



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 members who fit this discussion

These are the members whose absence from church most likely was diagnosed as “neglect of Word and sacrament.” If you have an elders’ program, these members may have been admonished to recognize how we all need God’s Word to grow in faith.

Some who disappeared from the congregation and from divine service were led astray by sin. Sexual sins, divorce, living together without marriage, drugs, and drunkenness may have made been the attraction that led the member away from the family. Probably even more commonly—but less obviously—the love of this world drew the hearts of many who no longer come regularly.

Many left the church on their own despite the efforts of pastors and elders, but there may be cases where church discipline was exercised years ago. If they return to church at the invitation of a member, a conversation may reveal many different possible motivations for returning.

Issues to be aware of

When people who are conscious of their sin come to church, Satan may use shame to prevent such returning members from feeling at home. Shame is a feeling of embarrassment. Responding with love and sincere welcome is the undoing of shame.

Sin and guilt are separate issues that are addressed in the preaching of the Word and in private conversation. Some church members may feel the need to admonish the returning member. There is a time and a place to address obvious issues, but welcoming people to church is not one of them. Even when done in a light-hearted teasing way, a person who feels shame will feel unwelcome in God’s house. All who enter God’s house are sinners. The hope is that the Word calls all of us to repentance and to follow Jesus.

Certain sins have complicated roots. Divorce, addiction, and homosexuality have all occurred among God’s people, and sometimes the solutions are not simple. Communicating welcome to people who have been branded sinners is a trademark of Jesus Christ, who was known for his welcoming approach to prostitutes and tax collectors. Imagine if you had persuaded your child to come to church with you because you wanted your child to hear once again the love of Jesus and be led to repent. You want your child to find people who really care, who share your concern. You do not want your child to face a confrontation about his or her sin at the door of the church!

Don’t assume you know someone’s spiritual struggle just because you’ve heard the name of their sin. Society identifies people as “straight” or “gay,” but a Christian’s struggle can be complex and someone who has fallen can also repent (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

A warning about what not to say at church to the returning member who was drawn away by sin

Do not refer to their absence from worship, even as a joke—that will increase the feeling of shame. There may be church members who think that shaming a sinner is appropriate—this lesson will help them understand why shaming is the opposite of welcome.

Don't bring up the subject of their sin while at church, or in conversations before you have established a relationship to talk about this. (The pastor and elders have this relationship due to their office. You may grow in this relationship by admitting your spiritual struggles or failings and by expressing your hunger for God's forgiveness in Christ.) The returning member may refer to the sin, which gives you permission to talk about it. Don't minimize the sin, "Oh, it doesn't matter," but react with the sympathy of a fellow sinner redeemed by grace.

Responding to an initial return of a member who was drawn away by sin

Find ways to express joy and genuine welcome:

- "It's so good to see you! Will you sit with me?"
- "You made my day—it's so good to see you!"
- "Hey, let's get together for coffee this week."

Long term welcome

Follow up the week after a visit with a contact—a text, a call, an invitation to meet for coffee. Make this a learning visit. What is going on in this member's life? What brought him or her to church? How did they feel about church? Do they have any suggestions for ways to improve the church?

In the weeks after the initial visit, maintain the positive interest and encouragement. If the returning member is trying to recover from the sin that led away from worship, Christian relationships are important to replace sinful relationships developed. If your conversations reach the point where the returning member is looking for validation for sinful choices, understand that it is natural for our sinful nature to try to find ways to excuse choices and patiently point them to following Jesus.

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.