



Process

THE PETER PLAN

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO *THE PETER PLAN*

This document lays out the steps of *The Peter Plan*, a system that lovingly addresses absenteeism through a series of contacts. Initial contacts are done simply to encourage the absent person to return to worship. After repeated discussions, the contact includes loving admonition to follow God's directive to make faithful use of the means of grace.

Key people & job descriptions

Peter Plan Coordinator

This is a position of service and therefore could be filled by any spiritually mature member of the congregation. The coordinator simply makes sure that all attendance information collected by a pew worship register or Connection Cards or some other format is entered into whatever recording system is being used. This should be done in a timely fashion, within twenty four hours of the final worship service of the week.

The coordinator also produces lists of people who have been absent for the number of weeks that require action. For example, under the model recommended in *The Peter Plan*, the coordinator would produce a list of who has been absent: 4 weeks, 8 weeks, 12 weeks, 18 weeks, 24 weeks, 30 weeks, 36 weeks, 44 weeks, and 1 year. That list is forwarded to the pastor(s) and to the elders.

Head Elder

This is a position that involves authority and needs to be occupied by a man of high spiritual maturity.

The head elder will work with the pastor (and possibly consult with some of the members of the Discipleship Committee) to assign a member of the Discipleship Committee to individuals who have been absent for four weeks. Ideally, the Discipleship Committee member might be an acquaintance of the absent member. Or perhaps, they would have something in common (similar age with children). This allows the initial encouragement of *The Peter Program* to come from someone who can perhaps better relate to the situation of the absent member.

The Head Elder, working with the pastor, also assigns that absent member to one of the elders (which may be the head elder himself). Again, it might be that the absent member is assigned to an elder with whom he is acquainted. (Note: Some congregations choose to divide up members among the elders. The potential problem with this is that one elder could be overworked, while another has very little to do.)

Elders

This is a position of authority as it may involve bringing church discipline against a member and possibly removing him or her from membership. Therefore, this position is limited to spiritually mature males.

The elder serves as a “caseworker” of sorts for members who become persistently absent. He manages *The Peter Plan* report form, which lists all contact information that has taken place in dealing with absent members, as well as the outcome of those contacts.

The elder is the one who works with the pastor if it becomes necessary to provide loving admonition.

Discipleship Committee Member

This is a position of service, and therefore could be filled by any spiritually mature member of the congregation.

Members of the Discipleship Committee are assigned to absentee members. They make initial contact, simply to see if anything is happening that might keep the individual from attending worship, such as a change in work schedule or an illness.

The assigned Discipleship Committee member works with the assigned elder for the absent individual. The Discipleship Committee member reports all contact with the absent member to the assigned elder, so that the elder can update *The Peter Plan* report form.

Pastor(s)

As the under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd, the pastor oversees the operation of *The Peter Plan* with the assistance of the Board of Elders. He is involved in some of the calling activity on the absent members. He is also likely the one who will provide the training for both the Discipleship Committee and the Board of Elders.

Preliminary steps

The Peter Plan requires a system to accurately record membership attendance. To implement, the following need to occur:

1. Members must be trained and encouraged to register for worship. This could be done through Connection Cards, a pew register, or in some other fashion. However, the system needs to be in place for *The Peter Plan* to work well. Members need to be instructed on the importance of using the system.
2. On a weekly basis, the attendance information must be entered in a timely fashion into some sort of system.
3. The appropriate lists are to be produced, e.g. those who have been absent for four straight weeks, those who have been absent for eight straight weeks, etc.

With these preliminary steps taken, let us now look at the nine main steps of *The Peter Plan*.

PART TWO: THE NINE STEPS OF *THE PETER PLAN*

STEP ONE — Member has been absent for FOUR WEEKS

- What happens:** A member of the Discipleship Committee (DC) makes a phone call to the absent member simply to see if everything is ok.
- Goal:** Collect information to understand why the member has been absent, and if needed, to provide gentle encouragement to return to worship.
- People involved:** A single member of the Discipleship Committee
- Sample script:** *"Hello, this is _____ from St. Peter's. How are you tonight? (Listen to response. Respond accordingly. Then transition.)*
"The main reason I'm calling is that our records say you've missed church for four weeks straight. That happens fairly commonly. We've had members who have gotten sick and were laid up for a long time. We've had members who work schedule changed. So I'm just calling to see if everything is ok. Because if it is something like that, we want to help in whatever way we can."
- Possible outcomes:**
1. The individual gives a valid reason for missing worship, such as illness or change in work schedule. The member of the Discipleship Committee offers help or advice as needed. (For example, perhaps the absent member does not know about midweek services at their congregation, or at another local WELS congregation.)
 2. The individual claims they have been in worship in the past four weeks. If so, they need to be asked if they have been using the worship registration system. Explain to them that is the system the congregation uses to tell if someone might need help, as well as to collect information from visitors. Explain that it is impossible to simply remember who was there, and so it would be appreciated if they use the system. No further action is necessary after that.
 3. The individual admits that they don't really have a good excuse for missing church. E.g. *"I've just been really busy lately."* They promise to return. No further action is necessary.
 4. The individual provides a reason they have stopped coming to church. Depending on what that reason is, further conversation is scheduled. For example, if they claim that they find the service boring, the DC member might suggest they get together over coffee to discuss that. The DC member will have been trained to handle discussions like that. If the absent member explains that they no longer believe some doctrine of the church, the DC member suggests they meet with a pastor to talk that through.

STEP TWO — Member has been absent for EIGHT WEEKS

- What happens:** The pastor contacts the absent individual by phone. The tone is still one of encouragement. He may schedule a meeting with the absent individual.
- Goal:** Try to understand what is keeping the absent member from church. At eight weeks absent, the issue *might* be one of scheduling. It also could be one of growing spiritual apathy. So further encouragement is needed, trying to get the individual to return to worship. If the problem *is* one of scheduling (e.g. the individual is new at a job and therefore is given all weekend shifts), arrangements may need to be made to meet the individual's spiritual needs.
- People involved:** a pastor
- Sample script:** *"Hello, _____, this is Pastor _____. I hope you're doing well. (A bit of small talk is good. It makes it clear the individual isn't "in trouble." Then transition.)*
- "Hey, the main reason I'm calling is I'm feeling a bit guilty. My job is to feed your faith with God's Word and Sacraments, and according to our records, I haven't been able to do that in almost two months. I should have called on you before this. Is there anything I can do for you, like bring you a devotion and the Lord's Supper? Or is there anything that is keeping you away from worship? If so, when can we meet and talk about it?"*
- Possible outcomes:**
1. The individual has a valid reason for not being at church, such as some unavoidable responsibilities that coincide with the only worship times the church offers. A plan will need to be formed for how to meet his spiritual needs.
 2. The individual admits that they don't really have a good excuse for missing church. E.g. *"I've just been really busy lately."* They promise to return. No further action is necessary.
 3. The individual provides a reason they have stopped coming to church. Depending on what that reason is, the pastor may talk about it over the phone. However, generally, the best option is to schedule a face-to-face meeting, preferably in the absent member's home.

STEP THREE — Member has been absent for TWELVE WEEKS

- What happens:** An elder sends the absent member a letter that outlines concern. The elder then follows up on that letter shortly after.
- Goal:** By this time, the absent member has had opportunities to provide valid reasons for his absence. His pastor has offered to meet his spiritual needs in other ways, and he turned them down, saying it was unnecessary. Yet, the member hasn't returned to worship. However, the primary goal of this contact is *still* encouragement, not admonition. After this contact, the absent member will have had three different individuals try to encourage him to return.
- People involved:** a member of the Board of Elders

Sample letter:

Dear _____,

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). One of the signs of spiritual health in the early Christian church was the regular use of the Word, the Lord’s Supper, and prayer. Therefore, I’m writing because I believe that it is possible you have not been in worship for almost a quarter of a year.

Perhaps you *have* been attending but are not using the worship registration system that we use at St. Peters. If so, would you please use that system in the future? We have that in place because sometimes people miss worship for very legitimate reasons, and we want to know about that so we can serve them spiritually. It is also how we collect visitor information, but visitors only will use the system if they see others using it too.

Perhaps we are not aware of a change in your living situation. Maybe you no longer live in our area year round? If that is the case, and you are attending one of our sister congregations during that time, that’s great! If you could please contact me at _____ and let me know, I’ll adjust our records to note that your spiritual needs are being met.

Perhaps you have made a permanent change and moved. If so, we apologize for not being aware. If you would please contact me, we will update St. Peter’s records with your new address. We could also assist you in finding another WELS congregation to which you might be closer.

Or, perhaps there is a more serious issue that is keeping you from the Word and Sacrament that needs input from a fellow Christian or Pastor. If so, please contact me or Pastor _____ at the church office. We simply want to help in any way we can. If St. Peter’s has let you down in some way, we want to know that too, so we can ask your forgiveness and avoid making the mistake in the future.

We want to do everything possible to assist your walk with Jesus and your spiritual welfare. I will be contacting you during this coming week to follow up.

Your brother in Christ,

Sample script: *“Hello, _____, this is _____. I serve on the Board of Elders at St. Peter’s. I’m calling to follow up on the letter I sent this week. Did you receive it? (Hopefully they did. If they claim they did not, briefly explain the contents.) Could I come over sometime this week to talk about it with you? It wouldn’t take long.”*

If the member agrees, set a date and time right then. The following script is what would be discussed during that visit. If the member refuses, then the conversation must continue by phone.

“Basically, I just wanted to see what it is that is keeping you from worship at St. Peters—whether it’s a move or something else—because obviously if you haven’t been to worship in three months, that’s not spiritually healthy. The Bible says that “Faith comes from hearing the message” (Romans 10:17). Therefore, I just want to encourage you and help you in whatever way I can to get you back in regular contact with God’s Word.”

Possible outcomes:

1. The individual has a valid reason for not being at church that has not been clearly communicated. It could be they are in a “snow bird” situation or that they have moved. Records need to be updated and, if necessary, a new church home suggested.
2. The individual admits that they don’t really have a good excuse for missing church. They admit they have been ignoring the earlier contacts from others in the church. They promise to return. No further action is necessary.
3. The individual provides a reason they have stopped coming to church. Future discussions will need to be scheduled, possibly including both the pastor and the elder.

STEP FOUR — Member has been absent for EIGHTEEN WEEKS

- What happens:** The same member of the Discipleship Committee (DC) who called the individual at four weeks now makes a pop-in (unannounced) visit on the absent individual. The DC member drives to the house of the absent member at a time when he suspects the absent member might be home. Sunday morning can actually be a great time. If the DC member can find the absent member at home on Sunday morning, it illustrates the problem.
- Goal:** This is a final gentle encouragement to the absent member. The absent member is encouraged not just to come back to church, but also to open up and be honest about why they haven't been in church.
- People involved:** DC member
- Sample script:** *"Hi, _____. I just decided to stop by cause now I'm getting really worried about you. Can we talk about this? (If the absent member invites the DC member to talk, that's good. If they refuse, that needs to be communicated to the Board of Elders and pastor.)*
- "I just want you to be honest with me about what is keeping you away from church. It's been a long time! What would it take to get you to come back to God's house. He wants you there. I want you there."*
- Possible outcomes:**
1. The absent individual says things that might set up a conversation that allows the DC member to launch into a law/gospel presentation (such as *God's Great Exchange*) or to handle certain objections people have for coming to church. After that conversation, the absent individual admits he needs to return to church and says he will do so. No further action is necessary.
 2. The absent individual dismisses the DC member, either after a law/gospel presentation, or before one is even allowed to happen. The DC member communicates this to the Board of Elders. The process now switches from encouragement to admonition. Any additional follow up is done by an elder or the pastor.

STEP FIVE — Member has been absent for TWENTY-FOUR WEEKS

- What happens:** The pastor sends a letter to the absent member, explaining the seriousness of the situation. The letter also indicates the pastor desires to meet with the absent member face-to-face sometime that week.
- Goal:** At this time—close to six months absent from worship—encouragement must be followed by loving admonition and, if necessary, rebuke.
- People involved:** pastor
- Sample letter:**

Dear _____, my brother (or sister) in Christ,

Scripture says,

“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. If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” - Hebrews 10:24-27

The Greek word for “meeting together” is actually a form of the word *synagogue*. Going to synagogue was at least a weekly event. Scripture says going to church once a week was Jesus’ own custom. We need this. A modern parallel thought is “Seven days without God’s Word makes one weak.”

According to our records, you have now been absent from worship for twenty-four consecutive weeks. I have contacted you with concern about this. Approximately three months ago one of elders contacted you to encourage you to make use of God’s blessings in Word and Sacrament. I believe other members, who love you dearly and are also concerned about you, have contacted you as well. Yet, it is now almost a half year that you have been away from worship.

I’m writing to suggest that perhaps it’s time for three things.

First, it is time to get serious.

Have a sober chat with yourself and your Lord. Review your priorities. I pray that will result in your firm resolve to renew your walk with Jesus, making him your greatest priority. This also means hearing his Word and receiving his Sacrament regularly at St. Peter’s. Our Bible Classes are a wonderful way to get your questions answered and get back into the Word. Our small groups are a great way to connect with fellow members.

Secondly, it is time to be honest.

If, for whatever reason, you would be better served by another WELS congregation or Christian church, please contact me at ###-###-####. We can discuss a transfer or release from membership, if that is what you want. That would sadden me greatly. I would sincerely appreciate the opportunity to discuss why you want that,

if for no other reason than if St. Peter's has failed you in any way, we want to rectify the situation and not repeat it.

Thirdly, it is time to be open.

It could be that your beliefs have changed, and you haven't wanted to admit it for fear of condemnation. You won't get that from me. I would, however, appreciate the opportunity to understand what has changed.

Or perhaps there is something that needs the care that only God can provide with forgiveness. I have seen it happen often that when people leave church, it is because they did something that is burdening their conscience. _____, that is precisely the person who needs the Word and Sacrament most! If that is the case, let us talk. I want to share with you the unconditional grace that is yours in Christ. I want to help.

As your pastor, I will be contacting you during this coming week to follow up. It would even be better if you take the initiative and contact me.

Your servant in Christ,

Sample script:

There is no way to provide a sample script for how this conversation will go, as it has the potential to go in a dozen different directions. Members, pray for the Spirit to give your pastor wisdom as he engages in this conversation.

Possible outcomes:

The possible outcomes follow the three parts of that letter.

1. The absent individual might admit they have strayed far from God. They may repent and be absolved. The fruit of repentance will be their expressed desire to return quickly to worship.
2. The absent individual provide a reason they have pulled away from worship that goes beyond spiritual apathy. It might be that they have come to disagree with one of our doctrines. It might be that they have tried visiting other congregations, WELS or another denomination, and believe they are being fed better there. It might be that they feel the congregation has let them down in some way, and in their pain, stopped attending. This individual may be on a path that leads to release by self-exclusion.
3. The absent individual might simply expresses spiritual hardness. He knows the Bible says he should go to church, but he disagrees that is necessary. He is shown how neglect of the means of grace is a sin, and he does not seem to be concerned about this. This individual may be on a path that leads to excommunication.

STEP SIX— Member has been absent for THIRTY WEEKS

- What happens:** The same elder who wrote and visited the absent member at twelve weeks attempts a “pop in” (unannounced) visit on the absent member. If the absent member is not home, the elder tries a “pop in” visit a few days later. If the absent member is not home, the elder now tries to contact him by phone.
- Goal:** To provide further warning and admonition to the absent member. This is done, however, with a spirit of gentleness and love. The member should feel that he is genuinely missed and cared for. The elder is visiting out of a spirit of concern, not anger or judgment.
- People involved:** a member of the Board of Elders
- Sample script:** *“Hi, _____. I am just stopping by cause Pastor told me that he sent you a letter... must have been about six or seven weeks ago. I’m just wondering if there is anything else we can do or say.”* (Listen carefully, if the absent member responds.) *“Let me ask you two questions. Do you believe that God’s Word says we should be in worship regularly? And if you believe that, would you admit you are sinning by not being in worship?”*
- The conversation can go multiple directions from here.
- Possible outcomes:**
1. The absent individual says things that might set up a conversation that allows the elder to launch into a law/gospel presentation or to handle certain objections people have for coming to church. (NOTE: This illustrates the need for there to be communication between the elder and the Discipleship Committee member. If on an earlier visit, the DC member presented God’s Great Exchange, the elder would want to use a different law/gospel presentation, such as *The Romans Way*.) After that conversation, the absent individual admits he needs to return to church and says he will do so. No further action is necessary.
 2. The absent individual provides a reason they have pulled away from worship that goes beyond spiritual apathy. This individual may be on a path that leads to release by self-exclusion.
 3. The absent individual might simply expresses spiritual hardness. He knows the Bible says he should go to church, but he disagrees that is necessary. He is shown how neglect of the means of grace is a sin, and he does not seem to be concerned about this. This individual may be on a path that leads to excommunication.

STEP SEVEN — Member has been absent for THIRTY-SIX WEEKS

What happens: The same elder who has been working with the absent individual sends a joint letter with the pastor. This is now the third letter that has been sent. It expresses concern that repeated admonition from both the elder and the pastor has not been heeded. It makes clear that if the member does not return to worship attendance, the congregation will eventually have to enact church discipline.

Goal: To make clear to the member that this absence from worship is sinful and, if not corrected, will result in his removal from membership.

People involved: a member of the Board of Elders and the pastor

Sample letter:

Dear _____,

We apologize.

Apparently both the pastor and I have both failed to convince you of the need to renew your walk with Jesus and reconsider your privileges and responsibilities as a member of St. Peter's Lutheran.

For over three-quarters of a year, because we sincerely care for you and your eternal soul, we have written, called and visited. However, a current review still shows no record of your attendance in God's house.

In Matthew 22 Jesus compares the call to forgiveness to an invitation to a massive wedding. It is a blessed person who through the Holy Spirit accepts this invitation. Unfortunately, many don't.

At some point in your life, you made a commitment to your Savior to follow his commands, because you knew that his commands are for your good. You expressed a desire to be a member of St. Peter's Lutheran Church. However, your continued absence from his Word, his Sacrament, and our church leads us to conclude that commitment is no longer there.

Option 1

We are not able to judge your heart and your relationship with the Lord. Only God knows your heart. However, it is clear you no longer wish to be a member of St. Peter's. Therefore, in the near future we will bring a recommendation to the appropriate boards at St. Peter's that you be removed from the membership roles. In doing this, we are not saying that we think you are an unbeliever. We are simply acknowledging what you have said through your actions—that you do not want St. Peter's to be the church that serves you spiritually.

Our motivation is not anger, but loving concern. There are some people who think that on Judgment Day, what will save them from hell is the fact their name is on a membership roster at a Christian church. However, that is not what saves us. Only faith in Jesus Christ can save someone, and the only way to maintain true faith is through regular use of the means of grace. Therefore, because we love you, we would remove you from membership to take away any false security that church

membership saves you.

Option 2

Our previous conversations and your statements indicate that you no longer believe in the teachings of St. Peter's. Obviously, you have some knowledge of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible. However, knowledge of Scripture is not the same thing as saving faith in Jesus Christ. In our conversations, you seem to understand what God wants you to do. Yet in word and actions, you have made it clear you are not going to repent of your sin. *You may insert the sin here. It might be persistently despising the means of grace. It might be other unrepentant sins in addition to that.* Unrepentant sin and saving faith cannot live in the same heart. Your lack of fruits of faith would indicate that whether you understand it or not, you are currently an unbeliever. Therefore, in the near future, we will recommend to the appropriate boards at St. Peter's that you be excommunicated from membership. To be clear, we would be saying that due to unrepentant sin, we believe that if you were to die, you would be spending eternity in hell.

We do not say that in anger, but love. St. Paul once told the Corinthian congregation how to deal with someone who refused to repent of their sin. "Hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:5). That is what we will pray for daily! We pray that this strong warning will lead you to see what a dangerous path you are on, and that you would return to the Lord and to St. Peter's. We would rejoice to have you back.

Conclusion

Unlike with previous communications, we will not follow up quickly with this one. We want to give you time to prayerfully consider this warning, which we make out of genuine concern for you. You can do one of three things.

1. Return to church. We will take that as a sign that you have repented. We will gladly share with you all the blessings of the Gospel. You will be a member in good standing. We will delight in calling you our brother/sister in Christ.
2. Contact us to discuss this further. If something in this letter is unclear, or if we have not answered concerns or questions in previous visits, then let us meet again. Contact us and tell us a time and location that works for you, and we will be there.
3. Do nothing. If you do not return to church or contact us, we will attempt to visit you one final time to be sure we understand in your will in this matter. That will be in about two months.

Sincerely, (elder and pastor both sign)

Possible outcomes:

1. The absent individual returns to church. This needs to be celebrated! If the pastor or elder would have him over for dinner, that would be entirely appropriate and show him the bond of love is strong.
2. The absent individual contacts the pastor and/or elder for further discussion.
3. The absent individual contacts the pastor and/or elder and asks the process of release/excommunication be expedited.
4. The absent individual does nothing, leading to the next step.

STEP EIGHT — Member has been absent for FORTY-FOUR WEEKS

- What happens:** The elder and pastor schedule a visit with the absent member. If the absent member refuses that visit, either the pastor or elder can attempt to have this final conversation by phone. If that is refused, the process goes to Step 9.
- Goal:** To have a final face-to-face warning and explain the impending reality of removal from membership.
- People involved:** a member of the Board of Elders and the pastor
- Sample script:** *“Hi, _____. You obviously know why we are here (or “why I am calling”). We want to see if you’ve had any additional thoughts after receiving the last letter.*
- The conversation can go multiple directions from here. If there is opportunity, the pastor and elder should explain exactly what is being said by a *release for self-exclusion vs. excommunication.*
- It should be explained that if released for self-exclusion, while it is not being said that the person is an unbeliever, there are serious concerns. If the absent member does not have regular contact with the means of grace, they *will* become an unbeliever in time. It is no different than if a log is pulled out of the fireplace. It will go out in time.
- It should also be explained that if the person is being excommunicated, that isn’t a declaration stating, “You can’t be saved.” It is a declaration saying, “You are not currently saved.” It should be expressed that the pastor and elder hope that in the future, God will work to bring that person to repentance and back into the faith. It should also be expressed that they would love it if that would mean the individual began coming back to St. Peters.
- The conversation should conclude with the pastor or elder sharing the exact date at which it will be one year the member has been absent. The member is informed if he would return by that date, it would be seen as a sign of repentance. Otherwise, that is the date when, practically, membership ends. (It will be ratified by the Voters later.)
- Possible outcomes:**
1. The absent individual may, after all this time, still be led by the Holy Spirit to repent. The “heaviness” of the situation might crush the hard heartedness. Rejoice! Welcome the individual back warmly.
 2. The absent individual may be resigned to being removed from membership.

STEP NINE — Member has been absent for ONE YEAR

What happens: A letter is sent by the pastor, informing the individual he is no longer a member.

Goal: To convey to the individual their current membership status and spiritual situation.

People involved: pastor

Sample letter:

Dear _____,

As of this past week, our records indicate that you have not attended worship at St. Peter's for one year.

In that time, you have been contacted repeatedly by multiple individuals. We asked nothing of you other than that you return. Our only desire was for you to enjoy eternal life in heaven. I pray you see that our actions have been motivated by nothing other than love.

According to our previous conversations, as of this week, you have been removed from the membership roster at St. Peter's. That decision will be ratified at the next the Voters' Assembly, so that the congregation understands the situation. The Voter will be informed that you are being... *Option 1* — ... released, for the reason of self-exclusion. *Option 2* — ... excommunicated, for the unrepentant sin of _____.

Please understand, we would love to have you attend St. Peter's again in the future. I believe that in the future, the pressure of living in a broken world as a broken sinner (like all of us) will weigh heavy upon you. This might come through some personal tragedy. It will certainly come as you have to face the doorway into eternity—death—and you wonder what lies beyond that door for you. At those times, I pray the weight of that leads you to cry out to the God of all mercy. He will listen. He will welcome you back into his arms. If that time comes, and I can be of assistance, I will serve you with the same zeal and love as if none of this had ever happened.

Along those lines, if you should decide in the future that you have made a mistake, and you want to return to St. Peter's, the members will welcome you back as a brother/sister in Christ. And there will be rejoicing, not just among us, but among the angels, as Jesus has said happens when a lost sheep is reclaimed for the fold.

This has been a long process, because this is a serious situation, _____. Heaven and hell are both very real places. I want you to enjoy the former, not experience the latter.

Your servant in Christ,

PART THREE: AN EXAMPLE OF *THE PETER PLAN* AT WORK

In order to try and pull this all together, let us look at a hypothetical example of *The Peter Plan* in action. Here are the characters.

- **Pastor John** - The pastor at St. Peter's who oversees discipleship and attendance
- Coordinator **Carol** - On Mondays, Carol takes the pew worship registers and enters attendance information into their database. She forwards the lists onto the pastor and head elder.
- Head Elder **Mike** - St. Peter's has a Board of Elders of five men. Mike is the head elder, and therefore makes assignments for *The Peter Plan*.
- Elder **Sam** - Sam is one of the five members of the Board of Elders at St. Peter's.
- Discipleship Committee member **Janet** - Janet is one of eight people who serve on St. Peter's Discipleship Committee.
- **Sharon** - Sharon is a single woman, 29-years-old, who is drifting from church.

Week 1 — June 7— First week Sharon is absent

Shortly after the last service of that week, Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. Sharon is not recorded, as she missed that week. Carol forwards the lists of those who have been absent for certain periods of time to the pastor and elders. Sharon isn't on that list, as she has only missed one week.

Week 4 — June 28 - Step 1 of *The Peter Plan*

Shortly after the last service of that week, Carol, the coordinator of *The Peter Plan*, enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. When Carol runs the queries to list who has been absent for certain periods of time, Sharon shows up on the list of those who have missed four weeks. Those lists are all forwarded to Pastor John and all the elders.

Pastor John and Head Elder Mike go through the list of those who have been absent for four weeks. They see Sharon on that list. Noting that Sharon is a younger, single woman, they agree to assign Janet, a member of the Discipleship Committee who is also a younger woman, to work with Sharon. Sharon's "case" is assigned to Elder Sam, who will now work with Janet. Head Elder Mike contacts both Discipleship Committee member Janet and Elder Sam. Elder Sam begins to keep a *Peter Plan* report form on Sharon.

Within a day or two, Janet gives Sharon a call. The gist is that Janet has noticed Sharon has been gone for awhile, and is wondering if everything is ok. Sharon assures her things are fine. Sharon tells Janet she has simply been very busy and has been out of town some weekends, but she will be back soon.

When that call is ended, Discipleship Committee member Janet either calls or sends an e-mail to Elder Sam, who records the date and outcome of this first contact with Sharon on *The Peter Plan* report form.

Week 8 — July 26 — Step 2 of *The Peter Plan*

Shortly after the last service of that week, Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. Sharon is not recorded. She has now missed eight-weeks in a row. Carol forwards the lists of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders.

Pastor John looks closely at the list of those who have been absent for eight weeks, because that is when he becomes involved in *The Peter Plan*. He notes that Sharon is on that list.

Pastor John calls Sharon one evening to ask if everything is ok. He offers to bring her Word and sacrament privately if her business schedule or something else is keeping her from being in worship. Sharon assures Pastor John everything is ok. She admits she has let herself fall into the bad habit of using her busy schedule as an excuse to miss church. She thanks Pastor John for his call and promises to return soon.

Pastor John either calls Elder Sam or e-mails him, informing him that Step 2 of *The Peter Plan* has been carried out, and that Sharon has admitted she is becoming lax and has promised to return soon. Elder Sam records the date and results of that contact on *The Peter Plan* report form.

Week 12 — August 23 — Step 3 of *The Peter Plan*

Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. Sharon is not recorded. She has now missed twelve weeks in a row. Carol forwards the lists of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders.

Elder Sam scans over the list of individuals who have been absent for twelve weeks, for that is when he becomes personally involved. He sees that Sharon is on that list.

Elder Sam sends Sharon a version of the form letter used with Step 3 of *The Peter Plan*. In the letter he promises to follow up soon. He does so, calling Sharon a few days later. He explains that he is concerned that she has been gone for almost three months, and asks if he might meet with her sometime to speak about what is wrong. Sharon explains that nothing is wrong. She admits she has fallen into a bad habit. She confesses that this is wrong. Elder Sam assures her that in Christ she is forgiven. He assures Sharon that everyone will be happy to see her again.

Elder Sam records the date and results of this step in *The Peter Plan* report form for Sharon.

Week 18 — October 4 — Step 4 of *The Peter Plan*

Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. Sharon is not recorded. She has now missed eighteen weeks in a row. Carol forwards the lists of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders.

Elder Sam checks through those lists and notices that Sharon, one of his “cases,” is on the 18 week list. He calls Janet, the member of the Discipleship Committee that was assigned

to Sharon. Elder Sam asks Janet if she'll do a "pop in" visit on Sharon sometime that week. Janet does so. It takes two trips, but on the second visit made in the early evening, Janet finds Sharon at home.

They sit down and talk through what is going on. Sharon admits that for awhile she has felt that she was not getting much benefit from church. Janet uses the training she received in active listening and in dealing with objections to encourage Sharon that she should come back to church. Nothing is resolved. Sharon simply promises she will think about it. Janet encourages her to call anytime she wants to talk more.

When Janet gets home, she calls or e-mails Elder Sam, so Sam can record the date and result of this contact in *The Peter Plan* report form.

Week 24 — November 15 — Step 5 of *The Peter Plan*

Shortly after the last service of that week, Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. Sharon is not recorded. She has now missed twenty-four in a row. Carol forwards the list of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders.

Pastor John looks over the list of those who have been absent for twenty-four weeks, since that is when Step 5 of *The Peter Plan* takes place, which involves him.

Pastor John sends to Sharon a version of the form letter for Step 5. It expresses his concern and explains the seriousness of the situation. It also states that he wants to meet with her face-to-face as soon as possible.

A few days after the letter is received, Pastor John calls and arranges a visit with Sharon. As they discuss the content of the letter, it becomes clear that Sharon is shaken up. Over the course of the conversation, it comes out that she has been engaging in certain sinful activities. Her objection—"I don't feel like I'm getting much out of church."—was an excuse to avoid church, as being there made her feel guilty.

Pastor John assures her that God wants Sharon to come back to his house, precisely so he can assure her that her guilt is taken away in Christ, and so that the Holy Spirit can give her power to fight against the sin that is making her feel bad.

Sharon promises she will return to worship. Pastor John presses gently: "This week, OK? Don't put it off any longer." Sharon assures him she will be back that week.

The next day, Pastor John either calls or e-mails Elder Sam, so Sam can record the date and results of this visit in *The Peter Plan* record card.

Week 25 — November 22 — Sharon returns to worship

Shortly after the last service of that week, Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. *Sharon is recorded!* Carol forwards the lists of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders. When it comes to Sharon, no action need be taken.

Week 30 — December 27 — The first *Peter Plan* check point since Sharon returned

Shortly after the last service of that week, Coordinator Carol enters in all the information from the pew worship registers. *Sharon is recorded!* Carol forwards the lists of people who have been absent various intervals to the pastor and elders.

Elder Sam is checking for his “cases.” As he walks through the list of people who have been absent for thirty straight weeks, he notices Sharon is *not* on it. Thus, he knows that sometime between week 24 and week 30, Sharon returned for worship. He rejoices! He might even send her a card welcoming her back joyfully, and encouraging her to remain in worship.

Elder Sam closes Sharon’s “case,” returning it to Head Elder Mike, who files it away for a period of time.

Some things to notice about this hypothetical example

1. By involving many people, hopefully it conveys genuine care on the part of the congregation for Sharon.
2. By involving many people, it spreads the work out. It isn’t one person carrying the entire load.
3. Different people will be looking at different lists. Pastor John, for example, is looking at the list of people who are absent for eight weeks, twenty-four weeks, etc. Those are the weeks that involve him.
4. One of the biggest tasks of the elder is administration and accountability. Everyone, even the pastor, reported the results of the contacts with Sharon to Elder Sam. If they *didn’t* report the results, Elder Sam would want to contact either Discipleship Committee member Janet or Pastor John and see if they needed help keeping *The Peter Plan* on schedule.
5. The purpose of Head Elder Mike filing away Sharon’s “case” is so that if she would relapse quickly, there would be record of all previous calling activity. For example, say that when Sharon returned to worship on November 22, she only came sporadically for the remainder of that year. She attended one other Sunday and Christmas Eve. Then she missed four straight Sundays in January. Pastor John and Head Elder Mike and Elder Sam will discuss whether Sharon goes back to step 1 of *The Peter Plan*, or whether she needs to be dealt with more firmly, with more admonition than encouragement, since she really didn’t return to faithful worship attendance. That is a situation spiritual leaders will deal with on a case-by-case basis.

PART FOUR: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT *THE PETER PLAN*

A daunting amount of work?

When one looks at the nine steps of *The Peter Plan*, it seems like this could be a daunting amount of work. As mentioned in the discussion piece *Elder Work*, implementing an aggressive plan to retain straining members can be time consuming *at first*. As the plan is implemented and worked through faithfully, the Word works. The amount of persistent absentee members will, God willing, become fewer.

What about meetings?

The Peter Plan intentionally calls for few meetings. This is to allow both members of the Discipleship Committee (DC) and the Board of Elders (BoE) spend their time serving with the gospel, rather than talking about serving with the gospel.

That said, monthly meetings can be beneficial. Our recommendation is that it begin with the combined DC and BoE, and then follow this agenda. It should not take more than 40 minutes.

1. Begin with prayer
2. Elders report on people who have returned to regular worship. This is not only to rejoice with the angels, but so that members of both the DC and BoE can look for these individuals on Sunday morning and be extra friendly to people who might be feeling guilty of sheepish about their absence.
3. DC members report briefly on any bad “matches” that there might be. Perhaps a DC member has good reason to feel he is not a good fit to work with some delinquent member. Changes could be made.
4. DC members are excused. The BoE remains behind.
5. The main topic of compliance of *The Peter Plan*. The BoE discusses if anyone is overworked and could use help or whether anyone can offer more help. It is vital that *The Peter Plan* stay on schedule.
6. Difficult cases may be discussed, if for no other reason than to lift those cases up to the Lord of the Church in prayer.
7. Close with prayer for straying members, mentioning them by name.

More technology? Less personal?

Some of the church attendance tracking software suggested contains the options of sending out mass e-mails to people who are absent for any given amount of time. For example, instead of having a member of the Discipleship Committee call someone who is absent for four weeks, you could just have the software send out a form e-mail to those people. Some of the software allows you to print mailing labels. So why not just send a

form letter to everyone who is absent for four weeks?

While that saves time, does it have the same impact? Think of what you do with e-mails you do not really want to read. Think of how quickly you toss out mail you know isn't vital, like a bill. Plus, might that not be perceived as cold and impersonal? One of the top three reasons people give for *leaving* church every year is that "church is cold and impersonal."

Adapt to your situation

WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling does not suggest *The Peter Plan* is correct way to deal with delinquency. It is simply *a* way.

Four weeks absent might not be the best time for a first time call in your congregation. It might be three weeks absent. It might be six.

The nine steps of *The Peter Plan* might not fit well in your congregation. You might do it in five. You might have twelve, one step a month.

The Peter Plan calls for "pop in" (unannounced) visits in some steps. There are places in the country, primarily gated communities, where that isn't possible. You *can't* show up at someone's house unannounced.

So, please, take this plan and adapt it to your situation.

God bless your efforts!

Jesus said, "When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Luke 15:5-7

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