

Slam the Back Door – Strategies for Regaining the Straying

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Introduction

I believe there is a genuine excitement in our synod in regard to reaching out to those who don't know Jesus as Savior. There's a renewed commitment to sharing Jesus with the lost. The fact that adult baptisms, confirmations and professions of faith are up throughout the congregations of synod from a generation ago also shows that WELS churches are taking Christ's Great Commission seriously.

However, when you look at our synod's statistical report, you see that, as a synod, we really aren't growing. In fact, year after year we're either barely holding our own or actually declining when it comes to number of souls and communicants. As we grow in our awareness of the need to reach out to the unchurched and evangelism efforts increase, why aren't we, as a synod growing?

Did you realize the 2005 Statistical Report lists total gains at 18,986 and total losses at 19,139? Did you realize that our synod's congregations reported 8,092 "back door" losses to "Joined Other Churches" and "Removal" in 2005? Did you realize that many children baptized in our churches are no longer active when they reach confirmation age and, therefore, never are confirmed? You are probably aware of the fact that about 70% of our confirmands are no longer active members of church by the time they reach the age of 21. Undoubtedly, many of those children, young adults, and their families were lost because, despite all efforts to regain them, they chose to leave the church.

But what about those who "fall through the cracks" as a result of our negligence? If 44.3% of our congregations are at worship on Sunday, then the other 56% could be termed "inactive." Bringing these people back into the fold of Christ requires a great deal of planned effort. The reason that I say "planned" effort is most of us have experienced or practiced a "hit and miss" method of regaining the souls that are straying from their Lord and his Church. We're making monthly efforts to contact our delinquents. Your pastor and elders leave messages on their answering machines. But they don't return the call, we don't see them in church, and months pass before we get anything done. Or, we write letters to delinquent families, but they don't respond. Other people move and we don't know how to reach them. Even our "planned" efforts meet with frustration and seem to bear little fruit.

It is my prayer that our study of *"Slam the Back Door - Strategies for Regaining the Straying,"* will bear fruit and serve to bring blood-bought souls back to their Savior.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus serves as both example and motivator in all that we do. Since that is the case, we will look to him for the principles to be followed in carrying out this important task. A strategy for applying the principle will also be supplied.

The Scriptural principles are three in number:

- I. Imitating Jesus' "soul vision"
- II. Imitating Jesus' effort
- III. Imitating Jesus' message

I. Imitating Jesus' "Soul Vision"

When you study the life of Jesus you can't help but notice the way he lovingly viewed people. He had "soul vision." Soul vision is the ability to "see through" people's rough exterior and behold their soul. An

important part of soul vision is to feel love for that soul. Think of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4). The average person shunned her. She was a social outcast. I remember one commentator accurately referring to her as "the sorry slut from Samaria." Yet when Jesus looked at her, he saw a woman that was spiritually bankrupt and in need of the healing forgiveness that only he could provide.

Remember Zaccheus, the tax collector (Luke 19)? Most people felt that the only good tax collector was a dead tax collector. Not Jesus. He lovingly saw Zaccheus as someone with a soul that needed to be retrieved from hell. I'm sure that you can think of other "great sinners" that Jesus associated with. Jesus had soul vision.

Jesus wants that same soul vision, that same loving attitude to be evident in us. Scripture makes it clear that we are to feel a responsibility for others' spiritual welfare. Here is a small sampling of verses that make this point clear:

- Leviticus 19:17. Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.
- Galatians 6:1-2. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
- Philippians 2:4-5. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.
- Colossians 3:16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.
- Hebrews 10:25: Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

There is no doubt about it. We are our brother's keeper. James 5: 19-20: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

This is where the work of regaining the straying begins. It begins with the way we view one another. We need to see every person as someone with a soul that is covered with the blood of Christ. Soul vision pierces through physical appearance, occupation, mannerisms, and social positions. It sees through to and loves the soul.

Do we have the Savior's love for souls? Evaluate your own attitude toward the inactive members of our congregation. If you are honest with yourself, you'll probably discover that your vision is less than loving. It probably needs adjusting in order to match that of Jesus. It is vital that we make that adjustment. "Our ministry to the "inactives" begins by overcoming certain attitudes and names in order that the energy and love of the gospel may rightly motivate us." (Gerhard Knutson, Ministry to Inactives). Alan F. Harre in Close the Back Door agrees:

Any organized program will probably be ineffective if it does not consider and strive to adjust the attitudes of the active members who serve as visitors and the attitudes of the rank and file members of the congregation who will need to be prepared to welcome returning members with open arms.

Nearly every book or pamphlet one reads on the subject of regaining the straying contains a chart like the one below. I include it because it does an excellent job of illustrating the attitude barriers that separate the active and the inactive members of nearly any given congregation.

“Actives”		“Inactives”	
How they see “Inactives”	How they Feel	How they see “Actives”	How they Feel
dropouts	frustrated	hypocrites	condemned
delinquents	fearful	do-gooders	forgotten & left out
do-nothings	anxious & worried	nosy	lonely & rejected
inactive	hostile	fussy	abandoned
lazy	suspicious	nitpickers	angry
backsliders	pity	bossy	suspicious
sinners	sympathetic	“in group”	failures
complainers	puzzled	judges	apathetic
excuse-ers	embarrassed	high & mighty	uncaring

How can we break down these attitude barriers? How can we instill "soul vision" in all the members of the congregation? There is only one thing powerful enough to do the trick - love. Before we can approach our brother or sister we must come to the realization that we, too, need God's love and mercy. We "actives" are no more deserving of God's forgiveness than the inactive person. We must also come to the realization that our Savior wants to use us as his instruments in reclaiming those who are drifting away from him. Jesus' love is the only thing that can adjust our attitude toward others. Only when we love as Jesus loves will we have soul vision.

Where there is love there will be an accompanying sense of responsibility. The two go hand in hand. There are a number of things we can do to heighten members' awareness of the fact that they are "their brother's keeper." Prayers can be offered in behalf of the congregation's inactive members. The pastor may watch for opportunities in sermons to urge members to shoulder their obligation of speaking to a straying brother or sister in the faith.

When adults are enrolled in the Bible information class, the pastor has a prime opportunity to teach them that being part of a Christian congregation includes a willingness to both receive and give loving admonition. This same point may be stressed to our young people as they study the Ministry of the Keys. Perhaps a section can be added to the confirmation vow of both adults and 8th grade confirmands:

Holy Scripture tells us that we are to encourage one another - "and all the more as you see the Day approaching." If you are willing to receive loving admonition from your fellow Christians answer: I am willing.

Do you likewise understand your responsibility to speak to a fellow Christian who is wandering from the fold of the Good Shepherd? If you understand and accept that responsibility than answer: Yes.

Years ago, the church I served in Missouri developed the following Mission Statement:

GETHSEMANE MISSION STATEMENT

I. We believe...

- A. The Bible is the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God.
- B. That all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and therefore cannot save themselves.
- C. That we are saved by grace through faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, who lived, died and rose again.
- D. That it is the mission and responsibility of every member to reach out with the Gospel to all nations.
- E. That everything we do as a congregation should support this purpose.

II. As servants of Christ, these beliefs will lead us to use our time, talents and treasures for the growth, preservation and the extension of Christ's kingdom.

While our Mission Statement stated that "it is the mission and responsibility of every member to reach out with the Gospel to all nations," do you feel that this addresses the issue of slamming the back door? Does something need to be added that specifically states that it is the mission and responsibility of every member to reach out with the Gospel to our inactive members? Remember, regaining the straying begins with instilling Jesus' "soul vision" in every member.

This morning the voters at Grace of God adopted the following Mission Statement:

Mission Statement

As members of Grace of God Evangelical Lutheran Church we gather to learn God's Word and will for our lives. We joyfully serve as Christ's Ambassadors—bringing the good news of our crucified and risen Savior Jesus to lost souls.

Objectives

- Preserve and build up the faith of our members through worship, Bible study and the proper use of the sacraments.
- Proclaim both law and gospel—God's grace and forgiveness—through Jesus.
- Announce Christ's message of forgiveness to all people—making disciples of all nations, baptizing, teaching and forgiving as Christ commanded.
- Serving God and the saints with the best of our time, talents and treasures to His glory.

This leads us to Objective #1 in "*Slam the Back Door - Strategies for Regaining the Straying*," - imitating Jesus' "soul vision."

Strategies for Regaining the Straying Imitating Jesus' "soul vision"

Objective #1: To assist the members of the congregation in developing a "soul vision," that is, viewing our inactive members as people with souls that need to be loved, nurtured, and brought back to their Savior.

Goals:

1. To help the active members of our congregation understand that they need to be concerned about one another's spiritual welfare.
2. To break down the stereotype barriers that separate the active members from the inactive.

Policies: [to be discussed and possibly adopted]

1. The pastor will use the Bible information class and confirmation class to instill "soul vision" in the newly instructed.
2. The pastor will include prayers for inactive members in worship services.
3. The pastor will watch for opportunities to incorporate thoughts regarding straying souls in his sermons.
4. The congregation will add something to the Mission Statement that specifically states that it is the mission and responsibility of every member to reach out with the Gospel to our inactive members.

Procedures:

1. Sections on Ministry of the Keys and the universal priesthood of all believers would be a natural place for discussing our spiritual responsibilities for the souls of others in classes. Adding a paragraph to the vow, stressing the need to give and receive spiritual encouragement and brotherly admonition.
2. The pastor will include prayers for inactive members at least () a year. This could be on special occasions/services/holidays _____
3. Conduct a Bible class at least () a year that deals with regaining the straying and that provides help for witnessing to an erring brother or sister.
4. Sample goal connected with Mission Statement: "To so encourage, correct and instruct each other as to reach a % of our membership active (as defined by the Board of Elders) in worship and communion.

II. Imitating Jesus' effort

One can also see Jesus putting forth effort in what might be called preventative maintenance. After Jesus called people to be his disciples he involved them in his ministry. He told Simon, Andrew, James and John that they would become "fishers of men" (Mark 1:16ff). Jesus was familiar with the spiritual gifts of his followers and matched those gifts to specific tasks. I can remember reading a conference paper that made the point that Jesus didn't ask for volunteers, he assigned people to specific tasks that he knew they could handle. The effort Jesus made at involving his following in ministry served to bond them more tightly to him. This, in turn, helped to prevent them from straying.

When it came to those who had already strayed or were lost, Jesus was not content to sit by and let people seek him out. (He didn't say, "Hey, they know where the church is and when services are held. Let them come back whenever they want to.") Jesus was constantly putting forth the effort to seek those who had made a mess of their lives. He created opportunities to engage the lost in conversation. Jesus walked through the territory of the hated Samaritans while his countrymen its borders. He dined with people that most considered to be the scum of society. When the Pharisees tried to trap him in his speech, Jesus not only escaped their trap, but in the process made an effort to bring them to repentance. While Judas dined with Jesus in the Upper Room, and then again when Judas came to him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus made the effort to reclaim his wayward disciple.

Luke, chapter 15, contains the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost or "prodigal" son. All three describe the effort required in seeking and finding those separated from their Savior. (Incidentally, is there anything we can learn about regaining the straying from the lost son's brother?) The word "lost" is not so much condemning as it is compassionate in the context of these three parables. The shepherd and the housewife expended a great deal of effort in seeking the lost. They saw value and worth in the lost sheep and the lost coin. The parable of the lost sheep illustrates the fact that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is concerned with a 1% loss. The parable of the lost coin has been said to typify those who are still in the church but out of circulation. As one studies this chapter it becomes apparent that seeking the straying requires effort.

In order for us to know where to direct our efforts at regaining the straying we need to spend some time discussing why and when people drop out. The reasons for inactivity are multitude. One study lists ten categories of "unchurchedness." Included on the list are the "burned out" (overworked), "the Hedonists" (pleasure lovers), and the "locked out" (not accepted by the rest of the congregation). (J. Russell Hale, The Unchurched: Who They Are And Why They Stay Away. Loss of a spouse, lingering illness, and lack of transportation can also contribute to inactivity. One pastor's summary of the "causes of delinquency" says:

1. Psychological reasons - The church is inadequate, irrelevant to his needs. Fear of not living up to the ideals of the church... feeling of guilt makes it impossible to feel close to God.
2. Theological reasons - He may lack adequate knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Little growth in Christian knowledge since confirmation... The careless morals of modern society may have made him callous to the laws of God... The Gospel has lost its meaning for him.
3. Sociological reasons - He may have a sense of not being needed or wanted. As new members they may not have been given a real sense of belonging... Some may feel they're second class members (don't send their children to school, etc.).
4. Economic reasons - Financial matters and Christian stewardship have not been understood and have become a source of personal indignation or a sense of guilt... The church program may be too much need-centered and budget-conscious.
5. Personal reasons - Real or imagined grievances (misunderstandings, insults or indifferences) involving another member, a relative, a pastor or a group in the church.

Pastors and laity who have worked at visiting their inactive members could add to the above list.

In addition to determining the reasons "why", we need to consider the times "when" a member might drop out. Harre says:

There are four stages in the life cycle which seem to make it more likely that people will become dropouts. People are more likely to drop out of church during the first two years they live in a new community, when they are between 15 and 23 years old, during the first ten years after their youngest child has moved away from home, and just after they are divorced.

It is necessary to understand the reasons and times. To simply lump all inactive people in the same category and then try to deal with them in the same way is disastrous. Simplistic problem identification and simplistic solutions lead to disillusionment on the part of active members and resentment on the part of the inactive.

It would seem that the better we understand the reasons and times, the better we could direct our efforts at preventing them from dropping out in the first place. You know the old saying: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Today there is much talk about being proactive rather than reactive. Prevention is the first step in slamming the back door. Like Jesus, we can start by making the effort to involve all members of our congregation in the work of the church. Spiritual gifts seminars and materials like Professor David Valleskey's "Spiritual Gifts Analysis" point to the importance of finding and harnessing the gifts of all of God's people. Our district recently held a seminar on "Assimilation." One goal is not only to prevent a few from getting "burned out" but also to prevent others from feeling "locked out."

Integration of new adult confirmands is an important part of the overall picture. The newly confirmed have to be encouraged to continue in Bible study. A few years ago Pastor James Huebner of Grace Lutheran, Milwaukee, put together what he called "a sequenced ongoing stick-with-the-Word-to-the-grave adult Bible series." After the initial instruction course entitled "Back to the Basics," participants were encouraged to enroll in Level II, entitled "Road Maps to Bible Reading," and finally, Level III, entitled "Growing in Grace."

Groups and organizations can be used effectively in integrating new members. In addition to growing in their relationship with Jesus, new members will grow in their relationship with one another in organizations for children, teens, and women, voters' meetings and fellowship activities. In Where Have All the People Gone? Carl S. Dudley makes the following observation:

Implicit in membership withdrawal is a curious double standard. When people unite with a congregation, they resist suggesting personal need or social satisfaction as cause for joining. They consciously relate church membership with program participation and religious values. When they leave, however, they are more likely to blame a breakdown in personal relationships. (New York: The Pilgrim Press).

Church growth studies suggest that each new person should be able to identify at least seven friends within the first six months. This is minimum. If new members don't immediately develop meaningful friendships in their churches, you can expect them to return to their old friendships and ways outside the church. The first six months are critical. It is for this very reason that we encourage both "friendly visitors" and the adopting or sponsoring of new members and families by congregational members.

"Friendly visitors" are encouraged to make contact with first time visitors to services within 36 hours. Contact preferably is made by a personal visit to the home of the visitor, and by a member who has something in common with the visitor (age, young children, occupation, location, etc.)

Adopting or sponsoring involves integrating new members into congregational life. For the first six months or the first year the sponsoring member or family takes the new members "under their wing," informing them of events and activities within the congregation. They invite them to or even pick them for various functions in the congregation, including meetings, church picnic, adult Christmas dinner, etc.).

Preventative maintenance could well include making someone in the congregation responsible for contacting the closest WELS pastor when a member moves, enters the military, or goes to college through the use of referral cards available through our synod's Special Ministries Commission. Referral should be made as soon as possible. It would be a great help to the pastor if someone would volunteer to assume this responsibility

and carry it out on a regular basis. Conversely, when a congregation receives notification that a WELS member is moving into the area it is imperative that the pastor or members immediately visits that person.

Closely connected with the above thought is the staff to member ratio in the congregation. In order to effectively do the things we are talking about in this section there has to be an adequate number of workers on the staff. "There is a direct relationship between a church's base of operational efficiency and effectiveness and its membership size." (Harre). If it is impossible for the pastor to make all necessary calls on those who have become inactive, the situation needs to be addressed by the leadership of the congregation. Wayne Mueller addressed this issue in his paper Key to Evangelical Congregational Development:

I don't know of a single congregation in our synod that is overstaffed. How can we ever convince our people that we need more called workers if the people themselves don't know how much work there is? And how will they ever know unless they see the work first hand and are a part of it? Once our laity sees first hand all the counseling that needs to be done, the wandering sheep that need to be brought back into the fold... they will push you to accept more help. Until then they will wonder what you do all week except write a sermon.

Involving the laity in the work of visiting prospects, retaining members and regaining the wandering sheep will have a twofold effect. The lay member will have an opportunity to serve the Lord in a very important capacity and will, at the same time, have a better understanding of the amount of work that needs to be done in the congregation.

One last aspect of preventative maintenance is one that we may not often think of, namely, the worship service. Making worship understandable, meaningful, and applicable requires ongoing effort. A pastor will benefit from occasionally analyzing his preaching. Questions he can ask himself include: "Am I feeding God's people with a variety of texts? Am I applying God's Word to everyday life?" Wayne Mueller makes a note worthy comment in regard to preaching:

A boring sermon does injustice to both the law and the gospel. Oh, I know that many people tune out and are bored no matter how much work I put into the sermon; I know the efficacy of the Word rests with the working of the Spirit... But I also know that appealing to these truths can be a salve to my flesh when the lack of interest in my sermons detracts from the gospel... A sermon is more than a study or a lesson... It is the dialogue of a representative of God with God's people. The servant of God must speak to his people where they live...we do want to talk to people in their own terms, and we do want to be interesting.

God's Word seems boring and un-applicable to modern life only when we make it sound that way. Congregations may consider including a children's sermonette to help youngsters realize the worship service is not just for grownups.

Besides occasionally examining his preaching, the pastor, choir director, organists, teachers and anyone else connected with the service should meet occasionally to discuss the entire worship service. Some congregations give members opportunity to critique the service, bulletin, etc. If this opportunity is given, care must be taken to insure that steps are taken to respond to suggestions given. Similarly, we want to impress on each member the importance of honoring the Word with regular attendance and undivided attention.

The following is a tool developed by the elders of one of our Texas churches:

Getting the Most Out of Worship Services

Spiritual growth is an important aspect in your personal life. Your attendance at worship has one primary purpose - to provide you with opportunity for spiritual growth. Are you using that opportunity to its fullest? Do you sometimes leave church feeling good and happy to see your friends, but only later discover you don't remember the message God sent you that day through the preaching of the pastor?

We all feel that way from time to time. But how do we change that? How do we get the most out of God's message on any given Sunday? Well, it takes some work on our part. It takes getting to church on time, getting into the chapel early enough to allow yourself time to wind down from the run-around of daily life, and getting prepared to hear God's Word. It's something like going on vacation. You can just pick up and go on vacation and have a good time. But when you plan it out and make good preparations, you really have a memorable time. The same goes for church. When you put in the time and effort to prepare properly, you get so much more out of it. Here are some ideas to help you prepare:

1. Arrive early enough to visit with your friends and say hello and still have time to get into the chapel 5 to 10 minutes before the service begins. The organist is there playing an interlude to make this a quiet time for everyone to unwind and begin to prepare to hear God's Word.
2. Start with prayer. Ask your Lord for his help and guidance in what you are about to hear. The bulletin has a suitable prayer entitled "Prayer Upon Entering Church". There are also suitable prayers found on pages 10-11 of *Christian Worship*.
3. Read the bulletin. Read through the "Worship Theme" and the explanations of the readings. Read through the descriptive articles regarding coming events and the weekly schedule. If you don't have time to read through the bulletin before the service begins, don't read it during the sermon; take it along home.
4. Get your hymnal ready. Find and mark the pages where the liturgy begins. Find and mark "The Psalm of the Day". If there is a responsive "Prayer of the Church," look it up and mark it. Taking a quick look at the hymns will give you some idea of the subject for the service.
5. Read and study the outline for the sermon. By studying the outline you will have a skeleton of God's message in your mind and as the sermon is delivered the life giving message will begin to take form and have even greater meaning. You may want to bring your Bible to the service.
6. If it is Communion Sunday, make final preparations to receive the Sacrament. Psalm 51 a (page 86, *CW*), or Psalm 130 (page 114, *CW*) are good ones to use to prepare for reception of the Lord's body and blood. You may also want to turn to "Private Confession" (p. 154-155) or "Personal Preparation for Holy Communion," (p. 156) as you prepare. Ask yourself certain questions such as: Do I realize I am a sinner? Am I truly sorry for my sins? Do I believe that I will receive Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of my sins? Do I want to change my sinful life? Remember to also sign up for communion on the sheet provided.

Following preparation, execution is the next most important aspect of getting the most out of the service. It is our intent to make the service as edifying as possible for everyone. That's why we ask that talking and other distractions be kept to a minimum. There are two major reasons: Out of respect for God's house and so that our conduct is not a distraction to others who are trying to hear, study, and learn from this time in God's house.

There is another area of execution that's important: Concentration. Researchers tell us that it takes 10% of our brain to process the information we receive through hearing. That leaves 90% to do the other stuff and still be able to understand what is being said. Our nature is to let that 90% think about home, work, the whole list of things you have to do whenever there is time, and a whole multitude of other things. The trick is to focus as much of that 90% as you can on hearing and understanding what is said. That's tough, but honestly, it is worth it. Force yourself to not look at every little movement within your field of vision. Focus your eyesight, your hearing, and as much of your mental capacity as possible on the pastor and fully process his every word.

Someone explained this process as imagining you are looking at the minister through one of those cardboard tubes that wrapping paper comes on. All other distractions are blocked out by the tube and your total attention is on the face of God's messenger speaking God's Word. Open your hymnal and follow the liturgy. Heartily sing all the hymns and musical parts of the service. Having your hymnal open and following the liturgy also assists visitors to the service who may have never attended a liturgical service like ours before.

Beyond preparation and execution there is only one other area. Conduct. If you conduct yourself in a manner that eliminates distractions for others, it will also eliminate a source of distraction for you. Comfortable clothing and making stops at the restroom and drinking fountain before the service are usually helpful. This is especially true for youngsters.

We trust these ideas and suggestions will be received in the spirit they are given, as an opportunity to learn and grow from the life giving Word we seek every Sunday. May your understanding of God's message be ever greater and may you continue to grow spiritually.

Your brothers in Christ,
The Board of Elders

Something special should happen when people come to God's house for worship.

Now let's turn our attention to the effort required in reaching out to those who have already become inactive in their worship and congregational life. If we are going to imitate Jesus' effort, we won't sit by and hope that somehow our straying people will wander back on their own. The devil, no doubt, wants us to believe that if we just leave them alone they will come back through the doors of the church on their own. In reality, we are giving Satan time to put even more distance between that person and his Savior. We have to act. We have to make regular, personal visits. Most pastors would probably have to admit that their visitation of the inactive is anything but regular. Let's face it, it's not our favorite kind of call, and it's easy to put off when you consider all of the other different types of visits that pastors need to make.

But we have to make visitation of the straying a priority item if we are serious about slamming the back door. Discussion and assessment of the spiritual welfare of our inactive people should be a regular part of the elders' agenda.

If work isn't being done with the inactive, where does one start? Identify those who have dropped out. Make a list by studying the attendance record and checking communion attendance. Then decide who will visit who and when the visit will take place. The message the visitors will bear is discussed in part three.

The pastor is doing himself a disservice, as well as robbing his members of an opportunity to serve, if he thinks that he is the only one who should be doing the visitation. Likewise, members are doing their Lord a disservice and failing to use their time and abilities if they feel the work of visitation is solely in the pastor's realm. In the first church I served, I asked the elders for their assistance with the visitation of a large number of inactive families. I was told, "That's your work, pastor." Part of the elders' responsibility is to assist the pastor in the spiritual care of the congregation. But we need not restrict ourselves to just the elders. Just because someone has been elected an elder doesn't mean that he has the gift for compassionately reaching out to the inactive member. Anyone who has Jesus' love for souls can visit the inactive. High school youth can be included in visiting the young person who has begun to forsake his/her confirmation vows. Women of the congregation might be better equipped to visit women. A single woman may feel far more comfortable if a visit is made by fellow women rather than one, two, or three men. We need to recruit and train people. Materials for training those making visitations are included in the next section. One way of reinforcing a visit is to drop a note in the mail expressing appreciation at being able to meet and also emphasizing any scripture verses used during the visit. After making a series of visitations, sit down with pastor and elders and discuss the results of the visits. Make a written report every time a visit is made. Develop a card file similar to an evangelism prospect card file. Immediately plan the next action and the next visit. Decide who will make the visit and when. When the person visited responds by attending worship, we would do well to let them know via mail, phone, or visit, that we were glad to see them.

In addition to personal visitation, a congregation can develop a mail or email program. Some congregations send out the bulletins. We send or email each family the monthly newsletter and calendar. If a particular sermon addressed the necessity of hearing the Word and receiving the sacrament, a copy could be sent to the neglecter of Word and sacrament. The seasons of Christmas and Easter are good times for sending a card with a note encouraging regular worship. Although contact by mail or email is a distant second to personal visitation, it is an avenue that we should pursue.

In all these efforts, whether it is personal visitation or contact through the mail, email, or by phone, don't forget to preface what you do with prayer. Pray regularly for those wandering from their Savior. Do it in the worship service, in elders' meetings, before making a visit, and when you drop something in the mail. In fact, it would be beneficial for those doing visitation to make a list of people's names so that they might pray for them on a regular basis. Use all the tools available to us.

Preventing people from becoming inactive in the first place and regaining those who have already strayed takes tremendous effort. We must look to our Lord Jesus and imitate his effort in order to conserve souls.

Strategies for Regaining the Straying Imitating Jesus' effort

Objective #2: To make a concentrated effort at preventing members from becoming inactive.

Goals:

1. To keep every adult and 8th grade confirmand active in worship and congregational life.
2. To integrate new members into the congregation so they are regular in worship and fellowship activities.
3. To make a person or committee responsible for keeping track of members that move, go to college, or enter the military.
4. To make worship meaningful.

Policies: [to be discussed and possibly adopted]

1. To determine spiritual gifts of adults and young people through spiritual gift analysis.
2. To appoint a person/committee to make sure that the name of military personnel, students, or those moving are sent immediately to Synod. This same person/committee can occasionally remind the pastor to correspond with these persons via the telephone or mail. The person/committee may also send a personal letter to the nearest WELS pastor urging him to contact the member who has moved into his area.

This same person/committee could be responsible for mailings: newsletters, sermons, etc.

3. The pastor, organists, choir director, teachers, etc., will meet ___ times a year to plan the worship services.
4. Opportunity will be given for the members to occasionally critique the worship service.

Procedures:

1. The congregation will make a concerted effort to find and harness the spiritual gifts of new members and confirmands. Time and talent sheets can also be used for this purpose with new members and all members.
2. Invite new members to Bible classes, women's and, voters' meetings, etc.
Have the nominating committee consider new members when nominating people for council and board positions, and boards to especially consider new members when making appointments to committees. At least _____ a year have [elders/evangelism/stewardship] evaluate the integration of all members who have joined in the last two years.
3. A person/committee will serve as contact for members who are away from home. The WELS membership referral system will be used. A system for mailings to those away from home will be developed.
4. In order to critique his sermons the pastor will listen to a tape or view a video recording of his sermon once every _____. The annual stewardship program will be used to critique the worship service. An annual "Liturgy Sunday" will be instituted in which the meaning of the various parts of the liturgy will be explained to members and visitors.

Objective #3: To make a concentrated effort at regaining those who have become inactive.

Goals:

1. To identify those who have become inactive in worship and congregational life.
2. To visit all inactive members at least times a year, and correspond through the mail at least ____ times a year.
3. ____ % of the inactive members will begin worshipping at least ____ a month.
4. To locate members in the congregation who have the gift for reaching out to inactive fellow members.

Policies: [to be discussed and possibly adopted]

1. To review the entire membership of the congregation and make a list of those who are inactive at least ____ a year.
2. To provide training for elders, evangelism or stewardship committee members, and others who will make visits on the inactive.
3. To make the scheduling and discussion of visits a regular part of the elders' meeting agenda. Determine also the next course of action.
4. To document and keep on file a record of all visits by pastor and others.
5. To urge relatives and friends who have influence on the inactive person to join in the visiting process.
6. To send sermons to the inactive member that apply to their specific situation. Likewise, send church information at least ____ a ____.
7. To document clearly all cases of church discipline and excommunication.

Procedures:

1. The elders will review the membership list _____. Reasons, stated or possible, for absence from worship will be discussed. Discuss resources that may be of assistance (Special Ministries, etc.)
2. ____ a year in the month(s) of _____ have a workshop for elders and other visitors. Instruct young people in confirmation class about the importance of faithful attendance and train them and young adults to reach out to straying members.
3. ____ nights per month will be set aside for visits to the inactive. The pastor will take an elder or other member on at least ____ visits per month. Each visit will be documented. After making a visit a letter will be sent thanking the person for allowing the visit and reinforcing the discussion that took place. Visits will be discussed at the next elders' meeting. Another visit or the next course of action will be planned.
4. Have each [elder/evangelism/stewardship committee member] maintain a soul prayer list.
5. Have committee responsible for contacting members who are away from home send cards at Christmas and Easter. Have elders or others send letters to inactive members at Christmas and Easter.
6. If discipline results in release or excommunication, carefully document the reasons for such action in the minutes of the voters' meeting and in the membership files.

III. Imitating Jesus' message

Jesus' message is closely related to his "soul vision" and his effort. In some ways it is impossible to separate the three. Jesus' message to the lost and straying was, very simply, a proper blend of the law and gospel. Jesus had the advantage of being able to read hearts. He knew when to apply the searing iron of the law to the heart of the Samaritan woman and when to give her the water that would quench her spiritual thirst. Jesus could see the proud hearts of the Pharisees and know just how sternly he should preach God's judgment on their arrogance. He could see the troubled heart of Zaccheus and respond by relaying the sweet message of forgiveness. When Jesus delivered the message of sin and grace he was interested and understanding. He always properly applied the Word of God.

Since you and I can't read hearts, we have to settle for the next best thing - listen and diagnose. Listening requires the kind of personal visitation that we referred to in the previous section. You can send letters through the mail and you can call someone on the phone, but nothing beats face to face, personal visits. Pastor Jon Mahnke writes:

...when a soul is see-sawing between the Lord's kingdom and the clutches of the devil, how can we want to deal with that situation in any other way than personal, face-to-face, eye-to-eye communication?

Personal visitation is as close as you and I will come to being able to read and diagnose the condition of another person's heart.

When we visit we have to do so prepared to listen. Gerhard Knutson stresses the importance of learning to listen when he says: "Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening." Later Knutson explains what he means by listening: "Listening means taking the time and patience to understand what a person is feeling, means laying aside our own agendas and needing to tune into the other person." If we truly listen then our conversation will be a dialogue, not a monologue.

In an article entitled "Shush and Listen So You Can Learn" (TELL, Winter, 1988), Pastor Allen Sorum describes how a listening visit is conducted at his church. The person making the visit uses a modified version of the questions used in making an evangelism prospect call. The listening visit questionnaire reads as follows:

1. My past experience with _____ Lutheran Church has been
(good) 5... 4... 3... 2... (bad)
2. What turns me off about my church is...
3. What I like about my church is...
4. The reason I'm not attending church is...
5. The needs of our members and community that our church should be addressing is...
6. If I could change anything about my church, it would be...
7. What I think my pastor should know is...
8. If I were to die tonight, my soul would go...
9. I feel this because...

Pastor Sorum reports that the questionnaire both gives the person an opportunity to express himself and, at the same time, removes the uneasy feeling of appearing judgmental on the part of the visitor.

The person who has lovingly listened is ready to relay God's message to the one he is visiting. No doubt you will hear a long list of excuses for the person's inactivity. Some will be genuine reasons and others will be imagined. In some cases it will take several visits to get at the heart of what is really bothering the person. If we follow our Savior's lead we will try to get through the peripheral matters and go to the real issue at hand, namely, the person's relationship with Jesus Christ. This isn't always so easy to do. It's easy to become side tracked and end up discussing long-standing grievances such as why the person's offering total was inaccurate, the pastor's snub, another member's thoughtless or offensive comment or action, or simply why there are so many hypocrites in the church. There are some excellent resources available for training visitors in the art of turning a conversation from peripheral, confrontational matters to a discussion of the condition of the person's heart and soul. One simple method of training visitors in properly applying the law and gospel is to have the visitor accompany the pastor. After the visit the pastor can explain why he used the portions of scripture that he did.

When we discuss a person's relationship with Jesus it is important that when we apply the law we do so in such a way that it crushes any sense of complacency and pride. When we apply the gospel it is equally important that we do so in a loving, no-strings-attached manner that assures the person of forgiveness. Let's make sure that we don't make the gospel sound like law. Knutson warns: "Don't turn Gospel into Law by making people feel they must earn their way back into the good graces of the rest of the congregation by attending worship, communion, and offerings." The gospel is dynamic, loving, and affirming. Present it as such. When the visit is over there should be no doubt in the person's mind that we came hoping to reunite him with Jesus.

When we have properly applied the law and gospel we can make a natural transition to the life of service we owe to our Lord Jesus. In Close the Back Door, Alan Harre brings out a unique thought in regard to applying Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

When Hebrews 10:25 is usually applied, dire warnings are offered about the fact that absenting oneself from the assembling of God's people places one in spiritual jeopardy. But this passage also has another emphasis that is less perceived when this passage is explained. In a number of places in the New Testament, particularly in 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul argues that spiritual gifts are offered to the total church through gifts that God gives to its individual members. Not only do persons short change themselves and make themselves vulnerable to apostasy when they forsake the assembly of God's people, they also short change the members of the congregation... When they withdraw from the fellowship, their gifts are no longer available to their fellow members.

Every person has gifts that are to be profitably shared with the whole congregation. Of course, the inactive person will understand this only when we have first motivated him/her with the assurance of complete forgiveness through Jesus. We may want to encourage long inactive people to enroll in the Bible information class. They may wish to be refreshed in the basics of Christianity. We can never assume that they remember or even believe everything they were taught in catechism classes years before.

As mentioned, there are a number of resources available for training people in imitating Jesus' message. All will assist in doing two things. First, they will help educate all of our members in the purpose and need for reaching the wandering. Secondly, they will assist in training our members in imitating Jesus' message.

Now we come to a difficult question, "How long should we keep on delivering the message?" Recall the parable Jesus told of the master who wanted to uproot the unfruitful tree (Luke 13 :6-9). The servant begged for more time to water and fertilize it. Persistence in watering and fertilizing the human heart is the name of the game in soul conservation. We visit a person once and all too often two or three years pass before we visit them again. At least one study shows that dropouts consciously or unconsciously give the local congregation six to eight weeks once they have dropped out to call on them. If they are not called on, they may assume they weren't missed. You can count on having to make 6-10 calls on an unchurched person before you can expect to see them in worship. You can count on making that same number before seeing results in the person who has

become inactive in his/her worship life. As long as we see some progress we continue to bring the message. "Reaching indifferent members takes plowing, harrowing, and raking before good seed can be planted, and a good deal more labor before the harvest can be expected" (Waldo Werning, Winning Them Back: New Life for Inactive Church Members.)

But what happens when we, at least in our sanctified judgment, see absolutely no progress? When if the person finally tells us to stop coming, or verbally rejects Jesus as Savior, or refuses to repent of a manifest sin? We return to the parable in Luke 13 and hear the master tell the servant to go ahead and try to save the unfruitful fig tree. But if, after working with it over a period of time, there is still no fruit, the orders are to cut it down. This is the final effort at regaining the straying. It's called excommunication. After every means for reaching the person has been exhausted, our message to the person is, "As far as we can judge, you are no longer a part of God's family." The purpose of such action is to make the person take stock of his spiritual condition and return to his Lord with a repentant heart. The words of Scripture are clear: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven... For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18: 17,18,20). "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord... Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:4-5,13). Pastor David Kipfmiller's Loving Our Own contains an excellent illustration in regard to church discipline:

A small boy was floating his model boat on the pond in a city park when suddenly a light breeze forced the craft out of the boy's reach. The boy's desperate attempts to retrieve it caught the attention of an elderly gentleman who then came to assist. But the child was horrified when the man started throwing rocks in the direction of the boat! Then the boy realized the rocks were going over the boat and making ripples which pushed the boat back to shore. So it is with God's discipline. When we stray from him, it may appear he is throwing rocks at us. But really, he is using the violent ripples to bring us back to himself

Included in those violent ripples is the final step of excommunication. It is a call to return.

This final step is a difficult one, to say the least. People often view excommunication as unloving, unnecessary, and unworkable in today's society. A great many pastors can identify with Pastor Wayne Mueller's feelings:

Carrying out the ongoing work of church discipline is the most difficult, uncomfortable work in my ministry. It is the only thing in 15 years that has made me wonder whether I should have been an electrician after all... But then I remember that it was the King of love that commanded it... I think of the strong witness excommunication for despising the Means of Grace gave to those who were tempted to think lightly of stomping underfoot the Spirit of Grace.

Should the person respond to this final step, the pastor and congregation should stand ready not only "to forgive and comfort him," but also "reaffirm [their] love for him." The Apostle Paul says this is necessary "...so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." (2 Corinthians 2:6-7). Our joy is like that of the angels who rejoice over one soul that repents. It is important for the congregation to lovingly receive the erring brother or sister back into the fold.

Regaining the straying is a painful task. It calls for imitating Jesus' soul vision, effort and message. After all, Jesus has not only set us an example, he has given us the command and the strength to carry out this important work. He sends the Holy Spirit to work on hearts. He promises to bless our efforts. It is worth the effort and the time. When Pastor Mueller first came to his former parish, Trinity Lutheran Church, Waukesha, Wisconsin, there were over 300 inactive members (total membership was over 2,000). When he left 7 years later, the number of straying members had dropped to slightly under 100. (Note: When "Slam the Back Door"

was originally compiled in 1988, I reported the following: "Pastor Jerome Enderle of Gethsemane, Kansas City, reports that in the mission congregation he serves the number of inactive people dropped from ten to three due to persistent work by himself and the elders.") Hard work does payoff, regardless of the size of the congregation. The work is there. The fields are white for the harvest among our own members. Let's imitate Jesus and "Slam the Back Door." Let's put out all stops and "Regain the Straying."

Strategies for Regaining the Straying Imitating Jesus' message

Objective #4: To train visitors to rightly apply law and gospel in visitation of the straying.

Goals:

1. To train the elders and other members of our congregation in applying law and gospel.
2. To provide some basic training in the application of law and gospel for all members of the congregation.

Policies: [to be discussed and possibly adopted]

1. To establish workshops for training visitors.
2. After making a visit assess the person's spiritual condition. Decide what part of scripture could best be used in the next conversation.
3. To offer and encourage the inactive person to refresh himself in Christian doctrine by enrolling in the Bible information class.

Procedures:

1. _____ a year in the month(s) of _____ have a workshop for elders and other visitors. Instruct young people in confirmation class about the importance of faithful attendance and train them and young adults to reach out to straying members.
2. _____ nights per month will be set aside for visits to the inactive. The pastor will take an elder or other member on at least _____ visits per month. Each visit will be documented. After making a visit a letter will be sent thanking the person for allowing the visit and reinforcing the discussion that took place. Visits will be discussed at the next elders' meeting. Another visit or the next course of action will be planned.
3. When it comes to the study of the Keys in confirmation class, young people can begin thinking of relaying law and gospel to friends that are not attending worship. Use role playing to demonstrate getting to the heart of one's relationship with Jesus. (This can continue with teens, young adults, etc.)
4. When it becomes apparent that a person's absence from worship has robbed him of knowledge of central truths, encouragement can be given to attendance at the Bible information class.