

# Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 6

## How to Shrink Your Church's Inactive Member List

**Why are we gifting you this volume?** Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) for subscription information.

**Purpose of this Volume:** Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures with which to (1) prevent active members and attendees from dropping out and (2) recover inactive members.

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## **I. Active Church Member Dropouts**

According to an old story, a farmer who retired and moved into town inherited a poorly cared-for lawn. Frustrated with the dandelions, he wrote the Department of Agriculture, asking how to solve this problem. The letter he received listed some specific recommendations and added, “We also suggest that you learn to love dandelions. You will always have a few of them around.”

Wise church leaders take a similar attitude toward inactive members and face two facts concerning this complex challenge: First, by careful planning and action, fewer members become inactive. Second, you never totally eliminate inactive members. Death, taxes, and inactive members are permanent features of every church landscape. Learn to love them despite their behavior. You will always have some of them in your yard.

## **II. Training Session for Dropout Ministry Conversations**

Use this procedure for training (a) laypersons who participate in a ministry that makes contact with people within the first six weeks after they drop out of worship attendance and (b) laypersons who serve in a special “Coming Home for Christmas” emphasis (used not more than once every five to seven years) that attempts to recover long-term dropouts.

*Warning:* If you conduct this training session more than one week ahead of the day you send the people you train out to make visits, most of its value is lost! Laypersons must *practice these skills* shortly after they learn them. Information does not equal transformation. Knowing what to do does not equal knowing how to do it. When people have no opportunity to practice responsive listening skills within a few days after learning them, they do not integrate them into their thinking and talking reflexes. Consequently, the training session was a waste of time.

At least two people should lead this training session—a key layperson and the pastor. If desired, the material is designed so that three leaders can divide up the sections.

*Open with prayer.*

*Distribute to each participant a copy of the following section: “Why Do They Drop Out?”*

Ask each participant to (a) follow along as the leader reads it aloud and (b) make notes in the margins for use during for the discussion time.

## Why Do They Drop Out?

Pioneering research by John Savage indicated that most dropout flights start taxiing toward the runway due to a specific incident on a specific day. Savage called this the “anxiety-provoking event.” From that point on, their church relationship deteriorates. Their attendance becomes irregular or stops. (John Savage, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member* [Pittsford, New York: LEAD Consultants, 1976]) Subsequent research by Savage and others identified several other inactivity causes, not all of which are related to an “anxiety-provoking event.” (Steve Clapp, *Overcoming Barriers to Church Growth* [Elgin, Illinois: The Andrew Center, 1994], pp. 77-82)

During more than 100 on-site consultations Herb Miller conducted with congregations in many denominations, written survey input from several thousand “formerly more active members” added additional reasons why people drop out. The causation list is much longer than the initial researchers indicated. The typical dropout pattern usually originates from one or a combination of the following twenty causes (not listed in order of frequency).

**1. Conflict with the pastor (or traumatic loss of the affectionate bond).** Church members want a warm relationship with their pastor. In small congregations, that relationship may involve personal contacts during home visits or socializing occasions. In large churches, that positive relationship may only involve handshakes after worship and rubbing shoulders at weddings, funerals, and fellowship dinners. Either way, if something happens to damage that warm relationship, the member starts feeling uncomfortable about attending that church.

**2. Conflict with another church member.** Disagreements with key laypersons who occupy positions of authority are the most common examples.

**3. Feeling unaccepted by other church members.** After joining, some people begin feeling that they do not share the needs and interests with other members that they had anticipated. Other new members feel rejected because no one ever asks them to serve on a committee or in a ministry. Still others feel unappreciated because nobody ever seems to listen to their ideas.

**4. Assimilation failures.** Most people who remain active (a) are involved in a regularly-meeting church group of some type and (b) carry some sort of church responsibility. When these two bonding mechanisms fail to happen, many people begin feeling that they do not fit here and drift away from regular attendance.

**5. Change in pastors.** Some people join the pastor first and the church later. If the pastor moves or retires soon after they join, such persons may feel emotionally disconnected or betrayed and withdraw from attendance.

**6. Insufficient friendship formation.** People who remain active usually have six or more friends in the church. Members who become inactive usually have two or fewer friends in the congregation.

**7. Feeling neglected during or after a personal tragedy.** The absence of caring signals from other members becomes especially obvious during times of personal stress or illness. When that happens, many people disconnect from attendance.

**8. The overworked, burned-out syndrome—too much, too soon.** Highly capable people who become heavily involved in several church responsibilities sometimes begin to feel trapped there. Deciding that they can more easily say no to attendance at this particular congregation than to its numerous requests for volunteer service, they drop out.

- 9. Too little change in the church.** Some people get so frustrated that they prefer disappearing to the unending irritation of a paralyzed-progress plateau.
- 10. Conflict with a family member.** A marriage on the rocks sometimes causes withdrawal from church life. In-law problems are another version of this cause. When members of a family tree have a falling out, some of them may fall out of the congregational tree.
- 11. Various forms of life crisis.** This distress list includes personal financial problems, death of a spouse, serious illness, errant children, alcoholism, depression, and unemployment.
- 12. Various forms of life change.** Upward job mobility that increases hours per week or demands weekend travel can thrust people out of the church attendance orbit.
- 13. Moral problem.** When people of high principles engage in moral or ethical indiscretion, their guilt feelings sometimes lead to withdrawal from church attendance.
- 14. The failing band-aid syndrome.** Couples sometimes try to avert divorce by joining a church. If that fails to solve their problem, they may drop out several months later. Sometimes a person under psychiatric treatment joins a church as a source of self-medication. If this does not work, he or she may exit from participation.
- 15. Cultural differences.** Some people find that they do not “fit in” because their economic or professional status is too far above or below that of most other members. Cultural differences such as ethnic background, language, or national origins can also cause feelings of “social distance” that seem unbridgeable.
- 16. Lack of shared theological values.** Because they like the pastor or their teenager likes the youth group, some people allow that “halo effect” to override their theological reservations about becoming members. Later, when reality sets in, they recognize that they cannot live with the chasm between their cherished biblical convictions and those of this congregation.
- 17. Lifestyle incompatibility.** Some newcomers, after getting acquainted with several of the laypeople, find their lifestyles abhorrent. This is often a problem with theologically-conservative Christians who join a more theologically-liberal congregation. “Getting to know you” sometimes becomes “not being able to stand being around you.”
- 18. Control failure.** Women sometimes think they can change a man’s habits by marrying him. Similarly, a few people who join small churches expect to change them by becoming active leaders in them. When that procedure fails, ecclesiastical divorce happens.
- 19. Fear.** When fearfulness of conflict takes them beyond their comfort zone, people sometimes find disappearing more practical than trying to cope with their uneasiness. Some such people, in times of sharp congregational disagreement, slip overboard.
- 20. Angry unwillingness to rebuild broken relationships.** A few irascible individuals cannot or will not forgive and forget, even though months have passed since the incident that precipitated their hostility. Such people find departing easier than restarting. Unlike the person whose *fear* drives them away, this person departs loudly rather than quietly, doing as much damage as possible on his or her outbound trip.

*The leader asks for questions and discussion.*

*Distribute a copy of the following section, “The Dropout Pattern,” to each participant. Ask each person to (a) follow along as the leader reads it aloud and (b) make notes in the margin of his or her comments and questions for use during the discussion time.*

### **The Dropout Pattern**

Research indicates that members and regular attendees who become inactive move through predictable stages on their way to deadwood inactive status.

**Stage One:** They disappear from worship.

**Stage Two:** They either consciously or unconsciously assume that they are so sufficiently important and appreciated that church leaders will miss them and attempt to find out why they disappeared.

**Stage Three:** Concurrent with phasing out their worship attendance, a few dropouts continue their committee involvements or other church activities for several weeks.

**Stage Four:** Some people abandon all church activities but continue to mail in their offerings for several weeks or months.

**Stage Five:** They shut off financial support.

**Stage Six:** They cease to care about church relationships. Having reinvested their time and energy in new endeavors such as Scouting, grandchildren, or weekends at the lake, they no longer care about recovering their church attendance pattern.

Apathy replaces their positive feelings about church. Like the person who goes through the emotional trauma of divorce, the early stages of separation feel painful. The possibility of mending the broken marriage occasionally comes to mind.

At some point, however, the consciousness-CD flips to another channel. Those feelings no longer invade their conscious thinking. When that happens, the person moving toward finalizing a divorce or exiting a church no longer feels any desire to recover the relationship.

When church dropouts arrive at stage-six apathy, only a micro-minority ever return to regular attendance patterns!

*The leader asks for questions and discussion.*

*The pastor distributes to each participant a copy of this “Dropout Intervention at Stage One” section. Ask each person to (a) follow along as the leader reads it aloud and (b) make notes in the margin of his or her comments and questions for use during the discussion time.*

### **Dropout Intervention at Stage One**

Every church needs an early warning system that identifies regular attendees who disappear from worship for three consecutive Sundays without explanation. In some small and midsize churches the pastor, the church secretary, or a lay volunteer records the attendance each Monday and flags any regular attendees who are absent for three consecutive Sundays. Some larger churches enter attendance data into a computer equipped with church software that automatically lists those names on a printout.

A time-tested measure that arrests church members’ drift toward inactive status entails organizing three-to-six spiritually mature laypersons as a “Dropout Ministry Team.” One pastor calls it the “Search and Rescue Team.”

Church leaders often think, “The pastor knows how to do these things! He or she knows how to talk with people!” While that is often true, the pastor is *not* the right person for this particular ministry. What if the dropout is upset with the pastor? Most people feel ill at ease about directly expressing anger toward a clergyperson. Send trained lay listeners. Their presence does not create an emotional barrier that keeps people from telling their story.

**Teach lay volunteers on the Dropout Ministry Team how to use the following material.** The church secretary automatically notifies the team’s coordinator of any regular attendee’s unexplained absence for three consecutive Sundays. The team coordinator telephones that household and says, “I thought I should check in to be sure you folks are okay. We have missed seeing you in worship for the last few weeks (or “missed seeing your name on the attendance register”). I hope there isn’t an illness in your family.” Eighty-five percent of these telephone call recipients return to worship the following week.

For the small percentage of people who do not return the following Sunday, the Dropout Ministry Coordinator asks one of the team members to visit the home. Timing is crucial. After people in a conscious or unconscious flight pattern toward inactivity miss worship for six consecutive Sundays, they (a) begin feeling disconnected, (b) develop new habits for using Sunday morning hours, and (c) become much more difficult to reactivate.

Therefore, between the fourth and the sixth week, a Dropout Ministry Team member telephones the household and makes an appointment to stop by. During the trainees’ first six visits to such households (in which they are gaining experience), ask team members to work in pairs. Working together, they learn much more from their in-service training.

Later, team members may prefer to work alone rather than in pairs.

Training in the following conversational pattern is an essential preparation for these visits.

**1. Understand that hostility is not the basic emotion behind withdrawal from activity.** Because some people express hostility around the edges, you may think anger is their central emotion. For most people, however, the basic emotion is grief! People who drop out of church have lost a significant life relationship; most of them feel badly about that loss.

**2. Make the visit with only one aim in mind—listening to their story.** Do not lecture people about not being in church. Do not criticize them in any way. If you are compassionate enough to let them tell their story, that sharing is more likely to bring them back to church than anything you say to them.

In some cases their story involves hostility toward the pastor and/or someone else in the congregation, but expressing it ordinarily reduces its intensity. People who have dropped out of

church need catharsis more than they need someone to tell them what to do. Your listening ear can facilitate their willingness to share. If you succeed in allowing them to tell their story, they often reappear in worship the following Sunday.

**3. Use responsive-listening skills.** This conversational approach attempts to hear another person in such a way that we truly *understand* that person, even though we may disagree with some of his or her opinions or behavior. The listener avoids judgmental statements that block the talker's open expression of feelings, ideas, and opinions.

Responsive listening is the practice of using mouth and ear to express nonjudgmental, accepting love. Responsive listening is Christian love in one of its purest forms—the same kind of “in spite of” love that Christ used with the prostitute in the city street and with Peter, the apostle who could not grasp his great teacher's major point. This is the same sort of Grace that God practices toward us—the kind of “anyway acceptance” that doesn't depend on our earning or deserving it.

Just as the *experience* of acceptance by God during conversion often causes instantaneous changes in a person's feelings-thinking-behavior systems, responsive listening can help inactive members make quick, positive changes toward wholeness in personal life and church attendance. Several positives usually result when we take the trouble to practice the art of responsive listening with another person:

- We feel greater self-worth from the experience of practicing genuine caring for another human being.
- We feel more positive toward the person to whom we listen.
- The person to whom we listen feels a greater sense of personal closeness and warmth toward us.
- The person to whom we listen gains a greater sense of wholeness, because the experience of self-expression has clarified confused feelings and produced a more certain sense of self-direction.
- By “getting it off his chest,” the person to whom we listen is enabled to have more positive feelings about, and to take more constructive actions toward, a situation about which he or she has been concerned.
- Many inactive members visited by persons who use this method reactivate their participation in church life.

Responsive listening does more than let people tell their story: it encourages them to do so. One of the best formulas for responsive listening is three magic words: “You feel like . . . .” For example, if someone unfolds a long criticism, when they run down, say *one sentence* that begins with the three words “You feel like . . . .” Then add to those three words a rephrasing of the *feeling* that seems to lie behind their words. By using those three words, you can talk with people about a hot issue without taking sides. They will feel that you are listening sympathetically to what they say.

To understand how those three magic words work, test them in a business situation or in conversations with friends. Those three words—*you feel like*—signal people that you have carefully listened to what they said. Because of that, they want to say more. As they say more and you continue to listen responsively, their inhibitions and fear of “saying too much” decline. They feel more and more comfortable in saying more and more. That, of course, is why you are there, to let them tell their story.

You can say those three magic words in a variety of ways, all of which accomplish the same thing: “What you are saying is that . . . .” “You are saying . . . .” “Are you saying . . . ?” “It seems to you that . . . .” “You feel . . . .” “You feel that because . . . .” “I hear you saying that you feel . . . .” “Correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like . . . .” “You appear to be feeling . . . .” “I see that you are coming from a perspective of . . . .” “I sense that . . . .”

Another way to understand the art of responsive listening: Imagine yourself as a human mirror. See yourself as reflecting back the feelings the person expresses—without making a judgment about whether those feelings are rational or irrational, right or wrong. A mirror does not change anything; it merely reflects the reality before it. A mirror does not argue or add new information; it lets people see themselves more objectively.

**4. Do not make defensive statements about yourself, the church, God, other members, or the pastor!** Yes, it is sometimes difficult to restrain yourself when someone communicates a neurotic reaction that makes no sense! Yet listening uncritically is essential to achieving the goal you went to this home to accomplish. Therefore, avoid succumbing to the temptation to become “counsel for the defense.”

**5. Visit for a few minutes on general topics; then bring up the subject you came to discuss.** Inexperienced Dropout Ministry callers assume that people will bring up their absence from church. Few do.

How can you introduce this subject in a positive way? Say something like this: “You know, Joe, I have been concerned about you, because I haven’t seen you in church for a while. Since I know you are a person of real integrity, I know there must be a good reason why you stopped attending.”

That positive approach says, in effect, “Joe, you’re a fine person, and I haven’t seen you in church lately.” Everyone wants to be seen as a person of integrity. If you approach the subject in this way, Joe will feel warm toward you and is far more likely to tell you what is on his mind.

In large churches where people are not personally acquainted with each other, say something like the following: “We have missed seeing your name on the attendance forms. I’m sure there is a good reason why you haven’t been there.”

**6. What if the person responds initially with what seems like a phony reason for stopping church attendance?** Disregard it and probe carefully. Fearful of letting their emotions out, some people try to avoid talking about this problem. If Joe evades your question with a flimsy excuse, say, “In addition to that, isn’t there something else in the back of your mind?”

Salespeople have used this conversational can-opener for sixty years to talk with regular customers who suddenly stop purchasing from them. Using the question in this setting helps inactive members to see that you sense *part of the truth*. That makes them want to give you the *total truth*—to make sure your imagination is not providing negative instead of positive information about them.

Wait for his or her story.

**7. Listen. Listen. Listen.** After you introduce the subject, wait for Joe to respond with his story. Many people begin immediately. If so, hear them out, using responsive-listening techniques you learned in your training.

**8. If he or she still seems unwilling to express real feelings, skillfully probe again.** Say something like this: “You know, Joe, I feel like someone in our church has made a real blunder. Perhaps I was that person.” This technique is called “introducing an intentional inaccuracy into the conversation.”

After you do that, Joe will likely feel that he has no choice but to tell you that *it is not you*. He is overwhelmed with the urge to set you straight on this, and he cannot set you straight without telling you the truth. When he starts telling you the truth, he automatically starts telling his story. As soon as he begins telling his story, he finds it is easy to tell—because you are reinforcing his communication with responsive listening.

Wait for the person to respond with his or her story. Approximately 99 percent of people will do so by this point.

**9. What about that 1 percent of people who still withhold their story?** Make a final skillful probe. Say, “Joe, I know you may not want to discuss the reason you stopped attending, but I would really like to know. But if you would rather not discuss it with me, that’s okay.”

This psychological technique is called “giving permission.” It puts the other person in charge of the conversation. Giving people permission not to tell you something often makes them want to tell it to you. For example, the next time a friend says to you, “I know a secret about so and so, but I promised not to tell it,” respond with this: “I understand. I wouldn’t want you to tell me if you feel you shouldn’t.” Then change the subject. Within twenty seconds, many people tell you their secret! You have given them permission to withhold the information—which makes them long to tell you.

Listen carefully as Joe tells his story. (Dropout Ministry callers rarely need to use this last technique, because most people want to tell someone.)

**10. Conclude by saying, “What can we do to make you feel more comfortable about coming back to church?”** By this time Joe often says, “Well, not anything, I guess. I’m probably the one who needs to do something, and I just need to come on back.” Joe is now in a different mood than when you arrived. You have paid him the courtesy of listening to him and caring about him. Because of that therapeutic intervention, he changed his attitude.

**11. What if Joe responds with a suggestion?** Listen to it. Occasionally, dropouts or upset people see a problem in the church that needs addressing—one that no one else has seen. Listen to their suggestion. If it sounds sensible, communicate it to the appropriate person in the church.

**12. Complete the visit by saying, “I really appreciate your willingness to be honest about your feelings.”** Laypersons often listen to sermons about the “priesthood of all believers,” but they practice it far less than they hear it taught.

If you make this kind of visit and people pour out their hearts, you know what it means to be a priest to another human being. People who express to you their pain, their hurts, or their angers—sharing with you from the deepest level of their beings—are placing a high level of trust in you. Close the conversation by expressing your appreciation.

*The pastor asks for questions and discussion.*

*The pastor distributes to each participant a copy of this section: “Tips for All Types of Dropout Visits.” Ask each person to (a) follow along as the leader reads it aloud and (b) make notes in the margin of his or her comments and questions for the discussion time.*

### **Tips for All Types of Dropout Visits**

Your conversation may happen during the first six weeks after someone chops off a regular worship attendance pattern, or five years later. Either way, awareness of the following blocks that prevent us from listening responsively can strengthen our skills.

**1. Not paying attention.** What happens if we keep gazing around the room instead of looking at the people to whom we are listening? We block them from talking because they get the feeling that we do not care about what they are saying. Body language—posture, attentiveness, and eye contact—create a positive climate for communication.

**2. Listening judgmentally.** We are often tempted to “straighten out” the thinking of the people to whom we listen. If we interrupt their speaking to do that, we distract them from continuing their stream of thought. That blocks them from the one thing that is capable of “straightening out” their thinking: expressing their feelings.

**3. Our own need to talk.** What if our anxiety is so great that we find ourselves doing all the talking instead of listening? This signals other people that we are more interested in our own problems than in theirs—which immediately turns off their self-expression. This kind of visit does more damage than good. It confirms the other person’s feeling that the church people do not care about him or her. Compulsive talkers make poor inactive-member visitors.

**4. Emotional involvement with the person to whom you are trying to listen.** Most of us find it difficult to help our spouse untangle a difficult personal problem, especially if it involves us. Similarly, a close emotional relationship with a church dropout to whom we are trying to listen usually blocks the help we so much wish to give him or her by listening. If a church member has withdrawn from worship attendance because of conflict with a particular church leader, do not send that leader to visit him or her. (That may come later, but not now.) Likewise, do not send close friends or relatives. In a dropout situation, greater emotional distance increases the likelihood of people openly expressing their feelings.

**5. Fearfulness in the person to whom we are trying to listen.** What if people seem afraid of repercussions in the church or community should their real feelings become known? If you sense that is the case, say, “I’m sure you know that whatever you tell me will be kept in the strictest confidence.” Keep that promise despite all temptations to do otherwise. This is a sacred trust—the privilege of serving as a priest on God’s behalf to another person.

**6. Fear of giving approval.** Responsive listening does not equal giving approval to another’s feelings, actions, or thoughts. We can care about and accept someone without accepting his or her ideas as true. When we say “yes” to his or her conversation by attentive listening, we are not thereby violating our principles and saying “yes” to everything he or she says. In fact, if we really want to change another’s thinking or action for the better, the first step in that process always involves hearing and understanding his or her viewpoint.

**7. Giving advice.** The person talking sometimes tries to get you to dispense advice—thereby subtly attempting to get you to take responsibility for making his or her decisions. Avoid this by saying that different people would probably handle this matter in different ways: you feel certain that he or she will come to the right decision. Likewise, refrain from rushing into the stream of conversation with, “Now, I think you should . . .” Such managing-director interventions reduce the likelihood of successful conversations. Telling people what they should do seldom gives them the will to do it.

**8. Asking questions that divert the person’s attention to a side issue.** Follow the direction of the other person’s *feelings*. This is not a “salad chat” about everything in general; it is meant to be a therapeutic conversation in which you help clarify the other person’s thinking, not your own thinking.

**9. Too many probing questions.** Asking a person “Why do you feel that way?” often sounds more judgmental than inquisitive. Use it occasionally, but sparingly.

**10. Lack of desire to understand.** If we truly desire to hear, understand, and accept another person, we probably can, even with minimal training. This visit is therefore not a task for the totally self-centered person incapable of concentrating on the needs of other people.

*The pastor leads the group in a discussion of the procedures to be sure everyone understands them.*

*The pastor distributes copies of and asks each person to complete the following true-false quiz.*

- \_\_\_ 1. Most inactive members have drifted out of the church without any particular reason.
- \_\_\_ 2. Responsive listening means that you agree with everything the person says.
- \_\_\_ 3. Responsive-listening visits usually make inactive members angry.
- \_\_\_ 4. All inactive members will return to regular worship attendance following responsive-listening visits.
- \_\_\_ 5. The feeling that many inactive members experience within the first few weeks after stopping worship attendance is similar to a grief reaction.
- \_\_\_ 6. The best way to help inactive members is to give them “a good talking to” about what they have done wrong.
- \_\_\_ 7. The three magic words of responsive listening are “You ought to . . . .”
- \_\_\_ 8. It is best to wait for the inactive member to bring up the subject of why he or she has stopped attending worship.
- \_\_\_ 9. If at first the inactive member gives a superficial excuse for stopping church attendance, you should immediately change the subject and not talk to him or her any further about the matter.
- \_\_\_ 10. You should telephone one week in advance before visiting the home of an inactive member.

*When everyone finishes marking the sheets, the pastor gives the correct answers, one question at a time.*

*After each answer, encourage questions and discussion.*

*Divide everyone in the training session into groups of four. Place the groups of four in separate rooms or seat the quads at some distance from one another in a large room. Thus, the participants will not feel ill at ease by knowing that people in other groups can overhear their practice conversations*

**Ask the groups of four to spend a few minutes memorizing and reciting to one another the two sentences by which they “get into” the core of the conversation with a dropout:** “You know, Joe, I have been concerned about you, because I haven’t seen you in church for a while. Since I know you are a person of real integrity, I know there must be some good reason why you stopped attending.”

**For the next few minutes, two people in the quad act as “observers” while one of the other two people plays the role of a responsive listener and the fourth person plays the role of a church dropout.** The responsive listener uses the memorized sentences and the responsive-listening techniques to open and continue the conversation. The person who plays the dropout role can use one of three options:

1. Use his or her imagination to fabricate a conversation and feelings.
2. Reach back into memory for an unhappy personal experience in which he or she either felt like withdrawing from church attendance or actually did withdraw.
3. Blend together a combination of option one and option two. For most people, starting from a remembered experience makes the role-play much easier.

**The two observers remain totally silent during this conversational interchange.** When the other two people complete their “let’s pretend” conversation, the observers comment on what was said.

- In what ways did the visitor successfully use responsive-listening techniques?
- At what points did he or she block the church dropout from expressing feelings?
- Did the responsive listener use one or more of the blocking habits from the list of “Tips for All Types of Dropout Visits”?

**Give the responsive listener and the church dropout an opportunity to express how they felt during the conversation.** Was it easy? Hard? In what ways? If they were doing it again, would they have said something differently?

**Rotate the roles.** One of the two observers plays either the dropout role or the responsive listener role. Repeat the process outlined above.

**Rotate the roles again.** The other observer plays either the dropout role or the responsive listener role. Repeat the process outlined above.

**Rotate the roles one more time.** Repeat the process outlined in above.

This gives each person the chance to play all the roles. This makes the role players much more comfortable in making this kind of visit. The sharing will also give them much warmer feelings toward one another.

**Bring everyone back together in the same room.** Distribute copies of the *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 9, How to Develop a Congregational Care Team* that you download free of charge at the [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) Web site. Ask each person to read pages 9-19 as “homework” that will increase their skill. The volume contains additional information on how to listen and respond to people who exhibit a wide variety of stress reactions (grief, anger, suicidal thoughts, etc.).

Suggest that during the next few days everyone practice their skills while conversing with friends, coworkers, and family members. This helps callers to experience the remarkably positive results that come from responsive-listening techniques—before they have to use them in their first conversation with a church dropout.

**Ask everyone to cluster for five minutes in the same quads as before but without going to separate rooms.** They should decide who pairs with whom on the night later this week when they go out two-by-two for practice training. If necessary, to handle schedule conflicts, set two different practice nights within the next seven days. Under no circumstances should anyone go alone on these training visits.

Note: If this training session is happening to launch the “Coming Home for Christmas” program outlined in Section III below, announce all of the visiting nights, so that this phase of the program can be completed in a timely manner.

On the other hand, this training may be launching a “Dropout Ministry Team” whose goal is to arrest dropout flight patterns within the first six weeks after disappearance from worship. If so, send trainees to visit people on the church’s inactive member list, even though they are not in the first six weeks after dropping out. The contacts will be valuable training, providing your team members the opportunity to integrate their knowledge with thinking and conversation reflexes.

*Close with prayer.*

**Everyone meets at the church for the practice night (or two nights in two groups as suggested above), no later than seven days after the training session.** Give each pair of callers the names of four inactive households. Assume that they will find two of their four households at home this evening and thus can complete two practice visits.

The visitors telephone ahead and ask if they can come by for a few minutes. Set an approximate time with people, allowing about forty-five minutes for each visit.

The callers should not explain the visit's purpose in the telephone conversation in which they make the appointment. If pressed, the callers should respond with something like the following: "This is not a fund-raising visit. We try to stay in contact with all of our church members. We'll take only a few minutes of your time."

Avoid making these telephone appointments several days in advance. That makes the visits too easy to cancel at the last minute. For Sunday afternoon or evening visits (the day of the week when you catch the most people at home and in the most relaxed frame of mind), set the appointments between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. On weeknights, set the appointments between 6:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

Make the visits in the manner described above. Each pair of visitors decides which of them will act as the "lead listener." This person directs the conversation and does most of the responding. The other visitor plays a support role and speaks only at moments when he or she feels that the lead listener

1. Has missed a key point
2. Has accidentally diverted the conversation off the track
3. Is bogged down and unclear about how to move ahead

As they move into the second listening visit, the visitor pair changes roles: the support person becomes the lead listener and vice versa.

After completing both visits, the two callers return to the church and spend time reflecting together on their conversations. They try to help each other pinpoint times in the conversations when they used effective listening procedures, as well as times when they made errors.

The several pairs of visitors then meet for a few minutes as a total group. One caller in each pair briefly describes how they felt about their visits. He or she shares (a) positive values seen in the visits and (b) helpful insights for future visits to these or other inactive members.

### III. Recovering Long-Term Dropouts

God never gives up on people; neither should we. However, only a small percentage of church members that stop attending worship for six months reactivate in that congregation. Regardless of how much we care and what steps we take to motivate them, they do not return.

Hence, the importance of the section above that stresses telephone calls after three consecutive absences and a small, well-trained Dropout Ministry Team that visits homes between weeks four and six following the first of three consecutive unexplained absences.

What can we do to recover the people who have been AWOL for six months, a year, or ten years?

**Implement A Three-Year Plan.** View inactive member recovery as a process, not an event. These three years are three steps that build on one another like bricks in a wall. Honor the sequence. Do not lay the third layer of brick before you trowel in the foundation layer.

#### Year One

This first year consists of two steps.

**1. In Late August or Early September, Take Pictures for a Pictorial Directory.** Especially if your church has not published one in several years, a professionally-produced booklet that contains pictures of all families helps members learn newcomer names, assists with new-member bonding, and occasionally reactivates a few borderline-inactive members. Schedule the photographing in late August or early September, after school starts!

Contrary to what many church leaders think, especially those in small congregations, pictorial directories cost the church nothing. The companies make their profit from selling pictures to members who use them for Christmas gifts and other family purposes. Generally speaking, avoid contracting with local companies to “save money” or to “make things simpler.” Usually, neither goal is achieved. Then, too, feelings often get hurt and irritation ensues because local firms are working with a process in which they have no experience.

Two reputable directory companies: Olan Mills ([www.olanmills.com](http://www.olanmills.com)) and United Church Directories ([www.churchdirectories.lifetouch.com](http://www.churchdirectories.lifetouch.com)). A side benefit for small churches: many such companies also provide free or reduced-cost brochures describing a congregation’s ministries, useful with first-time worship visitors and other prospective members.

**2. In early September appoint leaders for and finalize plans to conduct the “Coming Home for Christmas” strategy.** Follow the detailed steps for effectively accomplishing this plan outlined on the

## Coming Home for Christmas

During the past fifteen years, hundreds of congregations that followed “to the letter” the how-to-do-it instructions for the “Coming Home for Christmas” strategy outlined below reactivated 15 percent of inactive members. One pastor said, “A member who had been absent from worship for ten years returned on Coming Home for Christmas Sunday. That was more than a year ago. She has attended regularly since then.

The scripture that suggests we reap what we sow comes true with this process, as in many other aspects of church life. The more carefully leaders execute each detail, the greater the results. The following paragraphs provide the rationale and timeline for “Coming Home for Christmas.”

**Foundational Principles:** Faith in God through Christ *begins* with a single step—we say “yes” to Christ at some point in life. Our faith relationship *continues* because of a series of “yesses”—as we pass through various life stages and several highs and lows of responsiveness to God.

- As we move along that life-faith journey, weekly worship attendance provides one of the most objective barometers of our continued series of “yesses.” While no one can judge the precise quality of another person’s relationship with God, worship attendance is one of the external marks of a person’s inner faith experience. The earliest disciples “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). For good reason, Paul warns new Christians against “neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25). Not doing so tends to disconnect us from the guidance of God’s Spirit.
- All Christians need an opportunity from time to time to make a fresh start in their relationship with God in Jesus Christ.
- Getting inactive members to attend worship again for the first time is usually the most difficult and yet the most essential step in moving them back toward an active relationship with God.
- The principle of stimulus-response tells us that any change in behavior *response* by individuals usually happens because of a change in *stimulus* from outside themselves. In other words, an inactive member’s change in church attendance behavior seldom happens spontaneously. The attendance is more likely to *begin* because of something church leaders do to get his or her attention refocused on this need.
- “Coming Home for Christmas” provides that stimulus.

**Theological Base:** Why should we try to get inactive members back into the church? After all, aren’t they adults? They know where the church is located, don’t they? Why should we bother? For two reasons:

- *The practical*—Involve them in serving others through financially supporting the church’s ministries. The more people, the more effectively the church’s mission and ministry get done.
- *The spiritual*—Jesus continually portrays God as a shepherd who keeps on seeking strayed sheep. God does not wait until people send an SOS signal, saying, “Hey, I’m lost. Come and get me.”

Cain asks in early pages of the Old Testament, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Yes, answers the New Testament again and again. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” (Luke 6:32).

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Being perfect as God is perfect means loving people even when they have shown little sign of loving us!

**The Plan:** Leadership happens through (a) the Nurture Committee or whatever you call the key leader group in your church that seems most appropriate to handle this function and (b) the church governing board. The organizational structure of “Coming Home for Christmas” insures that someone exerts positive encouragement for every church member to participate in morning worship and the luncheon on that day. This is accomplished through six logical steps spread over several weeks:

*Step #1:* Designate a date as Coming Home for Christmas Sunday for your church. If Christmas Day comes on or near a weekend, set your date one week earlier, to avoid the out-of-town travel that jeopardizes all church events on such weekends.

*Step #2:* Six weeks before Coming Home for Christmas Sunday, church leaders make “listening visits” in the homes of all inactive members. See specific instructions for how to train those listening callers in Section II above.

*Step #3:* Four weeks before Coming Home for Christmas Sunday, begin a publicity blitz that makes all inactive and active members aware of this special day.

*Step #4:* One week before Coming Home for Christmas Sunday, church leaders visit the homes of active and inactive members who have not turned in reservation cards, to secure their reservations for the morning worship and luncheon on Coming Home for Christmas Sunday.

*Step #5:* On Coming Home for Christmas Sunday, a luncheon follows the special morning worship service. (If your church has multiple services, plan a brunch following each one.) The lunch is either catered or served by the youth group and paid for from the church budget. It must *not* be a covered dish fellowship dinner. Nor can you sell tickets or ask for donations to cover it. Financing it either of those ways destroys the attendance results.

*Step #6:* During the weeks following Coming Home for Christmas Sunday, follow-up instructions provided in the timeline below help bond into the congregation’s fellowship the inactive members who attended Coming Home for Christmas Sunday.

**The Key to Success:** This approach to reactivating inactive members is not easy; it is demanding and challenging. Success depends on thorough execution of all phases and responsibilities. Do not omit any steps, *especially the six-weeks-in-advance listening visits, the luncheon reservation visits, and the follow-up visits.* If leaders follow the outline and secure members’ participation in each step of the plan, Coming Home for Christmas will reactive significant numbers of inactive members. If not, it cannot succeed. Make every effort to inform, inspire, and commit all members to full participation.

**Timeline:** Write in each blank the calendar date. Write above that calendar date the name of the person who will assume responsibility for this task or event.

\_\_\_\_\_ 10 weeks before Coming Home for Christmas Sunday (hereafter referred to as CHCS), the Nurture Committee Chairperson and the Pastor appoint four chairpersons for CHCS: General Chairperson, Chairperson of the Key Leader Group deemed most appropriate for training and supervising callers for the “listening visits to homes,” CHCS Luncheon Chairperson, and the Follow-Through Chairperson.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8 weeks before CHCS, the Nurture Committee Chairperson and the Pastor meet with the appropriate Key Leader Group to get their commitment to make the “listening visits.”

\_\_\_\_\_ 7 weeks before CHCS, the Pastor and General Chairperson provide training for members of the Key Leader Group in how to make “listening visits” to inactive members’ homes, using the material in Section II above.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6-to-4 weeks before CHCS, the Key Leader Group Chairperson and group members make listening visits to the homes of all inactive members.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4 weeks before CHCS, the General Chairperson arranges for a catering service or the youth group to serve the luncheon following the special worship service. (See the instructions in *Step #5* above and *adhere to them rigidly*. This must *not* be a covered dish fellowship dinner.)

\_\_\_\_\_ 4 weeks before CHCS, the Church Staff provides a lead article for the church newsletter that lists names of all Chairpersons for CHCS tasks and events. Frequent articles during the subsequent three weeks say, “It’s Coming!—[date].”

\_\_\_\_\_ 4-to-3 weeks before CHCS, the Governing Board Chairperson and the Key Leader Chairperson recruit members from the church’s governing board and other selected leaders to make approximately five visits each to the homes of *all church members* from the Sunday through Tuesday prior to CHCS.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2 weeks before CHCS, the General Chairperson makes a brief announcement in all adult Sunday school classes and during morning worship regarding CHCS events. Focus on the goal of everyone being present for the Sunday morning service and the luncheon. The General Chairperson should also arrange for announcements in meetings of other church groups, such as the women’s organization, whose regular meetings occur during this period.

\_\_\_\_\_ Monday, 2 weeks before CHCS, the Pastor provides an article in the church newsletter about CHCS.

\_\_\_\_\_ Wednesday, 2 weeks before CHCS, the Church Staff mails the following letter to all church members, especially inactive members, requesting their attendance at morning worship and the luncheon on CHCS.

*[Date]*

Dear Friends:

You are, by now, surely aware that \_\_\_\_\_ *[date]* is Coming Home for Christmas Sunday at \_\_\_\_\_ *[name of church]*. A special luncheon [brunch after each service in multiple-service churches] follows the Sunday morning service, for all members and friends of our congregation.

Someone will stop by your home next week to obtain your reservations for the luncheon. We hope you will say “yes.”

Sincerely,

Joe Green, Chairperson

Coming Home for Christmas Sunday

\_\_\_\_\_ Sunday, 1 week before CHCS, the General Chairperson arranges for someone to make brief presentations in all adult Sunday school classes and morning worship regarding CHCS, emphasizing the need for *everyone* to affirm his or her faith in Christ by attending.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sunday, 1 week before CHCS, during morning worship, the General Chairperson asks worship and Sunday school attendees to complete reservation cards indicating that they will attend worship and the luncheon on CHCS. The General Chairperson announces that “we will make home visits to people from whom we do not receive reservations this morning, so it is very important that everyone turn in a reservation card this morning.”

To get the cards filled out, the pastor says, "The ushers are coming forward to pass each household a card. We will give you three minutes to complete the cards. Then the ushers will come back to pick them up, so please pass them down the pew as soon as you finish."

Do *not* ask people to place the cards in the offering plates. This method reduces the number of cards turned in, greatly increasing the work load of the home visitors who will ask for reservations from people who did not complete a card. Arrange for special background music while people complete the cards.

*Use ONLY in worship the previous week and with personal visits in homes, never in letters.*

## **Coming Home for Christmas Sunday Reservation Card**

We (I) will be present at these events on [date] \_\_\_\_\_:

1. Sunday morning worship \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no
2. Sunday luncheon immediately following worship \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no
3. Number of plates for our household \_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Sunday through Tuesday before CHCS, the Governing Board Chairperson leads the Governing Board Members and selected church members in visiting the homes (not by telephone) of all members (both active and inactive) who were not present last Sunday to complete reservation cards for morning worship and the luncheon on CHCS. Key leaders who made the earlier "listening visits" (between weeks 6 and 4) should visit *every inactive member* while other church members visit active members, but no one should visit the same households as he or she visited during weeks 6 through 4.

In other words, visit everyone who did not complete a CHCS Reservation Card in an adult Sunday school class or morning worship the previous Sunday. Do not ask members to fill out reservation cards sooner than one Sunday in advance. (Exception: the very large church with several hundred worshippers may want to take reservations for two consecutive Sundays prior to CHCS, but no earlier than that.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Sunday afternoon before CHCS, in a brief training session at the church prior to the Governing Board Members and selected church members visiting homes, the Governing Board Chairperson distributes to each visitor and reads through orally with them the handout on the next page:

## Handout Sheet for Governing Board Members and Selected Church Members Who Visit All Active and Inactive Members

1. \_\_\_\_\_ [date] is Coming Home for Christmas Sunday for our congregation. A luncheon will immediately follow morning worship—not a potluck dinner but a catered meal—free to all attendees.
2. Our goal is to secure a commitment from all church members to participate in Coming Home for Christmas Sunday by attending morning worship and the luncheon that day.
3. All reservations are due in the church office by noon, \_\_\_\_\_ [date], the Wednesday before Coming Home for Christmas Sunday. Your ministry goal in these home visits is to invite the member(s) to attend and to obtain their reservations. *If the person(s) you visit are not presently active in our congregation, your ministry goal does NOT include asking them to become active again. Avoid preaching to people or giving them sentences laced with “oughts” and “shoulds.”*
4. Attendance at worship and the luncheon is accomplished by the following steps:
  - Each caller makes a personal visit to the homes on his or her Reservation Summary Sheet during the period of \_\_\_\_\_ [date] through \_\_\_\_\_ [date], the Sunday through Tuesday evening prior to Coming Home for Christmas Sunday. A visit to the home is the only effective way to accomplish our ministry goal. People find it too easy to ignore or “forget” a telephone call or to say “no” to the appeal.
  - Use the Reservation Card to obtain their promise to attend worship and the luncheon. Ask them for the information on the Reservation Card and write it in yourself. Leave it in the home and place the appropriate number of attendees on your Reservation Summary Sheet beside their name(s). If they cannot attend the luncheon, encourage them to attend morning worship. Write the number of attendees in that blank on the Reservation Summary Sheet.
5. Make a full report of all your contacts on the Reservation Summary Sheet. Comments and information are important, especially unusual circumstances such as illness or other difficulties that may hinder a member’s participation.

*Remind visitors to leave the completed reservation card in the home and return the Reservation Summary Sheet to the church office no later than Wednesday noon before CHCS. Retain in the church office a copy of every Reservation Summary Sheet you assign, so that you can determine the names of any members not yet visited.*

Print the following form multiple times to create the Reservation Summary Sheets.

## Reservation Summary Sheet for Coming Home for Christmas Sunday Events

CHCS Visitor: \_\_\_\_\_

List Each Person Or Household's Name	Number of Worship Reservations	Number of Lunch Reservations	Remarks, Comments, Address Corrections
1. _____			
2. _____			
Etc. _____			

\_\_\_\_\_ By Wednesday noon before CHCS, all Reservation Summary Sheets must be returned to the church office. The General Chairperson and the Key Leader Chairperson telephone any visitors whose sheet was not returned. Get an oral report to write on their duplicate Reservation Summary Sheet retained in the church office.

\_\_\_\_\_ By Friday noon before CHCS, the General Chairperson turns in the number of CHCS luncheon reservations to the caterer or food preparation group. Add approximately 5 percent to allow for an invitation to worship visitors on CHCS.

\_\_\_\_\_ On CHCS, the General Chairperson makes or has arranged for someone else to make brief presentations in all adult Sunday school classes regarding the CHCS service and luncheon today.

\_\_\_\_\_ On CHCS, the Pastor's morning-worship sermon stresses the importance of connecting spiritually with Jesus Christ and growing in that relationship.

\_\_\_\_\_ On CHCS, the luncheon is free, with the cost paid by the church budget or the CHCS budget. Keep the program short, with a celebration atmosphere and perhaps brief special music. The Pastor makes brief remarks of appreciation and introduces the General Chairperson, who then recognizes some of the Key Leaders who worked in the program, then reports the total attendance at the two events (from luncheon reservations and today's morning worship attendance count). The General Chairperson may want to compare today's morning worship attendance with the same Sunday last year, review the church's recent accomplishments, and mention important plans or events coming up during the next few months. *Do not draw special attention to inactive members that are present; this embarrasses them and keeps them from wanting to return.* Close by singing the "Doxology" or "Blest Be the Tie that Binds."

\_\_\_\_\_ Saturday, the first Sunday after New Year Sunday, the Pastor telephones all inactive members present on CHCS, inviting them to coffee in his or her office during the Sunday school hour tomorrow. At that meeting, he or she asks for their advice and ideas on "how we can make our congregation an even better church."

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-to-4 weeks after CHCS, the Follow-Through Chairperson organizes and leads members of the Key Leader Group in visiting the homes of *all* inactive members that attended CHCS (each Key Leader should visit different people than he or she visited during weeks 6 through 4 or during the week before CHCS).

\_\_\_\_\_ During the 2-to-4 weeks after CHCS, the Follow-Through Chairperson assigns each of the inactive members who returned on CHCS to a specific adult Sunday school class that seems to fit their age and interests. Ask the class to arrange for three get-acquainted telephone calls by three different adult Sunday school class couples or individuals during three consecutive weeks. The objective: Help all the inactive members feel welcome, and invite them to visit that adult Sunday school class.

### **Year Two**

Churches are in the Kingdom-influence business, not the names-on-a-membership-roll business. Trade your inactive member list with the inactive member list of another nearby congregation.

If one is close by, exchange lists with a congregation of your own denomination.

If no congregation of your denomination is close by, trade lists with a congregation of a denomination that seems similar to yours in theology and worship style.

If leaders in the church with which you trade treat your inactive members as they would prospective members who just moved to town, they can reactive up to 30 percent of those inactive members. You can do the same with their inactive members.

Avoid telling the inactive members of other churches, unless they ask, where you got their names; just invite them to worship. Even if they ask, say something oblique such as, “Our evangelism committee works hard to get names of people they think might be interested in attending our church.” Why say that? As we encourage inactive members to consider options other than the church they no longer attend, we do not want them to feel rejected by that congregation.

### **Year Three**

Select the names of three congregations in your area that are highly evangelical in behavior. Make three copies of your inactive member list. Hand those three lists to the pastors of those three congregations, saying,

“For two years, we have done everything we can to encourage them to become active members again, but without result. We seem unable to meet their spiritual needs, but we hope they will become active in a church somewhere. Perhaps that can be your church. We do not want them to feel that we are rejecting them, so we prefer that you not tell them where you got their name(s). However, we encourage you to reach out to them and, if possible, help them to strengthen their spiritual relationship with God by participating in your church.”

These churches will achieve that goal with a few people on the lists. In a few other cases, they will drive people back in your direction! In other cases, the inactive members will remain inactive and stay on your membership role.

**Be Prepared for Returnees.** Across the years, people experience times when they are receptive to God’s Spirit moving in their lives. Often, that happens during a period of life stress. When a long-term inactive suddenly appears in worship, you should assume that some form of stress or life-change has caused that behavior. The pastor should make contact with those inactive members within the first few days after they show up in worship.

How to reduce the incidence of a problem that many congregations experience: at least once a year, remind your leaders and members, perhaps through a newsletter article and/or a sermon on the topic of caring, to use sensitivity in communicating with dropouts who return to worship.

A woman said, “My husband had not been to church in years. As we came in the entryway that morning, one of the elders—trying to make a joke, I guess—said, ‘Oh, look who is here. I hope we have good insurance, in case the roof caves in.’”

With tears in her eyes, the woman said, “My husband is a shy person. He felt humiliated, and never went back to church there, or anyplace else.”

**Keep On Caring.** What about people who have been inactive for several years and/or do not respond to any of these three years of procedures? They do not return to regular worship attendance. They do not become active in another congregation. They do not die or move out of town.

Continue to exhibit caring concern for them. Churches are in the shepherding business. Shepherds never give up on their sheep. Pray for them. Visit them in the hospital. Marry them. Bury members of their family. Dropouts do, occasionally, become active again because of some life change in which they recognize the need for God. If that happens, receive them with open arms. If it does not happen, keep on caring.

One pastor reached out faithfully for six years to a dropout who claimed he had become an atheist. In the seventh year the man appeared in the pastor’s office one morning and asked for help. He was suffering deep depression. His wife was threatening divorce.

Referral to a psychiatrist and several coffee conversations with the pastor during the following weeks brought the man to an awakening of his need to connect spiritually with God. Two years later he was the Sunday school superintendent and that congregation’s most faithful worship attendee.

However, keep your dropout ministry in balance with the other important ministries in your congregation, such as evangelistic reach-out. Do not neglect the team on the field (present active members) and the potential team on the bench (prospective active members) by focusing all of your attention on the ex-team that has retreated to the bleachers (inactive members).

Delegation is an important virtue. A church business administrator has this sign on the wall near his desk: “Do not feel totally, personally, irrevocably, obsessively responsible for everything. That’s my job. Love, God.”

After applying your best efforts with dropouts in a three-year process, do three things: Keep on caring about them. Delegate them to God, realizing that their decision to return does not all depend on you. Warmly welcome them if their life circumstances and God’s Holy Spirit shepherd them back to your church.