

### EXPLANATION

#### The Need for *Welcome Home*

WELS has 150,000 members who attend worship fewer than two times a year. Approximately half of those individuals have not attended in over a year. In the average WELS church, around forty percent of members attend in a given week. This presents a number of challenges.

The biggest and most important challenge is the one facing those who seem to be disconnected from the means of grace, a challenge to their faith. The individual who is separated from Word and sacrament is like a coal pulled out of the campfire. Faith can flicker out. Moreover, straying members lose connection to the Christian community that Scripture says we all need. *“Let us not give up meeting together”* (Hebrews 10:25).

***Faith comes from  
hearing the message.***

ROMANS 10:17



This leads to another challenge: the logistics of providing encouragement for people to remain connected to God's Word and to their fellow believers. Typically, this responsibility falls to the congregation's Board of Elders. In many WELS congregations, the elders meet at least once a month to discuss, among other things,

members who have not attended church in awhile. But if 60% of a congregation's members are gone in any given Sunday, it can be a massive challenge to identify those people, especially if the congregation is larger. *“Has anyone seen John Doe in the past month?”* There is uncertainty. That uncertainty can lead to inaction.

This leads to a third challenge: a culture of “acceptable” non-attendance. When congregations dip below a certain percentage of members in attendance, some members will perceive that it is “acceptable” if they skip worship. Why do they think that? Because so many people are gone each week, yet (so far as they can tell) nothing happens. It is almost never the case that the church leaders don't care or that they actually view non-attendance as “acceptable.” It is just that delinquency is such a large problem, it seems impossible to address. *“Where would we start?”* While the percentage varies from place to place, a good target is 50%. Congregations typically need to have 50% of their members in weekly attendance to avoid creating a culture of “acceptable” non-attendance.

*Welcome Home* attempts to help congregations address all of these challenges.

#### The Basic Concept of *Welcome Home*

Many WELS congregations have some sort of fall festival, typically connected with a worship service. A number of WELS churches have made those “100% attendance” Sundays. Fall is a peak time for church attendance anyway. Family vacations are over. Kids are back in school. With “100% attendance” Sundays,

congregations ask all members to set aside a designated Sunday—no family trips, no weekend projects, etc.—to attend church. The goal is to allow people to reconnect and have the energy of a packed church for worship. There’s something exciting about seeing *everyone* together. Sometimes, congregations will have only one service and hold worship for this Sunday in a special location (e.g. the school gymnasium) to accommodate that attendance.

This “100% attendance” Sunday concept has also proven useful in getting straying members to return to worship. Oftentimes, when a member strays from worship, guilt sets in. Perhaps an elder called them, but the individual didn’t return for fear other members would look down upon him for his absence. Those “100% attendance” Sundays are viewed as a sort of clean start. You have been absent for awhile for some reason. You come back on that Sunday when everyone is there. You find out your fellow members aren’t looking down at you for the fact you stopped coming. They are simply happy you are coming again. *Welcome home!* You get back into the habit of church beginning that week.

The *Welcome Home* initiative provides congregations with resources to encourage every member to attend a “100% attendance” Sunday. It is the first Sunday in a worship series that focuses on the blessings of Christian community. Why a worship series? We just said we want people to get back *into a habit* of coming to church. Studies show it takes about two months of consistent behavior for a habit to form. Worship series have proven to be helpful in encouraging people to attend more regularly.

The *Welcome Home* initiative also provides training and shares systems to help congregations beef up their elder program. At [welscongregationalservices.net](http://welscongregationalservices.net) there is a video-based *Welcome Home* elder training system. It allows the pastor(s) and spiritually mature laymen to develop an elder plan that deals with delinquency lovingly, promptly, and evangelically. One model—*The Peter Plan*—has been provided as part of *Welcome Home*.

Congregations can modify this elder work system to fit their local needs.

So *Welcome Home* not only tries to pull people back into church, it also attempts to keep them there through zealous elder work.

## The Phases of *Welcome Home*

*Welcome Home* can be divided into four phases.

### Phase 1: Planning

*Welcome Home* can be carried out many different ways. While the *Welcome Home* resources are intended to give congregations a head start, they will need to be customized to fit one’s local context. It would be impossible to provide a program that would fit *every* congregation’s situation. So congregational leadership will need to take a few weeks to go through the *Welcome Home* materials and figure out exactly how it would work best in their setting.

### Phase 2: Promotion and Training

This takes eight to twelve weeks. In that time, the congregation is aggressively promoting the *Welcome Home* Sunday. It is a day the congregation is striving for 100% attendance. (Perhaps your congregation will include a fall festival as part of that day, with food and games after worship.) This needs to be promoted multiple times via a variety of methods. Advertisers talk about “The Rule of Seven,” which claims that people need to see an advertisement seven times before what is being advertised registers in one’s mind. Perhaps that is simply advertisers trying to get a bigger commission! But the basic concept is logical: overcommunicate that which is important.



The two months before *Welcome Home* Sunday is also when the Board of Elders would be looking at their systems. In church planning, a “system” is a series of tasks that is kicked off by a trigger event. For the elders, the trigger event would be that someone misses worship. How is that noted? What happens? It is time for the elders to examine if they have good systems in place to deal with delinquency.

If it is believed that this group needs to be larger to deal with delinquency more efficiently, this is the time for new elders to be recruited. Training could take place over the fall utilizing the *Welcome Home* online elder training program ([welscongregationalservices.net/servant-training/](http://welscongregationalservices.net/servant-training/)).

Finally—and this is extremely important—this is a time for congregational leaders to prepare members. How will they graciously welcome people back home to the church? This can be touchy! Take Mark, who for some reason stopped coming to church many months ago. He comes on *Welcome Home* Sunday. Jeff, who was one of the guys Mark considered a church friend, sees Mark and says, “*Hey, stranger! Been awhile! Let me get you to sign our visitor register.*” Jeff is just joking. But that joke *might* mean Mark does not come back again.

The reality is that many people stop coming to church because of perceived (and maybe sometimes real) slights they received from other members.

- There’s the single mother whose young kids can be rambunctious. If she gets to church late (which being a single mother is often), there is no room in the back. So, she has to sit in the middle of the church. She and her squirmy kids get disapproving glares from a few members who think, “*My kids never misbehaved like that!*” Instead of offering to help her, they judge her.
- There’s the man who is struggling against his homosexual desires. He feels people know. (And some do.) When he would go to church, people seemed to avoid him.

- There’s the 20-something girl with the funky colored hair, gauges in her ears, and full arm sleeve tattoo. She sort of wants to go to church, but doesn’t appreciate the way people seem to disapprove of her dress.
- And of course, there’s the individual who sat in the wrong seat, the one “owned” by that longtime member.



This is *not* a minor issue. Exit surveys of those who have left WELS congregations show that these type of things play a major role in why they leave.

If people leave our congregation because they do not see the spiritual need for church, even after our persistent encouragement and loving admonishment, that mistake is on them.

If people leave our congregation because they do not agree with our doctrine, even after our careful listening and patient instruction, that too is on them. And there is nothing we can do. Our first love is for God and his Word. We are not going to change or hide what God’s Word says because someone does not like it.

However, if people leave our congregation because of slights—perceived or real—that is something we, for the sake of Christ and his mission, can attempt to rectify.

These preparation months are a time to do just that, to train your “every Sunday” members how to welcome not just guests, but also to *welcome home* members who left and have now returned.

*Welcome Home* provides resources that members could use in a group (e.g. a midweek Bible study) or on their own to help them think

through how to be welcoming and gracious to members who strayed, but now have returned.

### ***Phase 3: Welcome Home Sunday & Series***

*Welcome Home* Sunday is “the big day” when congregations are encouraging 100% of their members to be in attendance. There will be ways to encourage people to come back in subsequent weeks, if the congregation opts to also use the full *Welcome Home* worship series instead of having a single, standalone Sunday. Again, the goal is to help people get in *the habit* of going to church regularly.

Another important part of this phase takes place *after Welcome Home* Sunday. The congregational leadership assesses how things went in a “hot wash,” determining how to make future 100% attendance Sundays even better.

### ***Phase 4: Attendance Tracking and Elder Work***

The prayer is that through the *Welcome Home* effort, congregations will get a percentage of their delinquent members to come back to church. It is now time to try to keep them there. It is also time to deal lovingly but firmly with those members who are damaging their faith by long-term separation from the means of grace.

Therefore, in summer and fall, congregational leadership will assess the current delinquency program being operated by the Board of Elders. If necessary, they will make adjustments. During the *Welcome Home* initiative, congregations may even decide to train more elders.

This is also the time when congregational leadership will begin to communicate that the church is about to implement a new discipleship system (i.e. elder work) to encourage members to remain in the means of grace and the Christian community. It will be made clear this is done out of love.



## **USING THIS TIMELINE**

The following pages break those four phases down into various tasks. It gives a timespan in which to complete those tasks.

- It would be wise to print out multiple copies of this document. Give a copy to every member of congregational leadership.
- It might be wise to print out one copy of everything available in the *Welcome Home* resources, so that leaders can peruse them when they assemble.
- Let everyone read through this document on their own. Then come together to discuss it and review the other printed materials that are part of the *Welcome Home* initiative.
- When the leadership has discussed the program, they can begin to mark up this document. What will be done? What won't be done? For each task, write down who is responsible and the date by which this task must be completed.
- Individuals responsible for those various tasks produce an action plan to make sure they are completed in a timely manner.

# Welcome Home *Timeline*

## Initial Encouragement

The *Welcome Home* initiative includes a lot of materials. However, a parish pastor and leadership team need to make them their own.

Ultimately *Welcome Home* comes down to two things, both of which address delinquency:

1. It can be beneficial for congregations to have a weekend where all members are encouraged to attend. It is not simply that it is uplifting to worship in a packed church. This “100% attendance” Sunday has proven to be encouraging for members who are embarrassed they have been absent for some time, but who might come back with some persistent, loving encouragement.
2. It is absolutely vital for discipleship that congregations track member attendance and have a system in place to address prolonged or persistent absenteeism. The most important resource provided is the *Welcome Home* online elder training program.

If you focus on those two things, your *Welcome Home* efforts will be productive, even if you do not utilize every one of the resources! Do what seems wisest in your context. Also, realize this is not a one time event. Establishing a more zealous elder program will be part of an ongoing effort. Having a *Welcome Home* Sunday is something a congregation could do every fall. (It might be titled different things, e.g. Fall Festival.) The *Welcome Home* initiative gives you ideas for getting started. But you can build on it year after year in whatever ways benefit your context.

## *Phase 1: Planning (July to mid-August)*

### Pick a Date for *Welcome Home* Sunday

We have offered two options: October 20 and October 27. The reason is that many districts have teacher conferences on one of those weekends. Since you want 100% member attendance on *Welcome Home* Sunday and called workers serve as examples to other members, you will need to pick a date your teachers can be there.

Could you pick a date other than one of those? Sure. However, the *Welcome Home* worship series runs over the season of End Time (November 3, 10, 17, and 24). If *Welcome Home* Sunday is October 27, that sermon series follows immediately. It is a five-week series under the theme, “Welcome Home.” If *Welcome Home* Sunday is October 20, we have provided a “filler” service for October 27 to make it a six-week series under the theme “Welcome Home.”

### Confirm the Budget

Depending on the decisions made in this planning phase, *Welcome Home* could cost your congregations almost nothing. However, it could also cost a couple thousand dollars; e.g. if you did lots of mailings and had a fall festival with lots of food and activities. (You may already have congregational funds set aside for some of this, if you currently have some fall fellowship event.) Determine if it is feasible to do everything you want to do. Adjust as necessary.

## Review All Worship Materials

A complete worship plan for the *Welcome Home* series has been provided. There are editable service folders that have been provided. (There are also PDF versions which are simply meant to give ideas for worship planning.)

The worship plan calls for six weeks of special services, ones where the liturgy captures the major themes of the day (Reformation, Saints Triumphant, etc.). Pastors and worship leaders will need to go through the worship plan. There are lots of substitutions that can be made to fit a local congregation's musical gifts/preferences, such as swapping out the Verse of the Day for a choir anthem. Congregations can edit the folders to include Holy Communion as fits their local schedule.

When the worship plan calls for special music, both the worship plan and the service folder templates contain hyperlinks that take you a webpage where you can order that music. (The service folders are unusable *without* that music.)

NOTE: The congregation is responsible to make certain they follow copyright compliance laws. In most cases, simply purchasing enough copies of the recommended musical pieces for your congregation's musicians will give you the right to reprint what is in the service folder templates. See the worship plan for more details.

## Plan Any *Welcome Home* Fellowship Events

Many congregations have a fall festival. It often includes a cookout or potluck (or combination of the two). It sometimes includes games. It might include activities for the kids, budget permitting: bounce castle, face painting, etc. If your congregation currently does this, would it make sense to have it align with *Welcome Home* Sunday, since you are encouraging 100% member attendance? If your congregation *doesn't* do this, would it make sense to include such activities on *Welcome Home* Sunday?

It isn't necessary. Again, the goal of the *Welcome Home* initiative is to address delinquency. That is best done by getting people to see the benefit of what happens *normally* on a weekend: you hear the Word, you receive Christ's body and blood, etc. However, since *Welcome Home* is meant to be a celebration of the blessing of Christian community, it is certainly appropriate to include fellowship time/activities if feasible.

## Produce the General Communication Plan for *Welcome Home* Sunday

Remember "The Rule of Seven"! Starting in late August, you want to communicate pertinent information about *Welcome Home* multiple times in a variety of ways. If you start in late August, that gives you two months of promotion time. That is not too much! People are busy. They need to hear about big events early and often.

The *Welcome Home* resources, contain a lot of tools you can use as part of this communication plan:

- There are a series of letters that could come from the pastor, congregational president, or head elder. (How about one from each?)
- There are "blurbs"—announcements 100 to 300 words long—that could go in the weekly bulletin, monthly newsletter, e-mail blasts, the congregation's Facebook page, etc.
- To go along with those blurbs, there are a variety of images of the *Welcome Home* logo in varying sizes.

- ❑ There is a *Welcome Home* Sunday promotional video that can be shared on the congregational web page or Facebook page.
- ❑ There are *Welcome Home* postcards that can be ordered from [www.echtprinting.com](http://www.echtprinting.com).

In the production of this general communication plan, the congregation not only will need to determine *how* to communicate information about *Welcome Home* but *what* to communicate. In some of the sample announcements provided in the *Welcome Home* resources, *Welcome Home* is portrayed as a fun effort to get 100% of members together in worship, “packing the house.” In other sample announcements, it makes it clear that *Welcome Home* is also an effort to go after members who are drifting away. Congregational leadership needs to decide what message goes to which members.

## Plan for Phone Calls to Straying Members

The general communication plan for *Welcome Home* is nonpersonal. It is letters and e-mails and announcements.

Members who have been straying for awhile will almost certainly need some additional encouragement, the type where they are actually speaking to someone. In most churches, the best way to do this is by phone. The *Welcome Home* resources include possible phone scripts for these calls.

Congregational leadership should decide the best way to do this. Is this best done by the elders? Perhaps. But this phone call is simply meant to provide encouragement to attend *Welcome Home* Sunday. Therefore, it might be done by a broader “discipleship team,” one that includes men and women. Take the twenty-nine-year-old single mother. She hasn’t been in church in six months. You want to encourage her to attend *Welcome Home* Sunday. Would it be better for her to get a call from an elder... or... from another mother? Think that through. If you believe it wise to have a broader discipleship team doing this, now is the time to start recruiting individuals.

Another consideration is *who* gets this phone call? Is it every member who has been absent over the past two months? The past four weeks? In a good number of WELS congregations, it will probably be almost half of church households receiving this call. Thus, it could be a lot of work. Do the work. *Welcome Home* can serve as a line of demarcation for congregations that believe they have not been as zealous as necessary in seeking straying sheep. Moving forward, delinquency will be dealt with evangelically, promptly, and systematically. These *Welcome Home* calls are the first step.

When you have decided who is making the calls and to whom the calls will be made, schedule a brief training session to have those people making the calls walk through the phone script provided in the *Welcome Home* resources.

## Review Elder Systems. Plan Any Necessary Changes.

One of the biggest goals of the *Welcome Home* initiative is to encourage congregations to assess whether their current elder program is adequate in preventing members from lapsing into delinquency and/or leaving the congregation. Some questions the Board of Elders could address in this meeting:

- ❑ *Do we know which members are absent in a given week? How do we determine that? Is it a matter of the pastor going through a membership directory and checking who he saw and who he did not see? If so, is this done consistently each week? Is it accurate? Is it that the elders get together once a month and ask, “Who haven’t we seen for awhile?” If so, is this accurate? In other words, do we really have a handle on who is in worship and who is not?*

- ❑ *Do we have a good system of how to approach absent members?* In congregational planning, a “system” is a series of tasks kicked off by some trigger event. So, what happens if a member misses church one week? Is that noted in some database? What happens if a member misses two weeks? At what point is a member actually contacted: when they are going three weeks? Four? Who makes that initial contact? What is said? These are all *system* questions. Do we have a system? Is it adequate? Who makes certain it is followed? If it is determined you do not have an adequate system in place, the *Welcome Home* resources include a copy of the *Peter Plan* delinquency module. It is a comprehensive system congregations can adapt to suit their needs.
- ❑ *For a congregation our size, do we have an adequate number of people working to prevent delinquency?* Say the system calls for an initial phone call to be made if someone is absent for four weeks, a face-to-face visit made if someone is absent for eight weeks, and a second face-to-face visit made if someone is absent for twelve weeks. In some congregations, in any given week, there might be two or three calls and visits to make. In others, there might be thirty.
- ❑ *Do we have the correct people working on this discipleship issue?* In answering the previous question, you might have determined, “No! We don’t have enough people working on this. However, I’m not certain we can create a Board of Elders as large as we would need.” But do you need everyone who helps with delinquency be an elder? In an evangelical delinquency system, the first couple contacts with someone who is straying are only to offer encouragement. “*Hey, I haven’t seen you in church the past month. I’m just calling to see if everything is ok.*” When it becomes evident that the person has a sinful attitude towards corporate worship then it becomes a matter of church discipline and is rightly handled by the Board of Elders. But might that initial encouragement come from a larger group—a discipleship team comprised of men and women?
- ❑ *Have the people involved in addressing delinquency, such as the elders, received adequate training?* (Surveys show that about 4 out of 5 men serving on the church council or Board of Elders in a WELS congregation receive *no* training whatsoever.) Do elders know how to determine if an absent member needs encouragement or needs admonishment? Do they know how to respond to the explanations people frequently give as to why they do not need to come to church regularly? Do they understand when it is time to deal with a delinquent member one-on-one, and when it is time to “take one or two others along” (Matthew 18:16)? If it is determined that your elders/discipleship team need training (or additional training), schedule a time to make use of the *Welcome Home* Elder Training materials available at <http://www.welscongregationalservices.net/servant-training/>.

In the summary found in the initial explanation, it was stressed that congregations need not feel they need to have membership tracking and a new elder system in place by *Welcome Home* Sunday. Perhaps, that is feasible to do in your congregation. Great! However, if your congregation has never tracked member attendance before, it probably will need to be explained. “*Here is why we are doing this now.*” A good time for congregations to make big changes is at the new year. “*Starting the first Sunday in January, we will be asking members and visitors to fill out a Connection Card each week.*”



## Phase 2: Promotion & Training (late August to late October)

### Carry Out the Communication Plan.

Here is a sample *Welcome Home* communication plan that includes the various types of communications, including phone calls to straying members. These promotions should run every week this *entire* time span—late August until *Welcome Home* Sunday.

SAMPLE WELCOME HOME COMMUNICATION PLAN							
Type of communication:	Letters / Mailings	Website	Facebook	E-mail	Weekly Bulletin	Newsletter	Phone Calls
August	Week 3	Letter #1 assembled	<i>Welcome Home</i> video & summary of congregational activities posted on website	<i>Welcome Home</i> video & summary of congregational activities posted on congregation's Facebook as event		Save the date; brief summary	Recruit callers.
	Week 4	Letter #1 mailed					
September	Week 1			<i>Welcome Home</i> blurb in newsstream	Email #1, referencing letter #1	Save the date; all details	Encouragement calls made.
	Week 2	Letter #2 assembled		New blurb in newsstream		Encouragement to attend	
	Week 3	Letter #2 mailed	<i>Welcome Home</i> Sunday highlighted; additional information shared	Video posted in newsstream	E-mail #2, offering encouragement to attend	Encouragement to attend and bring others	
	Week 4	Postcard assembled		Video sent out as a Facebook ad	E-mail #3, referencing letter #2	Encouragement to attend and bring others	
October	Week 1	Postcard mailed		New blurb in newsstream	E-mail #4, offering encouragement to attend	Encouragement to attend and bring others	Follow up encouragement calls made as necessary.
	Week 2			New blurb in newsstream	E-mail #5, referencing postcard	Final encouragements	
	Week 3			New blurb in newsstream	E-mail #6, "Next week!"	Final encouragements	
	Week 4	<i>Welcome Home</i> Sunday					

In the *Welcome Home* resources, you will find sample letters and blurbs intended to give you some ideas for these. You want the messaging to be consistent, and yet not identical each week. Repeat key information each week: the date and times for *Welcome Home* Sunday, the goal to have 100% member attendance, etc. But you also want each week to stress something slightly different, so the messages don't seem redundant. One week you might discuss the need for Christian community to support us on the walk of life. Another week you might talk about how Scripture refers to believers as family. Still another week, if appropriate, you might encourage members to think of church friends they have that they know are drifting. Help them to see that it is their responsibility (not just the pastors and elders) to encourage those drifting members to remain connected to the means of grace.

It might be good to have *one* member of the congregation—someone good at writing announcements—produce *all* of these messages. That way you know messaging will be consistent throughout the weeks of promotion.

## **Recruit and Train Volunteers to Phone Straying Members; Make Calls**

In the planning phase, congregational leadership determined whether these calls should be made by the elders or by a larger group that would include women.

You will note in the sample communication plan, the phone calls are made in September. The earlier in September, the better. You want to give people plenty of time to set aside the weekend your congregation is holding *Welcome Home* Sunday.

Making those calls in September also gives this team the opportunity, when beneficial, to make a second encouragement call in the final weeks before *Welcome Home* Sunday. The phone script provided in the *Welcome Home* resources offers suggestions of when to do this and what might be said in that second phone call.

## **If Necessary, Recruit and Begin Training of Elders**

In *Phase 1: Planning*, the Elders determined if they had a good system in place to address delinquency. They also discussed if they had enough people to carry out that system well. Finally, they discussed if there was adequate training for the position. If it was decided that a) more elders were needed and/or b) more training was needed, now is the time to address that.

As said previously, it might be wise to wait until January 2020 to fully implement a new system, one that included tracking member attendance. But once that system is implemented, it will create discipling work that needs to be done promptly on an almost weekly basis. So use these months to get everyone ready for that. The *Welcome Home* Elder Training program and *The Peter Plan* delinquency system should be utilized at this time.

## **Equip Members to Graciously “Welcome Home” Others**

In the *Welcome Home* resources, you will find a tools intended to help congregations equip members to be welcoming and gracious to others who were away from church for awhile, but who returned through the *Welcome Home* effort. Those members strayed for different reasons. One left because of some sin. E.g. He pursued divorce for a non-biblical reason. Another left because she felt she was slighted, maybe even sinned against, by a fellow member. Still another left because they feel they were not well served. E.g. The pastor did not visit this member’s dying father as often as the member thought was necessary.

These resources can be used a variety of ways. They could be shared in a Bible class setting. They could be done in small groups. It is also possible for individuals to utilize them at home. But the congregation will need to disseminate them in some manner. It is desirable to having this training done in the month prior to *Welcome Home* Sunday, so that the encouragement is fresh in everyone’s minds. The prayer would be that this training not only helps welcoming members back as part of *Welcome Home*, but that it helps serve as “preventative medicine” for those who are more regular in worship.

## **Share the *Welcome Home* Lutheran School Materials with Your Teachers**

It is very common for a former Lutheran elementary school student to stray from the church later in life. In many cases, a former teacher is the perfect person to reach out to that member. In the *Welcome Home* resources, you will find resources meant to encourage teachers to see how they can fit into a congregation's delinquency prevention program. These resources also stress the vital role teachers play in sharing the gospel with children whose parents are perhaps straying.

## Phase 3: Welcome Home Sunday & Series (October – November)

### Produce the Service Folders

If your congregation is using service folders, now is the time to print them. The templates are designed to be printed on a legal sized piece of paper in landscape mode, two sides. The graphics are designed to be printed in greyscale. Use a single staple centered along the fold spine to hold it all together.

### Hold Welcome Home Sunday

You have been working hard toward this. Enjoy it! And may the Lord bless your efforts to reach those straying members. If you see some, welcome them warmly.

### Send Out a “Thank You” Letter; Thank Volunteers

After *Welcome Home* Sunday, it is a good practice to thank two groups.

- ❑ Thank *everyone* for coming. You asked repeatedly for members to set aside that Sunday, to not schedule anything else. Thank them for doing what the congregation asked them to do to make that day special. Thank them for coming. This is especially important for those members who have not been attending regularly, but came on that day. There is a sample “Thank you” letter in the *Welcome Home* communication resources.
- ❑ Thank your *volunteers*. You recruited people to make phone calls to straying members. You perhaps had the choir sing. You maybe had fellowship events, requiring all sorts of volunteers. For these big church events that require a large number of volunteers, it goes a long way to say a quick “Thank you,” when it is done.

The “thank you” to everyone is probably best sent by mail. However, if your church demographic is one where everyone uses e-mail, that is fine too. You could also post the letter on the members’ section of your congregational Facebook page. The “thank you” to volunteers can be done by e-mail or face-to-face, as the opportunity presents itself.

### Conduct a “Hot Wash” for Welcome Home Sunday

“Hot wash” is a military term. It refers to a thorough analysis/review of an event. The term “hot” refers to the fact that this review takes place very shortly after the event, when everyone’s memory of the event is still fresh. The term “wash” refers to the fact you are going over every aspect of that event and trying to “clean it up” in the future.

Within 48 hours of *Welcome Home* Sunday, assemble the key players: those who helped with phone calls, those who helped with worship, those who helped with the fellowship events, etc. For every aspect of your *Welcome Home* program, you are asking four questions.

1. What went well?
2. What didn’t go well?
3. Is this a “go”/“no-go” for next year?
4. If next year is a “go,” based on how we answered questions 1 and 2, what will we do differently?

Have someone take notes for this meeting. They will be vital as you are planning for next year’s every member attendance Sunday.

One word of encouragement as you are assessing whether this event is a “go” or “no-go” for the following year. It does not make sense to repeat ministry efforts year after year that bear no fruit. However, the key phrase is “year after year.” It would probably demonstrate poor strategic thinking to assess the merits of a 100% attendance Sunday when you only have one year’s worth of results. That is doubly true if this is the first year you have tried this. That is a gentle encouragement to make a 100% attendance Sunday an emphasis next year, even if your *Welcome Home* program did not bear as much fruit as you hoped this year. Do the hot wash. Tweak the program for next year. Then try again.

### **Continue Promoting the *Welcome Home* Worship Series Weekly Themes**

As mentioned previously, while there is a single *Welcome Home* Sunday, you can use it to kick off a worship series that carries out the *Welcome Home* theme. This series coincides with the season of End Time, the final season of the church year. The series stresses various blessings of being part of a Christian community/the Church. For example, the theme for Saints Triumphant (November 17<sup>th</sup>) is *Welcome Home to an Everlasting Family*. It stresses that for those outside the Church (unbelievers) death really is “the end.” Death separates unbelieving loved ones from one another. However, thanks to Christ, death cannot separate us from our Christian loved ones. The Christian who dies goes to their *true* home (Welcome home!) and waits for the glorious reunion that is to come.

Because worship series have a common thematic thread that runs through multiple weeks, it can provide additional incentive to come week after week. It takes time for a habit to form. Thus, it is important to have members who have strayed from church to come back for *more than Welcome Home* Sunday.

In the *Welcome Home* communication resources, there is promotional material for each week’s service. Combine it with an appropriate *Welcome Home* graphic. Then use both to promote the service theme of the upcoming week: in the weekly bulletin, on your Facebook page, through every member e-mails, etc.

### **Provide Individual Ongoing Encouragement to Members Who Came Back**

As part of *Phase 1: Planning*, congregational leadership determined which members would receive a personalized phone call, encouraging them to attend on *Welcome Home* Sunday. An important job for the elders on that day is to pay attention to which of those members who were phoned came back. You want to continue to provide ongoing encouragement to those individuals if they do not return in subsequent weeks.

Take Susan, who had not been to church in eight months. \But she came on *Welcome Home* Sunday, which her congregation held on October 27. Later that week, she received the letter thanking her for coming that day. (Every member received that letter.) However, she did not attend the next week, November 3, which was the observation of Reformation under the theme *Welcome Home: Where You Are Free to Be Yourself*. Someone needs to call her Susan that week. It need not be accusatory: “You came on *Welcome Home* Sunday, so why not last week too?” It simply would be to provide encouragement. “Hi, Susan. I just wanted to thank you again for coming to our *Welcome Home* Sunday. It was a great day for our congregation, and I hope for you. I also wanted to remind you we are continuing the *Welcome Home* series for the next couple weeks. I believe this week’s theme is *Welcome Home: Where You are Perfectly Safe*. Hope to see you there!”

What you are doing is treating Susan, a straying member, as though she were a first-time worship guest. Worship visitor follow-up is an indispensable part of a congregation’s evangelism program. When a congregation follows up promptly on a worship guest, thanking them for visiting, it makes it

400% more likely that worship guest will return a second time. They feel appreciated. (And they are!) The same holds true for a member who has been absent for awhile. Letting them know how happy you are to have them back provides additional encouragement to them to return to worship soon.

You might be thinking, “How do we know if someone came to Welcome Home Sunday but then did not come the next week?” If you use a pew register or connection card during worship (something that is encouraged in *The Peter Plan*), it is easy. If you don’t, it requires the pastor and elders to do the work mentally. After *Welcome Home Sunday*, produce a list of people who were given that encouragement phone call and subsequently showed up for that day. Now each subsequent Sunday of the worship series, go through that list again. Check off if those individuals came back. When it becomes obvious they *aren’t* coming back, give them the call.

## **Phase 4: Attendance Tracking & Elder Work (December & January)**

Congregations may hope to implement a new discipleship system (tracking attendance; follow-up at 4 weeks absent, 8 weeks absent, etc.) by *Welcome Home Sunday*. Or, perhaps they already have one in place and simply hope to tweak it a bit. Fantastic.

However, as mentioned previously, if a congregation has never tracked worship attendance before, or if the elder program is badly lacking, it might be wiser to wait until the new year to implement major changes. Why?

First, unless your congregation has a good discipleship system in place already, you might not have enough time to get the modified elder system up and running by October. It will likely require you to train more elders as well as an assisting discipleship team.

Secondly, if tracking attendance is something new for your congregation, your members need to be educated on why the church has begun this practice. Without careful explanation, it can come across as a Big Brotherish—the church looking trying to keep everyone in line by means of a heavy hand. And people’s sinful nature will jump to wrong conclusions. “*They’re just doing this cause they want the offerings to keep coming in.*” People need to understand that a zealous discipleship system is loving, pastoral practice aimed at keeping the branches connected to the Vine. So...

### **Explain the New Discipleship System**

The online *Welcome Home Elder Training* program and *The Peter Plan* both provide resources to help you do this. It is best accomplished by communicating repeatedly in a number of ways. You could explain the system, including the ways members will indicate attendance, at an open forum. You can explain everything—*why* the program is being implemented and *how* it will work—in the congregational newsletter. You could share weekly bulletin inserts throughout the season of Advent that explain why loving churches keep track of how often their members receive the means of grace.

The *Welcome Home* worship series concludes the end of November. Use December to explain the new elder system which will begin to function the first weekend of the new year.

### **Obtain Needed Resources for the New Discipleship System to Function**

There are two main resources required for an effective discipleship system.

First, you need a way of tracking weekly worship attendance. The two main options: 1) connection cards that people fill out and drop in the offering plate, and 2) a pew register which is handed down

the row during the offering. Either of these are used for two purposes: 1) your members letting you know they were present, and 2) worship guests providing contact information.

Second, you need software to record worship attendance. Recommendations are provided in the online *Welcome Home* Elder Training program, as well as in *The Peter Plan*. Crucial is finding someone to use this system. Who is going to enter the attendance information in the system each week? Who is the backup person if that first person is sick or gone? A good discipleship system requires discipline and redundancy, so this important task does not slip through the cracks.

## Implement the New Discipleship System

Here, there needs to be a key driver. Ideally, it is the head elder. He gets the list of people who have been absent four straight weeks, eight straight weeks, etc. He gives assignments for that week to others. One possible example:

- At four weeks absent, a member of the discipleship team (which includes men and women) makes a phone call to the absent individual simply to see if everything is ok.
- At eight weeks absent, the pastor makes a phone call to the absent individual to see if everything is ok. Depending on how that call goes, he may schedule a face-to-face visit.
- At twelve weeks absent, an elder sends a letter to the absent individual expressing concern. Shortly after he follows up on that individual face-to-face.

And so on. If absenteeism is a big problem in your congregation, the first year of this system is going to be a lot of work. But as people learn that they are *not* allowed to stray away, that someone *will* run after them in love, that provides a powerful encouragement. Will they come every week? We remain simultaneously saint and sinner. So maybe not. But typically, with this type of system in place, the percentage of members in worship rises a good level. Thus, you have more members connected to the means of grace more regularly. May God grant it!

## In Conclusion

This document began by describing the need for *Welcome Home*. It is becoming ever easier in our post-Christian nation to drift away from God's Word and worship. This has happened to thousands and thousands of our members.

A 100% attendance Sunday has been proven to be one way to get some of these individuals to come back. If they keep coming back to listen to a worship series, they are slowly developing a healthy habit. The *Welcome Home* initiative provides that Sunday and series.

If a congregation hopes to prevent a culture of "acceptable" non-attendance from developing, it needs to have an evangelical and zealous discipleship program in place. There needs to be a system in place to identify and address delinquency. And the Board of Elders needs to be disciplined in following it. The *Welcome Home* initiative provides the system and the training to implement it.

We pray these resources may prove to be a blessing for you and your people.

