

RECLAIMING FORMER MEMBERS

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

The parable of the lost sheep is found in Luke 15:4-6 **(OH-1)** "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" The Shepherd wasn't satisfied with 99% of his sheep being safe—he wanted 100%. And he didn't stop to rest until he found that one lost sheep.

You see, the sheep didn't know that it was in danger—but the shepherd did. The shepherd knew that there were mountain lions and other wild animals seeking to devour the sheep. He knew the sheep could wander over the edge of a cliff or drown in a stream. The sheep probably hadn't even wandered away intentionally. It might have been paying more attention to the grass immediately in front of it than to the rest of the herd and simply eaten its way in the opposite direction of the other sheep. How it happened was not important. What was important was that the sheep was lost and its life was in danger.

Notice what the shepherd did when he found his sheep. He "joyfully put it on his shoulders . . . and calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'" (verse 6).

This parable tells us that lost people matter to God—and they should matter to us. It doesn't matter whether a person leaves the church intentionally, became over-whelmed with personal problems, or simply got out of the habit of attending church. What is important to God—and should be important to us—is that they are no longer attending church.

Many congregations would probably be satisfied with 99% of the members attending church services regularly. However, most churches have far less than 99% attending. Should we be satisfied with seeing only a fraction of our

members in church regularly? If we believe the parable of the lost sheep, our aim should be 100% attending.

In that same chapter of Luke, verses 8-9, we find another parable that illustrates God's concern for the lost. **(OH-2)** "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'"

Verse 10 **(OH-3)** tells us, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." As women, most of us can identify with the urgency of finding something important that was lost—your purse, your keys, maybe even a friendship. Perhaps God is impressing you now with the importance of reclaiming women who are missing from the church—those who are no longer attending, no matter what the reason.

THE NEED FOR RECLAIMING

In order to begin a reclaiming ministry, there must be a recognizable need in your church as well as a strong desire to win back the women who are no longer attending. As God impresses the hearts of the Women's Ministries team, they should begin praying about it. Who is missing from church? Ask God to direct you to the women He wants you to reach out to. Remember, prayer is the key to success in this endeavor.

For inspiration, read the parables about "lost things" in Luke 15 and other books about missing members. The *Heart Call* kit, available from *AdventSource* is an excellent resource.

Think of women dear to you who no longer attend church. Don't you wish they would come back? Wouldn't you love to have that missing sister, daughter, or friend sitting in church with you again? Jesus wants that even more than you do, and He will guide you as you reach out to them in love and friendship.

As you consider becoming involved in a reclaiming ministry, try to evaluate your motivation. Can you offer genuine friendship to missing members? Former and inactive members can tell right away if you truly care about them. You must be willing to invest your time, effort, and *self* in a friendship, even if they never come back.

Other things to consider when beginning a Reclaiming Ministry: **(OH-4)**.

- Sometimes it only takes one contact to let a missing member know that they are missed, and the person will come back to church.
- Most missing members, however, need time to heal, time to know the church cares, and time to grow in their relationship with God and other members.
- Generally, the longer a person has been away from church, the longer it will take to win them back.
- Many former members do not feel that they have left God; they feel they've only left the church.

GETTING STARTED (OH-5)

A. Talk with the pastor

When your Women's Ministries group has a strong commitment to reclaiming, speak with your pastor about beginning a reclaiming ministry for women who have stopped attending church. Pastors are nearly always supportive of such a ministry because they rarely have the time to visit such individuals, and they often are not welcome in the homes of those who have left the church, especially if they are women home alone.

B. Gather data

You will want to talk with the church clerk to find the names of non-attending members who still live close enough to the church to attend. (This program is not designed for members who have moved away.)

Other places to find Adventists no longer attending church who live in your area include:

- Church membership directory
- Other church members
- Adventist relatives
- Bible schools of evangelistic ministries such as Voice of Prophecy, Faith for Today, It Is Written, Breath of Life, La Voz de la Esperanza
- Adventist educational institution records and alumni lists
- Vacation Bible School records
- Sabbath School records
- Church greeters/registration cards
- Camp meetings
- Church reunions

C. Talk to the church board

When you have enlisted your pastor's support, then present the plan to the church board for approval and ask board members for names of women who should go on the list to be reclaimed.

D. Present the plan to the church

The next step is to present the plan to the entire church. This can be done by the Women's Ministries leader, the reclaiming ministry leader, or the pastor. The important thing is to give church members an opportunity to add names to the list and to "buy in" to the program. They need to know that they will soon start seeing old familiar faces in church again and that they should be friendly and welcoming to them.

E. Form a Reclaiming Ministry Team

As concern for reclaiming women grows, it will be time to gather a group of women who will become a part of the reclaiming ministry team. You will want to meet with them and begin formulating plans for the ministry. You should pray specifically about a clear vision of the ministry, the individuals to be reclaimed, and how God wants to use each woman on the ministry team.

ORGANIZING THE RECLAIMING MINISTRY TEAM

The number of women needed on the team depends on the size of your church and the number of women to be reclaimed.

You need leaders of the team to coordinate the ministry. At the very least, you will need a reclaiming ministry leader and a Bible study leader. **(OH-6)**

- The ministry leader should be a woman who has a vision for reclaiming and possesses the spiritual gift of leadership.
- The Bible study leader should have the gift of teaching and be able to lead a small group through Bible studies.

In larger churches you will also need an assistant reclaiming ministry leader, an event coordinator, and a data coordinator (or record keeper). **(OH-7)**

- The assistant ministry leader should have administrative gifts and assist the leader, covering meetings in her absence, and generally helping to manage the details of the reclaiming ministry.

- The data coordinator (record keeper) should be a person gifted in details who will enter names into a database (on computer or card file) and keep track of the progress of each missing member who is being mentored.

(OH-8)

- The event coordinator should possess the gifts of hospitality and administration to coordinate social events and meetings to which the missing members will be invited. She should be a woman with a burden for missing members, who will reach out and build friendships with them. This person should be a loving and non-judgmental person who can see past the lifestyle choices missing members make. Besides teas and other special meals, missing members may respond well to meetings about topics of interest to women such as rape prevention, women's health issues, and low-fat or vegetarian cooking.

In addition to the leaders an integral part of the reclaiming ministry team are the women who become mentors. The job of the mentors is to make contact with the women to be reclaimed and literally love them back into the church. Ideally, each mentor should try to mentor no more than two missing members at a time, although one is best. The mentor becomes a friend of the woman she is paired with and makes an open-ended commitment to continue the friendship as long as the other woman is willing to be friends—whether or not she ever returns to church. This unconditional friendship is key to reclaiming the missing member. She needs to experience the unconditional love of Jesus in human flesh—the mentor.

Choosing the mentors is an important job for the ministry leader. Mentors must be non-judgmental women who are good listeners and who have a good relationship with God themselves. Not everyone on the team is qualified for this all-important role. Team members who have difficulty being loving, accepting, and non-judgmental should be given other assignments on the ministry team instead of being mentors. When visiting with the women to be reclaimed, mentors will likely encounter lifestyles and practices that are at odds with church beliefs. They must be able to love the missing member in spite of this and not lecture her about church standards or other issues. Lectures will repel; love will win them.

Keep in mind that most people do not leave the Adventist church because of doctrine. Many leave because their feelings were hurt, or because of illness or other circumstances. (They were absent for a long period of time and stopped coming at all.) But they generally don't leave the church over doctrines. That is why lectures about standards or doctrines do more harm than good.

An example of the power of love and acceptance is found in the Luke 19:2-9 account of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, who wanted to see Jesus when He passed through Jericho. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was an outcast of society because of the many people he had cheated. But Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus more than anything, and since he was short, he climbed into a tree to get a good view as Jesus passed along the road below.

Jesus, of course, knew all about Zacchaeus, and He looked right up into the tree and told Zacchaeus to come down because He was going to stay at his house that very day! What an honor Jesus bestowed on a despised tax collector.

Notice that Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus that He would go to his home if he repented of his cheating and repaid what he had taken from people. No, Jesus read his heart and accepted Zacchaeus as he was. But in response to such love and acceptance, observe what Zacchaeus did. He immediately pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay four-fold the money he had cheated people out of.

This story illustrates a truth that is essential in reclaiming ministries. People respond to love and friendship. That's why it is essential to have mentors who are good at befriending people and who are non-judgmental.

RECLAIMING MINISTRY TEAM MEETINGS

Good organization and training are key ingredients to the success of a reclaiming ministry. Your reclaiming ministry team needs to meet several times as you begin the ministry and regularly throughout the time the reclaiming process is carried out. Meeting times can vary. You may meet in a home with refreshments for a couple of hours. At other times you may meet right after church for 15-20 minutes. You might also want to meet for an hour during the Sabbath School lesson study time.

The orientation and training can be accomplished in 4-12 meetings, depending on the time you have and the amount of material you wish to cover. The larger your church and the more women involved, the more meetings you will need.

Try to make the team meetings social as well as spiritual in nature. Fellowship builds camaraderie. But remember to keep sight of the reason for the meeting and don't get sidetracked. You will want to cover the entire agenda in the allotted time.

There are several general guidelines for all reclaiming ministry team meetings:

(OH-9)

- Always include a prayer session in each meeting. Encourage the women to pray for their own needs as well as the needs of the women they are reclaiming.
- Spend part of each meeting hearing reports from mentors about how it's been going in building friendships with the women who have quit coming to church. During this time it is important to treat the missing member as a true friend and not reveal things she has told you in confidence.
- Report to the data coordinator contacts made by the mentors with the missing members as well as progress reports on the missing members. Include items such as whether they are taking Bible studies, attending a church service or social event, being rebaptized, or returning to church membership by profession of faith. There should be regular progress reports for everyone on your list of missing members.
- Before ending the meeting, make plans for the next meeting (time, place, etc.)

An effective ministry team needs to do the following: **(OH-10)**

- Affirm the leader and support her.
- Establish clear lines of communication—get phone numbers and/or e-mail addresses so team members can be contacted.
- Respect boundaries. Be on time for meetings, start on time, and end on time.
- Deal with conflicts that may arise—don't ignore them. Direct concerns to the individual(s) involved, not behind their back. This is important because people often leave the church over the mishandling of a conflict. Therefore, it is important for the reclaiming ministry team to practice good conflict management skills.

**ORIENTATION / TRAINING SUBJECTS TO BE COVERED IN RECLAIMING
MINISTRIES TEAM MEETINGS**

Each of these four topics may be covered in 1-3 meetings of the reclaiming ministries team. [Note to seminar presenters: Any of the discussion questions included in topics A, B., C, and D are good to use in your seminar discussions.]

A. Ministering to the Missing (OH-11)

Areas of focus: Reasons women leave the church
Identifying women who left the church
Making contact with missing members

Prayer time scriptures: Hebrews 12:2, 3; Philippians 4:6; Matthew 7:7, 8

Focus questions: Ask the women to discuss these questions and apply the lessons they've learned from their own experiences to the missing women they hope to reclaim.

1. Share about a time you felt like quitting church. What happened? How did you feel? What helped you to resolve those feelings?
2. Have you ever been contacted by an organization that you visited (perhaps another church) and you didn't want to be contacted? How did you feel?
3. Share an experience in which someone paid a visit to your home and you felt uncomfortable. Was it a salesperson? Someone from another denomination? What did you not appreciate about their visit?

Activities:

1. Discuss the reasons women leave the church. Here is a list of common reasons people quit coming, based on research among Seventh-day Adventists: **(OH-12)**.
 - Conflict with spouse and/or a divorce
 - Conflict with other members of the church
 - Move to another town with no follow-up between churches
 - Making the transition into a new stage of life
 - Lose their connection with God
 - Loneliness and feeling as though they don't belong
2. If you have not already done so, make a list of the women you want to reclaim, praying carefully over each name. You should have had input from the pastor, the church board, and the other church members. In addition, you will want to check other sources of names, such as those already mentioned.
3. Invite the women, especially the mentors, to begin praying about those with whom they could begin to build a friendship.
4. Discuss ways to make the first contact with the missing members.

- A. One of the very best ways to make the first contact is to send each woman you hope to reclaim a one-year subscription to *Women of Spirit* magazine (available from Review & Herald Publishing Association). *Women of Spirit* offers a special subscription rate for the *Heart Call* reclaiming ministry, so be sure to mention Heart Call or tell them it is for a reclaiming ministry when you send in your subscription list. They will send you a card to mail to each woman receiving a subscription notifying them that her church cares about her and is sending her a free subscription to *Women of Spirit*. This will alert her to look for the magazine.

When the women on your list to be reclaimed have had time to receive their first issue of *Women of Spirit*, then the mentors can call them, asking if they've had time to read the magazine, if they liked it, etc. This is an easy and non-threatening way to open up communication between the mentors and the missing members.

- B. If you live in a division where you can't send a subscription to *Women of Spirit*, sending the women's devotional book would be a good idea. Also, contact your division office to find out about other magazines that you might send them a subscription to or other devotional material. When you send a book, be sure to enclose a personal note with it, letting the recipient know that your church is thinking of her. If you give her a subscription to a journal, send her a note to let her know the church is sending it to her. In these notes, be sure to let the women know that they have been missed. Then the mentor can follow up with a phone call in a few days, asking if the woman has had time to read it, how she liked it, etc.
5. Discuss ways to make the second contact. You may want to:
- Invite them out to eat
 - Call them on the phone
 - Send them a greeting card with a personal note included
 - Invite them to a social event (away from the church)
6. Discuss emotions the mentors might encounter from the missing members when making contact with them **(OH-13)**
- Resistance—Do they really care that I come back?

- Suspicion—Am I part of some church project?
- Anger—I don't want to talk to you!
- Surprise—You're the first person who has contacted me since I left many years ago.
- Hesitation—What do you want? Money?

If the missing member feels that someone at church wronged her or offended her, don't make excuses. This will invalidate her feelings, and she won't want to be your friend. Instead of making excuses, say something like, "I'm so sorry that happened. Please come back and give us another chance."

B. The Healing Process (OH-14)

Areas of Focus: Learning to be a more effective listener
How to show you care for the women who have stopped attending church
How to minister to the needs of women who no longer attend church

Prayer time scriptures: James 1:19; Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:9-13

Focus questions: Ask the women to discuss these questions and apply the lessons they've learned from their own experiences to the missing women they hope to reclaim.

1. Share an experience in which you really felt the need to be *listened to*, but the other person cut you off and kept on talking. How did you feel? What are some of the qualities of a good listener?
2. Share an experience from your past in which you were hurt deeply over some difficult situation and wished someone would show care and concern. What would have been most meaningful to you at that time?
3. If you had a serious problem, where would you turn? If your world fell apart, where could you find someone who cared enough to help?

Activities:

1. Discuss ways to make friends with the women you are mentoring:
(OH-15)

- Become genuinely interested in her.
- Smile often. Express your sense of humor when appropriate.
- Remember names of people in whom she is interested.
- Talk about her interests.
- Be sure she understands how important she is to you; you must sincerely be her friend.
- Be a good listener; encourage her to talk about herself.

(OH-16)

- Keep confidences as a sacred trust.
- Remember, you are not there to talk, scold, beg, or plead.
- Don't be defensive. If she is angry, allow her to vent her anger.
- Show empathy. If she has been deeply hurt, allow her to express her pain.
- Open, honest, accepting attitudes will help her heal far better than making excuses or defending the church.
- Take things slowly. Be tactful and genuine when you express your own feelings in ministering to her needs.

2. Discuss ways to show you care: **(OH-17)**

- Don't "drop in" uninvited. Always call first.
- You might want to make an appointment to meet her for lunch as your treat.
- Have a positive, supporting attitude.
- Respect her personal space and offer to meet in a neutral place.
- Find out if there is anything you can do for her personally, such as child care, support group, or material needs.
- Remember to spend much time *listening!*

3. Plan a women's ministries tea or other social event at a location away from the church to invite the missing members to. The mentor should plan to pick up her friend and take her to this event if at all possible. The missing member may have fears about attending a church-sponsored event, and this will make it easier for her.

C. Building Trust and Faith (OH-18)

Areas of focus: Building trust in your relationships with women who no longer attend church

Knowing when and how to share your faith with women who are not attending church
Inviting women you are mentoring to join a Bible study or small group

Prayer time scriptures: 1 John 3:18; 1 Peter 3:15; Mark 1:35

Focus questions: Ask team members to discuss these questions and apply the lessons they've learned from their own experiences to the missing women they hope to reclaim.

1. Share about a time when someone let you down so badly that you felt you could no longer trust them. What helps you really trust a person?
2. Have you ever been uncomfortable when someone tried to share their faith with you? What happened? What would you have preferred?
3. What spiritual discipline (prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, journaling, etc.) helps you the most in your walk with God?

Activities:

1. Spend time discussing the qualities of a trustworthy friend: **(OH-19)**
 - Won't lie to you
 - Respects your boundaries
 - Respects your decisions
 - Upholds your dignity and worth
 - Wants the best for you
 - Honors your confidences
2. Allow time for the mentors to reflect on whether the women they are mentoring are developing trust in them. Are they sharing deep inner needs with the mentors?
3. When discussing ways to share your faith with your friend, consider the following: **(OH-20)**
 - The woman you are mentoring most likely still believes Adventist teachings, although she may have forgotten some things.
 - She does not need lectures about standards.
 - She may have been hurt by the church or by another Adventist.

- She may have done something that she feels God cannot forgive her for.
 - She will not share her true feelings until she trusts you.
4. Discuss practical ways to share your faith. **(OH-21)**
- Avoid arguing.
 - Be careful not to get sidetracked by doctrinal issues if her relationship with the Lord is shaky.
 - Talk in terms of her "needs."
 - Tell your own story of conversion/falling in love with the Lord and how important He is in your life now.
 - Do *not* push her.
 - Be kind and compassionate.
 - Drop the issue if she doesn't want to discuss it.
5. Explore the reality that in the course of their growing friendship the mentor may have an opportunity to invite her friend to accept Jesus by praying with her and then inviting her to do something to help her keep growing in faith. Here are some points to consider:
- It may not be time to invite her back to church. She may feel that it is not a safe place but would be willing to meet in someone's home for a Bible study group.
 - Share some of your devotional practices with her.
 - Be open about your own need of other Christian friends to encourage you and hold you accountable.
 - Invite her to attend a small study or prayer group, or for just the two of you to study together.
 - Do not end the friendship if she is not ready to join a study group. Be patient.
6. The Bible study leader should lead out in making plans for a small group(s) and/or Bible studies in members' homes. The number of groups will depend on the number of missing members who are ready to join such a group. It will likely be easier for missing members to go to a person's home rather than to take studies at church, especially if the woman has not attended church in a long time.
- Possibilities for group study are:
- The *Come Alive With Jesus* Bible study guides, which focus on building a relationship with Jesus

- *Bible Studies for Busy Women*, which are relational studies geared especially for women's needs
- Other books or lessons of interest to women: *Steps to Christ* also has study guides.

D. Renewing a Commitment to Christ (OH-22)

Areas of focus: Inviting your friend to attend church on Sabbath
Inviting your friend to an evangelistic meeting
Planning events to welcome former members back to church

Prayer time scriptures: Hebrews 10:25; Romans 10:17; Luke 15:8-10

Focus questions: Ask the women to discuss these questions and apply the lessons they've learned from their own experiences to the missing women they hope to reclaim.

1. Have you ever been nervous about attending church? Perhaps you had quit attending and then came back. Or perhaps you were a visitor at another church. Tell about your experience.
2. What do you like most about evangelistic meetings held at your church? What do you like least?
3. Do you enjoy celebrations? Share about a party or celebration you attended that you enjoyed.

Activities:

1. Discuss the fact that coming back to church after an extended absence can be difficult for a person. How can you make it a more positive experience? **(OH-23)**.
 - Offer to pick her up and take her to church.
 - Train your greeters to warmly welcome former members without questioning them about why they've been absent so long.
 - Invite her to join your Sabbath School class.
 - Don't subject her to standing and introducing herself or wearing a "visitor" sticker.
 - Invite her and her family home for Sabbath dinner.

2. Sometimes a former member may mention in church or in a Sabbath School class some of her bitterness or frustration with the church. It is important that you not react to such statements. Here are ways to help:
 - Be patient and listen.
 - Acknowledge that the church is not perfect and that most people have some kind of frustration with something or someone.
 - Do not try to correct what she says. Just listen, keeping in mind that listening does not necessarily mean that you agree.
3. Discuss ways to invite former members to an evangelistic meeting. It might be best to put the invitation in terms of how such a meeting is a valuable way to strengthen one's faith, or a way to review it. Here again, it is important for the mentor to offer to attend the series with her friend.
4. Think about the parable of the lost coin. In this parable, when the woman found her coin she rejoiced with her friends. Discuss ways your reclaiming ministries team or your church can rejoice in welcoming back the women who are returning to church.

You might want to give each one a gift to show your joy, perhaps flowers, a gift certificate, a book, or you might consider taking them out to a special meal or holding a tea or luncheon in her/their honor.
5. Close the meeting by inviting the team members to share a blessing, an answer to prayer, or other joy related to the reclaiming ministry.

FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS

After the reclaiming ministry is experiencing success and seeing missing members return to church, there is need for other, infrequent team meetings to formulate plans for: **(OH-24)**

- Nurturing and discipling the women who have returned to church to prevent them from leaving again
- Involving these newly-returned women in ministry
- Praising God for His blessings in your ministry

RESOURCES

Heart Call – Some of the material in this seminar is adapted from *Heart Call*, a reclaiming initiative of the North American Division Women's Ministries Department, and is used with their permission. The *Heart Call* kit is a 3-ring binder containing over 100 pages of training and other resource materials, a CD-ROM with training presentations for PointPoint and overhead projectors, plus a seven-minute video. It is available from *AdventSource* for \$29.95.

Books and Bible Studies

Bible Studies for Busy Women, by Ardis Stenbakken and Carole Ferch-Johnson (Pacific Press Publishing Association), is a set of 14 photocopiable Bible studies written especially for women. Available from your Adventist Book Center and *AdventSource*

Come Alive with Jesus Bible lessons is a set of seven Bible studies on dynamic Christian living prepared by Hart Research Center and is available from *AdventSource*.

Sharing Your Faith With Friends Without Losing Either by Monte Sahlin (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1990), reveals how to share the Adventist message with friends. Available from your Adventist Book Center.

Ten Who Came Back by Tim Lale and Pat Habada (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998) tells about ten people who left the Church and have now returned. Available from your Adventist Book Center and *AdventSource*.

Ten Who Left by Fred Cornforth and Tim Lale (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1995), shares the stories of ten people who have left the Adventist Church and their reasons for leaving. Available from *AdventSource* and your Adventist Book Center.

The Gift of Friendship by Tamyra Horst (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1999), is a practical guide to Christian friendships. Available from your Adventist Book Center.

Welcome Home, a 24-page guide to help you set up a Reclaiming Ministry in your church. Available from Center for Creative Ministry, 800-272-4664.

Workshop

SafetyZone: A Workshop for Friends Reaching Friends Who Quit Church, is an eight-part workshop to help individuals and congregations become safe people who create safe places for rebuilding friendships with former Adventists. Available from Center for Creative Ministry, 800-272-4664 and from *AdventSource*.