



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 former members who joined a different church and return for a visit

Some former members who joined a different religion or rejected organized religion may still visit your church for their family events. Their appearance in worship may not indicate a desire to leave their current church.

The grass may have appeared to be greener in another religion, and they left the WELS preferring a different style of worship or embracing an appealing doctrine. Some members may return to visit your church realizing that the church they chose was not perfect or that the doctrine was false.

A returning member who joined another church may have had a variety of motivations: marriage to someone of a different religion, testing new ideas during college years, frustration with a situation in your church. Despite the reason for the change, returning to your church to visit gives them growing perspective on your church.

A former member who changed religions or left Christianity may return to your church with a fresh appreciation for the blessings and doctrine which other members take for granted.

Issues to be aware of

For WELS members who emphasize our doctrine, it can feel like a betrayal when a church member (or family member) joins a different Christian church. Closed communion can reinforce the pain for both sides.

Former WELS members can be made to feel like the “black sheep”—which gives the impression that we look down on them as the Pharisees had contempt for anyone who was not a Pharisee.

Welcoming a returning member who left WELS back can help members in the pew who have doubts, serving as preventative medicine for those who never left but imagine greener pastures outside our faith.

A warning about what not to say to a former member who shows up at church

“I’m glad you finally recognized the error of your ways!” This is probably said with an attempt at humor, but whether serious or joking, such a statement gives the impression of arrogance. While WELS members may sincerely rejoice at our church’s commitment to holding to the truth, the problem with joking like this is that it turns something beloved (true doctrine) into an implied superiority over the visitor. The visitor may only be present for a family baptism or to accompany an aging parent to church. The visitor may still be a

person who rejects Christianity and is watching church members with an expectation that Christians think they are better than others, which this statement confirms.

Don't repeat the tired old joke that WELS people believe we are the only ones going to heaven. We believe and teach that the invisible Church consists of all who believe in Christ for salvation.

Responding to an initial visit

"It's good to see you. Thank you for coming." Whether the former member is returning to the church after a spiritual detour or just visiting for a family event, hospitality is an expression of Christian love for all people. Those who left the church for another confession should feel welcome.

Long term welcome

Ask them about their church and listen to their answers. While arguing is counterproductive, listening thoughtfully can provide an opportunity to clarify our convictions. ("We don't actually believe that other Christians are going to hell, you know.")

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.