



*The materials in this resource are an expansion of the topics discussed in the video. People drift away from church or stop attending for a variety of reasons. These four videos address specific circumstances that may have contributed to the situation. Pastors, elders, and other church leaders may be more aware of these circumstances than most of the people at church. The “Welcoming the Returning Member” series is intended to make all members more aware of the need to welcome the straying and the lost with the joy of the angels in heaven and the father of the prodigal.*

### **Profile of returning members who fit this discussion**

Families may have left because they were unable to get spiritual support for themselves or their loved one. Parents of an autistic child may have been told not to bring their child to church and no provision for the child’s spiritual needs was offered. Someone who is deaf may have been told that the church would not pay for an interpreter and the pastor would not provide a printed sermon. Disabilities are often invisible barriers to the ministry of Word and sacrament. When such members return to worship, it may reveal their continuing desire to be fed despite the barriers.

Returning members may also have left because they received no emotional or spiritual support during grief, illness, unemployment or trauma, during incarceration, while in college or military service.

### **Issues to be aware of**

The refusal to serve someone with disabilities is often attributed to lack of funds, volunteers, or resources. Such a refusal forsakes a Christian congregation’s responsibility to share the gospel with all people, and especially to do good to the family of believers. If a church refuses to assure people with disabilities that they will receive needed assistance to be fed spiritually, the family and other church members (if not the disabled) can get the false idea that the means of grace are not essential—some people don’t need the Word.

The results of spiritual neglect may be harder to diagnose. People who suffered without spiritual support may have learned to endure hardship without the Lord. They may have concluded that the means of grace are not essential or that your church doesn’t care about them.

### **A warning about what not to say at church to the returning member whose needs were not met**

“We can’t.” Do not dismiss the ability of the Lord to provide resources for your ministry needs by failing to pray for his help and striving to solve the problem.

“It’s too much effort just for one person.” This returning member is part of your church family. Their obstacles to participating in church are your “family’s” problem. Overcoming a disabilities barrier opens your church to serving others with the same problems and spiritual needs.

“Where were you?” If a returning member was neglected, this statement reminds the member that the church doesn’t really know what he or she has gone through.

## **Responding to an initial return of a member who stopped attending when their needs were not met**

If the person has a disability, welcome them by speaking to them personally—not just the family. Ask about the kind of help that they need. If the church does not offer the ideal solution (a sign language interpreter, for example) follow up by asking what other way to help in this situation.

If the person is returning to church after a time of neglect, you may not be aware of that at the time. Because you don't know what returning members may have experienced, it is good not only to welcome returning members warmly, but make sure to follow up on the visit promptly to show the importance placed on coming to worship with God's people.

## **Long term welcome**

Special Ministries has resources and guidance to help churches share the gospel in many challenging circumstances. If a returning member with a disability has shown up in church and the church is not prepared to serve, someone in leadership or a member who is good at researching should contact Special Ministries to learn how to serve. The church's sincere desire to share the Word will be demonstrated by being able to follow up on the question "How can we help?" with the assurance "We are working on it."

In the case of a returning member who went through a major passage of life without spiritual support, a long term welcome will include patience and understanding that the church bears some responsibility in inadvertently communicating that the means of grace are not vital. It may be awhile before such a person sees the need for Bible class or devotions, but inviting the returning member to dig deeper in the Word may eventually reverse the damage done.

### **Welcoming Returning Members**

Although each lesson gives specific insight, several common principles apply to situations where members greet a straying member or a former member at church:

**Christian love**—and specifically Jesus' compassion for the lost (Luke 15:20, Matthew 9:36; 23:37)—needs to guide our church welcome. **Avoid humor and sarcasm** in greeting a returning member. **There is a time and place for admonition and correction.** Welcoming members when they return is an opportunity to build the Christian family, so that admonition and correction can be given and received in a spirit of Christian love. Many don't know what to say, so they say nothing. **Say, "Welcome! Good to see you."** If you recognize a straying member who returned, **contact the person during the week** to repeat how good it was to see the person in church. A door to further discussion and friendship may open.