



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

Some people leave a church because they were sinned against or at least mistreated. They may have been a victim of abuse. Gossip by church members may have driven them away. They may have been cheated on by a spouse and criticized by members. Their pain may be disguised by a time of not attending church, so members of the church may not be aware what led to their departure.

Not everyone who feels mistreated was treated wrongly, of course. People can be offended by actions or statements they misinterpreted.

Even though they return to church for a visit, members who were wronged may retain feelings of anger, distrust, or at least sadness at their past experience.

Issues to be aware of

When someone tells us that they have been wronged, we need to respond carefully and lovingly. We need to be aware that defending someone who sinned against our fellow believer may appear to defend the sin and minimize the wrong to the person who was hurt. Friendly concern does not require us to take sides in the past controversy.

The returning member is unlikely to bring up this issue in an initial visit to church. In a small church, however, people who know about such problems may be tempted to stay away from the returning member. This feels like taking sides against someone who suffered or was hurt.

Sometimes it is publicly known that a Christian was genuinely sinned against. Imagine how frustrating it is when your child was sexually abused and members consistently defend the abuser. Imagine the disillusionment of having a fellow church member cheat you out of money, but members focus on your need to forgive while not taking action to talk to the wrong doer.

A church where abuse occurred should take steps to see to it that abuse will be prevented or dealt with appropriately. Leaders should strive to find better ways to handle wrongdoing. It's not enough to be friendly while ignoring harm that was done. Has the church addressed the problem or do the members of the church appear to blame the person who was harmed?

The returning member may expect an apology, but the person who committed the wrong may no longer be a member of that church or may not be willing to apologize.

A warning about what not to say at church to the returning member who was sinned against or hurt

Don't pressure the returning member to "forgive and forget," especially if nothing has been done about what happened. The Lord will help sinned-against Christians to forgive. Pressure to forget sounds like saying that what happened does not matter. Give the Holy Spirit room to work through the gospel.

Responding to an initial visit

Find ways to express concern and welcome for the returning member who has been wronged. There is no need to refer to the past:

- "Thank you for coming today. How are you?"
- "I'm so glad to see you here today. Is there anything I can do?"
- "How good to see you again. I've been meaning to reach out to you."

Long term welcome

Regaining betrayed trust cannot happen on a timeline. Love is unconditional, but trust is something that is earned. If a member who was sinned against returns to church, embrace this as an opportunity for healing and spiritual growth. In follow up conversations, learn from the returning member how he or she would like to talk about this or not address it. Respect their wishes, while earnestly striving to demonstrate concern.

If the person was abused, the dynamics of abuse are such that the common Christian exhortation to privately confront a sinner (Matthew 18:15-17) about sin does not apply. It gives the abuser the opportunity to harm the person further physically or emotionally. When Herod plotted to murder the children, Joseph was counselled to flee Herod, not confront him (Matthew 2:13). It is important for civil, criminal, and church authorities to confront a child abuser, but God does not require victims to place themselves in physical or emotional danger.

The departure of the member after being wronged may have short-circuited the process for dealing with what happened. If abuse prevention policies have not been adopted, the congregation should contact Special Ministries to begin the process of developing safeguards to prevent future abuse.

In healing other kinds of wrongs, the leaders of the church might investigate better ways of dealing with problems.

Urge the returning member not to let anything interrupt a relationship with Jesus and his Word. There will always be sinners in the world, and problems need resolving, but all people need spiritual strengthening through Word and sacrament.

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.