastor would like. Does that make them an irregular attendee? What classifies them as inactive members? What is the set number of absences that can cause a person to be considered an inactive member? There is no legalistic view that can define the core concept of irregular worship attendance. What is important to consider when determining whether a person is an inactive member is not a percentage but faithfulness.

Worship Attendance

In a traditional sense, irregular worship attendance might mean inconsistent or sporadic participation in Sunday services. A pastor is well aware of the members who attend the church's major festivals. Christmas and Easter bring back members who have not been in worship for a very long time. Some members will even go a couple of weeks without coming to worship. What is the reason? Throughout the interviews with some pastors, it seems that the expectations have shifted in response to the modern lifestyle. "So in a perfect world, I would like them there every Sunday. I would consider that those who are regular attenders at church would be twice a month

or more. Now, I know that's not very much, but honest to goodness, that's the reality of the world we're in.”⁹ This expectation does not reflect a weakening of conviction regarding the Third Commandment, but rather an acknowledgement of the world in which pastors minister.

Online Worship

Another complicating factor is the rise of online worship. While pastors may not view livestreaming as an equal substitute for in-person gatherings, many laypeople do. “And then, unfortunately or fortunately, I guess, however you look at it, if you’re asking your people to remember this, keep the Sabbath day every Sunday, they do have online options, which I would not say would be my first choice. But in most lay people's minds, if they watch worship on Sunday morning, that counts.”¹⁰ Online worship can serve as an excellent tool for people who can not make it to church. The problem that can arise is the abuse of that tool. In that case, it is hard for pastors to track their members who do not attend in-person worship. A member who is physically present twice a month may actually be worshiping more frequently through online worship, even though that is not always visible to the pastor or reflected in congregational attendance.

9. WELS Pastor (B), phone interview, October 7, 2025.

10. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

The Danger

While occasional absences may be understandable in the way of modern life, a significant spiritual danger emerges when such irregularity becomes a recurring pattern. What begins as a temporary lapse can slowly turn into the new norm, in which worship becomes optional rather than essential. Over time, the heart can grow comfortable with distance from the means of grace, and the member can slip into a pattern that is difficult to reverse. The danger is not missing a Sunday or two, but the gradual redefinition of worship's value in the life of a believer. "It starts without even knowing that you're doing it. And then, you're gone for a couple weeks, and then, it's three weeks, and well, now it's a month, and now and then, you didn't even realize it."¹¹ The danger with irregular worship attendance is hard for people to realize on their own. People can get caught up in different categories of their own lives. Whether that is work, school, children, extracurriculars, people begin to put more effort in those categories rather than worship. It is not necessarily wrong for a person to put effort into those different categories in their life. What is dangerous is the potential to shift their priorities away from Christ. People can get caught up in the business of life and forget what's more important. With that in mind, it is crucial for a pastor to help guide his sheep back into the pasture.

Size of the Congregation

The size of the congregation can play a significant role in the ministry to inactive members. With larger congregations, it may be easier because there are more resources, whereas a smaller congregation may not be able to expand its ministry as much as it would want to when it comes

11. WELS Pastor (D), phone interview, October 21, 2025.

to reaching out to inactive members. One lay person said, “We are small, so we didn’t have a lot of resources.”¹² Although being a small congregation can be a struggle, there are still many blessings. One pastor estimated that his congregation is about 150 members, with an average of 70 to 100 people on a given Sunday. “My church is the right size where I can keep track of all my sheep.”¹³ With a smaller congregation, it is easier for a pastor to keep track of all his members. He knows them so well that when “people are gone, it is pretty easy to notice.”¹⁴ While it may be easy to notice for smaller congregations, that isn’t necessarily the case with larger congregations.

When congregations are growing, it can be a huge blessing. But along with those blessings come some challenges. As a congregation grows to a specific size, it becomes much harder for a pastor to keep tabs on his members. One pastor admitted “I don’t know how those guys do it. Churches with seven hundred members must have a system in place.”¹⁵ While some pastors may be able to accomplish this ministry on their own, it can help significantly when two pastors serve at a congregation. “With two pastors, more of this work gets done. And it may not be that more ministry overall is getting done, but certainly more of this ministry gets done. And so we were able to maybe do a better job with some people.”¹⁶ While talking with Pastor D, he explained that the ministry to inactive members at his congregation is a lot more doable because his congregation has two pastors. With that option available, they can do a lot more ministry than

12. WELS Lay Member (B), phone interview, November 4, 2025.

13. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

14. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

15. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

16. WELS Pastor (C), phone interview, November 3, 2025.

other congregations may be able to.¹⁷ While some congregations can focus on delinquency, others may still struggle due to a lack of manpower. What every congregation seems to have in common, no matter the size, is its list of inactive members.

17. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

THE CAUSES OF IRREGULAR WORSHIP ATTENDANCE

Distraction Not Disagreement

Throughout the interviews, the pastors largely agreed that theological disagreements are rarely the root cause of irregular worship. Although some instances do pertain to doctrinal differences, the leading cause of inactivity is misplaced priorities and the business of life. A pastor noted that “time is the most precious commodity.”¹⁸ Because time is precious to people, they want to make the best of the time that they are given. When this occurs, life’s distractions often get in the way. People value time. And one might think it is obvious. But how do congregations see worship as a valued part of their time?

Worldly Distractions

The phrase “time is a valuable thing” resonates with people. There are many different things that can distract a person in their life. “I just think you have life transitions. You got people with new jobs, moves, family changes, that disrupt worship routines.”¹⁹ Although there are many distractions in a person’s life, one of the main ones that pastors are facing with their members right now is youth sports. Pastor A states quite clearly “The most common thing I see right now

18. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

19. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

is youth sports. It's that soccer, swimming, and football have become a priority. Then I've had people come up to say to me and say, "you won't see us the month of October, and it's because of youth sports."²⁰ There are many challenges that come with certain distractions in people's lives. But one of the main challenges in youth sports is not easy to deal with. In speaking with a lay member from congregation A, he stated what one of the main challenges with youth sports is. "The challenging part is that there really is no such thing as recreational sports anymore. As early as six, seven, eight years old, these kids are pulled into travel, and the majority of those games are on Sunday mornings between eight and eleven in the morning."²¹

People are pouring their time and money into these distractions. The culture of these distractions validates excuses like sports as good ones, making people feel like they have no choice but to skip church. Pastor D expresses his thoughts on youth sports. "And I think the hard part is culture sees all those excuses as good ones. I'm choosing good things. I'm choosing my child."²² As stated earlier in the paper, it is not bad to put effort into these good things. What is important is to realize it is okay to say no to those good things. The reality is that the world around us will continue to go down these paths of putting worship on the back burner. People are getting distracted by the ways of this world, so how can a pastor help his inactive members return to worship?

20. WELS Pastor (A), phone interview, October 27, 2025.

21. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

22. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING RETURN

The pastor sees the distractions of the world and the distractions his people are falling into. First, he must be careful not to fall into these temptations himself, with his own family and his own life. So he roots himself in God's Word. There, he sees how he can show thanks to a God who brought him out of his deep darkness of sin. It is easy for the pastor to see the importance of worship. But how can he get his people to see what he sees? How can he encourage his people to return? There may be a temptation to take a legalistic route, enforcing the idea that people have to go to church because that is what they must do. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching"(Heb 10:24-25). Encourage. Encourage. Encourage. That is the role a Christian has in ministering to inactive members. "We encourage each other by not giving up meeting together in public worship. We encourage each other by showing individual concern for souls from house to house."²³

What a wonderful encouragement that a pastor can give to his people! Gathering together as a body of believers helps put the focus on Christ and what he has done for his people. Meeting together helps build that relationship as a congregation. It is a time when fellow sinners can gather to encourage one another as they go through the stages of life. Therefore, it is

23. Zarling, Philip E. *The Mechanics of Member Visitation*. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. 8.

important to help people see the importance of worship. There will obviously come a time when the law needs to be given to the inactive member, but until then, it is important to emphasize the value of worship rather than condemn their absence. The following pages show ways veteran pastors have encouraged their people to attend worship by demonstrating its value.

Gospel Motivation

The gospel should be in the minds of pastors when restoring inactive members. Pastors can serve their members not by holding this guilt over their heads, but by showing them the comfort and necessity of the means of grace. One pastor's preferred approach is to highlight the value of in-person worship rather than speaking against skipping church or using live streaming. "If I'm not making the worship experience an enjoyable thing, if the atmosphere of my congregation isn't warm and welcoming, then how can I be shocked if my people do not want to be in the building?"²⁴ Instead of pointing the finger, it is best to show members the value of in-person worship. There comes a time when sin needs to be pointed out to the individual, but in this scenario, it is hard to do so. "I don't want to burden somebody's conscience and say that you are necessarily sinning if you skip church so that your kid can play soccer."²⁵ It is hard for pastors to speak in absolutes. If someone is neglecting worship to the point of putting other priorities before Christ, then a pastor can speak in absolutes.

It is a hard craft to perfect. It would be a whole lot easier if God would talk about the percentage of time that a person needs to be in worship. "The legalist in me would love that,

24. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

25. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

because then I could just call out everybody who falls below the 50% line. But that's not how God describes worship attendance. He describes with the word faithful."²⁶ Instead of being legalistic, strictly enforcing worship, a pastor must craft his ways into having their members see for themselves if they are being faithful or not. It is hard for a pastor to do this alone. That is why some pastors encouraged the importance of building relationships within a congregation.

Building Relationships

Personal connections are a major component of pastoral ministry. When personal connections are being formed, they then establish trust and create a climate for a positive spiritual conversation. Throughout the interviews, pastors have found that building relationships is vital for effective ministry and for keeping members in worship. Some have emphasized that a relationship of trust is the prerequisite for having tough conversations with members who are falling into inactive membership. "I'm not sure you can have those conversations with any real chance of success if there is not already a relationship of love there."²⁷ Without the personal relationship that a pastor can have with his members, those tough conversations that need to be had may not happen.

Shepherding is received as shepherding only when the sheep know the shepherd's voice and believe it is a voice of love. Whenever a person hears the truth, it often depends less on what was said and more on who said it and the relationship that frames the conversation. If a person you didn't know at all came up to you and commented on your hairstyle or fashion, their critique

26. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

27. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

would not hold any weight. “But if your buddy, who you trust, comes up to you and says, “Dude, what are you wearing? Your fashion sense is off.” You would be more accepting of the comment.”²⁸ The same is true with congregational life. “You do have to build relationships with people if you want to have the right to say some hard things.”²⁹

Ultimately, the pastor’s goal is to care for the soul. When members know they are seen and valued, hard conversations become opportunities for growth rather than an occasion for resentment. “You have to be a personable guy who cares about his sheep enough to go and see them to show them that you care enough for them.”³⁰ Building relationships is important, but more importantly, it is showing people the love their Savior has for them. As one pastor said “I try to make sure that my people know, first of all, our Savior's love for them, and how that forms my love for them.”³¹ As these relationships grow, they can naturally shape the congregation’s larger culture, creating an environment where members see the church as a family rather than an institution.

“Family Atmosphere”

The “family atmosphere” was consistently identified throughout the interviews. Some of the pastors interviewed recognized that their “family atmosphere” is key to keeping members in worship and maintaining the congregation’s internal health. One church, after a self-evaluation,

28. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

29. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

30. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

31. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

realized that they were not necessarily good at outreach but were very family-oriented. “What we came up with was the fact that we were not good at outreach, but we were very family-oriented. We decided to focus on our strong point, which was fellowship.”³² Recognizing one of their strengths, they strategically focused on building strong relationships with each other. “We started doing family night and fellowship time between church and Bible study, and really focusing on getting to know people.”³³ Once you get to know the people and grow this family atmosphere, it makes church an enjoyable place to worship. “If you have that family friend relationship, it’s going to make people want to go to church more, because not only do they want to worship, but they want to see their friends and their family.”³⁴

For another congregation, the atmosphere has a small-family feel. Living in an area that is not predominantly WELS can make you feel like you are under a microscope. “There’s nowhere to hide, right? On the flip side of that is that it has a small family feel to it.”³⁵ This is not a bad thing, as it brings to light a thought that people may never have considered before. “I never thought I would have said this. My best friends go to church with me. They just do. My closest friends that I would lean on, personally or professionally, go to church.”³⁶ What a unique opportunity to worship with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ!

32. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

33. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

34. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

35. WELS Lay Member (A), phone interview, November 4, 2025.

36. WELS Lay Member (A), interview.

A congregation with that “family atmosphere” helps address the core problem of inactive members. The overall conclusion is that the family atmosphere is what draws people in to stay and return to worship in the future.

This sense of belonging does more than create this warm feeling, it provides the relational stability and support many people lack outside the church. This relational motivation enhances worship attendance. The world around congregations is constantly changing. One of those changes is that people begin to feel isolated. “Everybody’s isolated with their phones and their screens and their social media and everything. I think a lot of times, people don’t have the personal interaction.”³⁷ With the world changing, the “family atmosphere” draws those in who are isolated. Those who do not have those close relationships outside of church. Having that kind of atmosphere draws people in to hear the gospel with their friends, who can be considered their church family. “A lot of times, I think people, people come because they’re lonely, and they just want to be around other people.”³⁸

This positive draw also uncovers a significant concern. When individuals do not experience this sense of connection, the result can often be disengagement. One reason members can become inactive is that they do not feel a sense of family connection. “They feel like they’re not part of the family. I think if somebody feels like they’re not part of something, they have no urge to come back.”³⁹ Once a person feels they are not part of the family, they see no reason to return to a place where they do not feel welcome. “I think people don’t feel like it’s their family,

37. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

38. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

39. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

then they want to look somewhere else.”⁴⁰ People can leave and try to find what they are looking for, but the result may not be the same. Other churches may look like they have what people are looking for, but in reality, what seems to be absent is the family atmosphere. “The big churches are adding hundreds of new members every year, but they’re also losing just as many out the back door.”⁴¹ Why? Because some of them are so large, it is hard for them to have personal relationships. When a church truly functions as a family, it not only creates belonging but it also invites care and accountability among its members.

Peer Accountability

When relationships within a congregation begin to deepen, they create a space not only for fellowship but also an environment that invites members to invest in one another’s spiritual lives. In these trusted relationships, accountability happens naturally as members walk alongside each other in faith. One way this can be accomplished is for the pastor to connect his members with one another. “If I can connect my members to each other in a way, in a loving way, in a natural way, then also spiritually, they’re going to kind of hold each other accountable too.”⁴² When members are connected in a Christ-centered relationship, accountability becomes a shared responsibility rather than placing all the work on the pastor. Trust begins to remove the fear of offending the person because they know the correction is rooted in care for the individual. Because of this, members can speak bluntly with one another, confident that honesty strengthens

40. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

41. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

42. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

the relationship rather than harms it. “I’ve noticed that members can be so brutally blunt with each other. Where are you at? You should be in church.”⁴³ This can only be done because of the relationships built within the church. When the body of Christ cares for its own members, the result is a level of accountability that no other program can replicate.

“Peer-to-peer accountability is the strongest form of accountability there is on the planet. And when I say peer to peer, I mean friend to friend, man to man, woman to woman, sibling to sibling, right? Yeah, you do what your dad says. You do what your boss says out of respect, out of chain of command, whether you like to or not, but when somebody that is on an equal playing field with you that has no skin in the game, encourages you or challenges you that you’re not being the best version of yourself, or that you have fallen below the line, that that gets people motivated, that gets people thinking.”⁴⁴

Clear Expectations

Accountability accelerates most effectively when it is guided by a mutual understanding of what faithfulness looks like within the congregation. For a pastor and fellow members to encourage and support one another, there must be clear expectations. Clear expectations serve as an important strategy that helps congregations define the terms of membership, which then encourages consistency and provides a foundation for future accountability.

The development of clear expectations was viewed by pastors as an important strategy. In a world that has many different understandings of membership, some pastors have stated that it is essential to define what membership means up front.

“People really don’t have a concept of Lutheran membership, which involves the fellowship principles, but also the body of Christ principles. And so what we did is, after they finish the Bible information class, I go, and I have a one-on-one visit with the new family coming in, and I have an expectation book. So I have a pamphlet that I read through with them. If you’re a member of a church, there are expectations you can have of your

43. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

44. WELS Lay Member (A), interview.

church, and a few that we have of you. If you join any club, there are expectations. If you have a membership at the library, there are expectations, right? There are expectations with everything.”⁴⁵

These expectations are not to enforce legalism but to provide structure for spiritual maturity. True freedom in Christ is not the absence of boundaries but the ability to live within them.⁴⁶ Believers are free to live within the boundaries that they are given. What is important to remember is the one who has given you those boundaries and how a person can give their best thanks and praises to Him. So the pastor struggles and thinks about how he can enforce the importance of worship without going down the route of legalism. One of the pastors who was interviewed had an approach that reinforces the expectations of accountability without making it sound like legalism. “I need to do what I have to do to stay faithful to what God’s Word calls me to do.”⁴⁷ Staying faithful to what God’s word calls a pastor to do can help the pastor explain those expectations to members without sounding like it is coming from legalism. And it does not just go one way. Going through these expectations helps a member see the expectations the church has for them and the expectations the member can have from the church. One of the member covenants from a congregation contains a reminder that could be helpful to all pastors. “A clear expectation that you can have of our church is that you will receive, Lord willing, sound preaching of God’s Word.”⁴⁸ The expectations go both ways, and when people start to understand that it flows less from legalism and more from a loving heart, they are more likely to hear what you have to say.

45. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

46. Oden, Thomas C, *Pastoral Counsel*, Classical Pastoral Care v. 3. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Books. 1987.

47. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

48. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

Clear expectations do not flow from what a pastor thinks he should put in his member covenant. It flows from what God's Word says. "Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'" (Mat 4:10). This isn't an expectation that a pastor has come up with on his own. "We are not stepping out of line by saying you should be in church because Jesus told you that you should be worshipping."⁴⁹ Now there are many different ways that a person can worship that fit according to their schedule. Pastor B is not saying that it must be done on a Sunday. The heart behind the statement focuses on the importance of the expectation of worship. The expectation of membership is that you will show up to worship in whatever way best fits your daily lifestyle.

Having those clear expectations makes it possible to have those challenging conversations when you come into contact with that irregular worship attender. "I have had, on occasion, brought that covenant back with them and said, listen, you guys, you're not in church. This is what you promised to do. You tell me if you're being faithful or not."⁵⁰ Another pastor reminds people of their confirmation vows to help bring up those expectations. "You stood before the congregation and said that this is the most important thing. Essentially, this is the most important thing in this world. You responded with I do and I ask God to give me strength."⁵¹ Pastor C notes that one of the main responses from this method of enlightening expectations is by them saying, "You are right, I just got so busy and so many things became distractions that I just got away from this."⁵²

49. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

50. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

51. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

52. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

Helping people understand their commitment helps frame this entire follow-up process in terms of eternal care. A pastor's expectations can be rooted in deep concern, communicating, "I am doing these things because I care about you, and I want you to be in heaven."⁵³ Let us not lose sight of the purpose of these visits. "Everything we do in the church has its underlying purpose: helping people headed to heaven."⁵⁴ The clear expectations show that the purpose is salvation, not just some covenant from an institution.

53. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

54. Zarling, *The Mechanics of Member Visitation*, 8.

METHODS FOR REACHING THE LOST

The process used for reaching out to inactive members varied across the interviews with pastors. The common reality that showed up between all the interviews was that ministry to inactive members is hard and can be challenging, but also rewarding. The pastor can look at that gigantic list of things he needs to accomplish and get bogged down when it's time to reach out to those inactive members. The following information includes some different ways that each congregation has used to reach inactive members. Congregations interviewed identified that this process occurs over a four- to six-week timeframe. What was found throughout the interviews is that there is no set method, as it depends on the pastor's personal preference within his ministry and the time allowed.

Member Relationship Communication

The initial contact can be a daunting task, but it is also necessary. As congregations figure out which method best suits them, the question is: How can a congregation make initial contact with someone who hasn't shown up to worship in a long time? Some congregations start the initial contact naturally. "Whenever somebody doesn't show up for a little while, it just sort of happens naturally. Somebody is just going to call them because they've already gotten close to them, so it

doesn't really fall to the pastor that much to have to do that."⁵⁵ It is the close relationships that are formed that make the initial contact happen. One pastor finds it equally helpful to rely on people in the congregation who have a relationship with the missing member to reach out first. "I will try to think of people who are in close contact with the person who hasn't been in worship for a little while, just to say, hey, I noticed you haven't been in church for a while. I was just wondering if everything is okay, and is there anything that we can do to help?"⁵⁶ While the natural relationships that are built within a congregation can make the first contact feel natural, these connections do not eliminate the need for pastoral involvement.

Pastoral Communication

When relational contact has not reestablished worship patterns, the responsibility often shifts to the pastor. The most common process that was seen throughout the interviews was through a text message or phone call. "They will usually get a text from me earlier on asking how they are doing. Just something real casual."⁵⁷ This was done due to how the world around us is constantly changing, as people are responding more to a text or a phone call over email. "I have moved to text more than email and even a phone call. It seems like text is probably the most casual form of communication that we have right now."⁵⁸ Because texting is the most common form of communication, pastors make it part of their process for reaching inactive members. "I text and

55. WELS Lay Member (B), interview.

56. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

57. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

58. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

call them usually every week, if not every other week. I usually call and switch up phones so that they answer.”⁵⁹ This regular contact is paired with careful consideration of how to reach out in a way that minimizes defensiveness. When one pastor makes contact, he primarily uses a phone call to avoid the confrontation that can form from an unannounced home visit because he wants to “put as few reasons to blow up and get mad as possible initially.”⁶⁰ In some cases, confrontation is what people are looking for. To avoid people getting mad at the church, the method of text messages and phone calls allows the pastor to establish initial contact and demonstrate his pastoral care for his people.

Mailbox Ministry

While text messages and phone calls can serve as valuable first steps, one pastor has developed a more structured system designed to provide visible, consistent care for inactive members. The goal of the mailbox ministry is stated below:

To apply the Word of God to our lost and straying members: Mark 12:30-31 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” “Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”¹ John 4:11 “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Develop a sustained, actionable, and long-term approach to address the spiritual well-being of our members. Seek to express care and concern for the absent parishioner. Make and maintain personal contact with straying members (eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart) as opposed to just “delivering stuff.”⁶¹

59. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

60. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

61. Pastor D, Mailbox Ministry Goals.

This structured system, formed by pastor D, consisted of a mailbox ministry where congregational news was color-coded each week. Once there were four different-colored sheets in a person's mailbox, there would be a need to visit a person's home to deliver their mail, along with a letter in case the member is not reached. Below is an example of the information that is contained in that letter:

Dear _____,

We've missed you at church services for the past several months. We are concerned about your spiritual welfare and want to know if there is anything that we as a congregation can do to help you. Please contact Pastor or the elder listed below at your earliest convenience. We look forward to having you back in the Lord's house!

In His service,

Pastor signature

Head Elder signature⁶²

Consistency throughout all these visits is key. Pastor D recommends that these should be done weekly so that he can stay faithful and ensure his people that the care for his sheep is well known. The conversation during these visits begins with genuine care stating "We are concerned we haven't seen you in a while, is everything okay?"⁶³ When a pastor starts the conversation with this tone it "disarms people, and it doesn't turn into this legalistic mentality that you need to go to church or else you're going to hell."⁶⁴ Taking the initiative to go to the member's house can show that the pastor cares enough to know the member personally. This personal effort can communicate the genuine care that a pastor has for his people. "I'm doing this to show that I care

62. Pastor D, Mailbox Ministry Letter

63. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

64. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

about you and that I want you to be in heaven.”⁶⁵ This loving pursuit emphasizes the care a pastor has for his sheep. The people who see the love that their pastor has for them can help them see how much work a pastor will do to express his love to his people.

65. WELS Pastor (D), interview.

WHEN RESTORATION FAILS

Even with thoughtful communication and intentional systems, restoration does not always occur as hoped. There remain situations in which these efforts fail to bring the member back to regular worship. Even if a pastor has expressed that he has approached these conversations with patience, prayer, and genuine love for the member, they also carry the burden that not every member is willing to come back to worship. Unresolved conflict and lifestyle changes create barriers that a single conversation, or even multiple visits, cannot overcome. In this reality, the pastor is reminded that God alone works repentance and transformation through his word, and the role as the shepherd under the greatest shepherd is to remain faithful in delivering it.

Because of these challenges, restoration is often not a moment but a process. A pastor could continue in his work using member relational contact, digital contact, and home visits. There comes a time when it seems the different methods of reaching out to inactive members aren't working, but that might not become apparent until the end of a very long process of encouraging return. Some pastors have noted that this process could take anywhere from three months to a year. It is not a process done in a single visit, but a gradual process of refocusing their attention on Christ. This naturally flows into the concept of the timeframe in which those efforts take place.

The Timeframe

One pastor describes a series of communications that typically last a year, starting when the member has been inactive for about four weeks. “I’ve got a series of like, six letters that slowly get sent out to somebody, and that usually is like a year-long process that starts at four weeks.”⁶⁶ Another pastor has explained that his ideal plan involves a letter if contact attempts fail after the six-week mark. “If we can’t track them down for another six weeks, which is about three months, and they do not respond, then we write them a letter.”⁶⁷

These different methods used introduce a challenging aspect when it comes to reaching inactive members. The hope is that “the mechanics of a member visitation program become such an established part of a congregational life that it becomes habit, second nature, a normal and accepted part of congregational life. More than just a hope, it should become a goal.”⁶⁸ A pastor must go through his goals and see the problems that could occur. If he were to continue too slowly, then the opportunity for meaningful conversation may be lost. If he moves too quickly, the member may view it as pressure rather than care. Navigating this challenge requires pastoral skill to ensure proper care for his sheep. This pastoral tension raises the reality that many congregations face: what should a congregation do when every attempt at restoration has been exhausted? It is in these moments where a pastor and his congregation wrestle with a final form a discipline, though painful, that is rooted in love.

66. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

66. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

67. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

68. Zarling, *The Mechanics of Member Visitation*. 7.

THE FINAL STEP

There is going to come a time in every pastor's ministry where he will have to make the decision to either release members from the congregation or excommunicate them from the church. Every pastor knows his sheep, so it will fit him well with whatever decision he comes down to.

Removal of Membership

The removal of membership is one of the final steps that a pastor may use when dealing with inactive members. "If we don't hear from you, we are going to assume that you're no longer interested in fellowship."⁶⁹ Another pastor emphasized that when he gets to the final stage, he asks the inactive member, "Are you in or are you out?"⁷⁰ The release of membership would indicate that the person is not interested in fellowship, but that does not necessarily mean they are not a Christian. When a person has shown that they are not a Christian then the act of excommunication comes into play.

69. WELS Pastor (A), interview.

70. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

Excommunication Defined

There will come a time when church discipline needs to be enforced, and excommunication will be practiced. Instead of falling into the temptation of putting it off he must remember that when someone is impenitent “the law must be preached in all its severity.”⁷¹ The final stage of ministering to inactive members is one of the most challenging responsibilities that a pastor faces, not because he desires it, but because he sees the spiritual danger that a member is falling into.

Excommunication is the solemn declaration of the church that the sinner because of his impenitence is no longer a member of the church, that he is to be regarded “as a heathen man and a publican” (Mat 18:17), that his sin is bound upon him on earth and in heaven (Mat 18:18). Exclusion from the visible church takes place because it has become evident that by his impenitence the sinner has excluded himself from the communion of saints.⁷²

The definition of excommunication, brought to light, helps pastors understand its purpose. “The purpose of excommunication is that this last and most severe preaching of the law might yet bring the sinner to see his error, and that he thus may in the end be saved. All of this implies that the congregation must be as sure as is humanly possible that the sinner is indeed impenitent.”⁷³ Through many visits and attempts at communication, if the inactive member does not seem to respond, they are considered to be living in sin, and it is the pastor's duty, along with the church, to point out that sin. “When we admonish those in the faith, our goal is to lead them to repentance. To do this we need to share specific law with them. We show them from scripture

71. Walther, C.F.W., *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Saint Louis, MO. Concordia Publishing House. 1929. 21.

72. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, 175.

73. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, 175.

that they are sinning and that their sin threatens their eternal welfare. But once the law has done its work, we comfort with the gospel.”⁷⁴

Excommunication as an Act of Love

Excommunication, rightly understood, is never about removing a name from membership; it is about calling a soul back to the Savior. “Though excommunication may result as the last recourse left for love, it is ill-advised to threaten people with church discipline as though it were a form of punishment which might have to be inflicted. The purpose is to gain a brother, not to clean house by getting rid of a problem member.”⁷⁵ With this thought in mind, a congregation can faithfully show love through the step of excommunication. With the concept of Matthew 18 “our Lord is not showing us the quickest way to get rid of a sinner, but the lengths in which love will go in order to gain him.”⁷⁶ Pastors throughout the interviewing process have brought up the act of excommunication, emphasizing that this is an act carried out from a place of love and concern rather than punishment. “We are not releasing you because we hate you, but you have clearly shown that you do not have an interest, so we are going to release you, and it is done out of love.”⁷⁷ Showing love should always be the goal. The “goal is to rescue, not to punish.”⁷⁸ That

74. Schuetze, John D. *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology*. Milwaukee, WI. Northwestern Publishing House. 2017. 193.

75. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, 170-171.

76. *The Shepherd under Christ*, 171.

77. WELS Pastor (B), interview.

78. Hollenburg, Nathan. *Matthew 18: A Call for Communication Not Excommunication*. Brethren Life and Thought. 2016. 18.

love was reflected throughout all the interviews with different pastors. Here is one of the pastor's goals during the process of excommunication:

The goal of this action is to always care for the individual's soul....Should the individuals not reconnect, we will be recommending their removal at the July quarterly voters' meeting. We are not taking any action today! It is the hope and prayer that these individuals would reconsider the importance of Christ and become active in His Church once again. Our doors and, especially, our hearts are always open to them. Should they be removed, they are always still welcomed to return to (Church Name). Please keep these individuals in your prayers in the hope that they might return to regular worship life.⁷⁹

The purpose of excommunication is "to regain the offender, calling us back to the imagery of seeking out the lost sheep."⁸⁰ That love can be shared by having members pray for the inactive member. It is important to bring up in-person conversations so that the individual knows that they are welcomed back to church at any time throughout this process. Members are not to hold their conviction over their heads, but they are to constantly reflect that same love that Christ has shown them.

Ultimately, excommunication is the church's acknowledgement that the inactive member has separated themselves from the communion of believers. This action is not always to be taken as a condemnation, but to confront the seriousness of their sin. Even during the excommunication process, churches do not lose hope because the goal remains the same: that the sinner may be turned and restored through the gospel.

79. Pastor D, Excommunication Goals.

80. Hollenburg, *A Call for Communication*. 18.

ANALYSIS

The interviews and literature in this study revealed a broad range of strategies that could be used to reach out to inactive members. Each of the approaches listed throughout this paper offered a legitimate value. Structured systems such as mailbox ministries, text messaging, and phone calls demonstrate care and consistency to the inactive members in a congregation. Part of that care is shown in the family atmosphere that was mentioned by many of the congregations interviewed. While the family atmosphere plays a crucial role, it is not the main role.

While structures that are put in place can assist the ministry, they cannot replace personal pastoral presence rooted in the Word of God. Systems depend on relational trust; letters can be ignored and messages silenced if they are not backed up with genuine spiritual care. A warm congregational culture cannot substitute the means of grace. Clear expectations can risk legalism if not carefully distinguished between law and gospel, and peer accountability requires pastoral oversight so that it remains to be gospel driven. Even the practice of discipline can go beyond human limitations, having the pastor be reminded of the work of the Holy Spirit. When all of these things are weighed together, it underlines the fact that restoration occurs most faithfully where a shepherd personally applies Scripture, listens, and comforts in Christ's name.

CONCLUSION

The ministry to inactive members is not a ministry that a pastor necessarily enjoys. There could be countless visits that seem like they are not moving in any direction. He may even lose countless hours of sleep, wondering if he did enough to care for the member's soul. The pastor must remind himself that he did all that he could do with the time that he has.

When you're beginning a task or beginning a day, you're energized by this privilege that God gives us and then at the end of the day, it's okay to hear well done, good and faithful servant. I've only given you 24 hours in a day and two hands and a finite amount of strength, and I've only given you the experience, and when you seek to use that faithfully, know that I smile on you and your ministry, and I'm pleased with this and if you fail to be faithful, confess your sin and know that that my mercies are new every morning.⁸¹

This reminder brings the entire ministry to inactive members back to its proper center. This work is not ultimately measured by how many people return to worship. It is measured by faithfulness to the call Christ has given you. Seeking the lost with a shepherd's heart. Whether that is through member relationships, pastoral communication, or church discipline and excommunication, the pastor is called to reflect the love of the Good Shepherd who goes after the wandering sheep. Because the wandering sheep are "important to the Savior. He suffered in Gethsemane and surrendered to crucifixion for each one. He rose as proof that each one is justified. He wants to prepare a place in heaven for each one."⁸²

81. WELS Pastor (C), interview.

82. *Doctor of Souls*, 193–194.

At the same time, this ministry guards the congregation from viewing worship as optional. Pursuing inactive members with patience, setting clear expectations, and practicing discipline out of love, the congregation reflects the love that Christ has shown them and then shows that same love to the wandering sheep.

The ministry to inactive members should be viewed as an expression of the gospel itself. The pastor must be a witness to the gospel, holding to truth and deed.⁸³ It can sometimes be difficult and emotionally draining. The pastor already has a lot on his plate.

Pastors have a lot of responsibilities in addition to preaching and pastoral work. Usually, they have board meetings and Bible Information Classes in the evenings. They are preparing for Bible studies and catechism classes. They plan worship services and often are part of the church choir. Many pastors also already do other kinds of personal visitation, including visiting home-bound members and making hospital visits, making regular evangelism visits, and conducting counseling sessions and pre-marriage classes.⁸⁴

Yes, a pastor embraces himself joyfully in his busy schedule. Yet there are times when joy seems far from describing the work of shepherding lost sheep. The pastor may struggle because he may not see the result of his work on this side of heaven. And so he is tempted to give reasons to put off this direct ministry. “I often hear the reasons: “I don’t have the time,” or “if they wish to see me my door is always open.”⁸⁵ It is during moments of those temptations that all can be reminded of the hidden work of knocking on doors, sending that text message, sending that letter, Christ is at work through His called servant. The pastor goes home tired and sometimes even discouraged. But it is helpful for him to remember that “from start to finish, ministry is a ministry of love and

83. Oden, *Pastoral Counsel*.

84. Nelson, *Overcoming Obstacles*. 19.

85. Bradbury, Gene G. *Pastoral Visits: Are They Worth It?* Sharing the Practice 45, no. 1. 2022. 9.

action. Always remember you're a sheep dog under the great shepherd's direction. Your continuing delight is to do Christ's will, just as his delight was to do his Father's will."⁸⁶

The pastor is reminded of the tasks that Christ has placed before him. He can remain confident that the Savior who went after him will continue to seek and find His people through His Word. It is only then that a pastor can rest confidently in that promise. He will rise up to the challenge of shepherding Christ's sheep with the same mercy that first shed light on him. Remember that light. Remember that a pastor is a sheep dog under the great Shepherd. The same Shepherd who called him into the ministry and the same Shepherd who carries him throughout his ministry.

86. *Care of Souls*, 280.

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