

Start or revitalize a ministry in your church

QUICK START GUIDE



RECONNECTING MINISTRIES



Quick Start Guide for Reconnecting Ministries

Available from:

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Introduction

Welcome to a ministry that has amazing potential for revitalizing the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Every Sabbath over one million former or inactive Seventh-day Adventists are not in a local congregation somewhere in the United States, Canada, or Bermuda. The attendance number in our churches would change dramatically if all these people came back!

However, reconnecting with former or inactive members doesn't happen with the wave of a magic wand. Your attitude about inactive members, your words and actions toward them, and your commitment over time needs to be loving and accepting.

She grew up Adventist and attended church regularly as a child and teen. But then she went through some troubled times and decided to take a weekend off from church. "I just need to pull things together and let life simmer down," she thought. Well, one week turned into ten weeks and ten weeks turned into a decade away. Then one day the Holy Spirit spoke to her heart and convicted her that she needed to go back to church.

So the next Sabbath she did just that. She drove into the church parking lot and found a place to park, but she couldn't get out of her car. No, the car doors worked just fine. It was fear and guilt that gripped her. The evil one was working overtime at that moment. "You know where you've been and what you've been doing. What makes you think you deserve to be in that sanctuary with all those perfect people?" he was whispering in her ear.

She pulled out her Bible and prayed while sitting in her car. Then she started the engine and drove away, not going into the church that day. This happened several more times before she confided to a friend about her experiences, and the next week the two of them went in together to worship God and enjoyed the welcome home this inactive member craved.

Makes one wonder how many people who once worshiped in an Adventist congregation somewhere in the past are sitting in the parking lots of the 6,000 Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America each Sabbath.

A Closer Look

Research shows that many inactive or former members regularly think about God and the church. The vast majority grew up in Adventist homes. Only 1 in 7 was baptized as a result of public evangelistic meetings. Most still identify with the Adventist Church and feel the need for a relationship with God. Unfortunately, some never bonded with a congregation. They were not invited to member homes or visited by members. Two out of three do not hold any church office. (Source: *Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church?*)

The "typical" person who slips away is a young to middle-aged adult, divorced or never married, with few friends in the local church and a demanding professional career. Many simply do not see church as being relevant or interesting any more.



It is noteworthy that family life is a key factor affecting church participation. Divorce often precipitates leaving the church. Inactive members are three times more likely to be divorced and remarried than active members, and four times more likely to be divorced and single.

According to survey data, being single in the Adventist Church is not easy. Many singles leave because of unfilled needs, not theological differences. One former member said, “The Adventist church has the best theology out there, but that’s not enough.”

An editorial in Operation Reconnect’s Getting in Touch e-newsletter states, “Shooting its wounded is perhaps the church’s greatest sin.” People who are hurting need understanding and care, not indifference or criticism. In our increasingly isolated society many people just need a warm smile and a big hug. They need the opportunity to open their hearts and share a few tears as we support them through their painful journey.

About 90 percent of Adventists who leave the church claim one or more of the following three reasons:

1. They experience conflict with another church member or the pastor— usually in matters other than doctrine.
2. They perceive that the church does not care about them or their needs.
3. They display a growing disinterest in spiritual things due to a lack of understanding about the gospel, which connects them first and foremost to Christ.

(Source: Center for Creative Ministry)

Qualities of a Reconnecting Ministries Coordinator

A successful Reconnecting Ministries coordinator will passionately embrace the biblical concept of seeking God’s missing children. He or she must feel the sense of loss that comes from inactive members not attending church, and should pray for church members to develop a strong desire for winning back the disconnected. The coordinator should model reconnecting skills through exhibiting tact, kindness, and concern for missing members. He or she will believe that paying attention to people leaving out the back door of the church is just as important as opening the front door to new members.

Your Commission

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making this appeal through us.” –2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (NIV)

Isn’t that exciting? You are a spokesperson for Christ to share with that person whom you have not seen in quite some time that she is highly valued by Heaven. That he has not gone so far that he cannot come back to God, and then when he is ready, to the Adventist Church.



The Role of a Reconnecting Ministries Coordinator

The role of the Reconnecting Ministries coordinator is to raise awareness and concern over missing members, facilitate training for active members so they relate well with missing or former members, and create opportunities for reconnecting.

Responsibilities

1. **Initiating a prayer focus on missing members.** Whenever there is a prayer session at your church, help the active members remember the missing members. Often we pray for those in the hospital, or the recently unemployed, but until someone specifically mentions it, our inactive members are not on our corporate prayer list. You should make sure that happens. One approach is to point out the empty chairs or pews in the church and say to the assembled group, “These empty seats represent people who used to be here. Let’s remember these persons in prayer that God will bless their lives abundantly and we might have an opportunity to reconnect.” Don’t disclose confidential information, but when appropriate, mention people by name. The more specific we get, the more motivated everyone becomes to reconnect.
2. **Gathering and distributing information.** Check with AdventSource and the Adventist Book Center for new materials on Reconnecting Ministries and acquire copies for your church. With the help of the pastor and church clerk, assemble a list of inactive members and keep your list updated.
3. **Providing several training events each year.** Plan several training events each year to raise awareness of Reconnecting Ministries. You could begin with a winter (January/February) seminar and provide warm drinks while engaging your group at the church. When spring (April/May) arrives you could start home-based book clubs where people read recommended books and discuss the implications for your congregation. You will probably want to skip summer when people are likely to be out of town, and host another training event in the fall (September/October) based around another creative curriculum. See the list of recommended resources on page 10 for ideas.
4. **Coordinating with other leaders.** Whenever possible, work collaboratively with other ministry leaders to create a church culture that welcomes missing members. If you want to see a new Sabbath school class for inactive members, talk it over with your pastor and Sabbath school superintendent and make plans together. If you want to help the greeters be more engaging with those who honor us by coming back, meet with the head greeter and work out a training plan together. Look for ways to enact change.
5. **Advocating for inactive members at board meetings and church gatherings.** Far too often, active members talk disparagingly about inactive members and make decisions without first consulting them. You have the opportunity to speak in defense of inactive members and encourage others to do the same. Matthew 18 must be followed in Adventist congregations: you go to the person first to work things out. Remind board members that they do not know the details of someone else’s spiritual condition.



Many inactive members have ongoing friendships with active members, even though they are not regularly in church. Ask that judgments be suspended until further contact is made. Feelings of rejection or embarrassment of inactive members' actions should not motivate church discipline.

- 6. Motivating a team to lead this ministry.** Reconnecting Ministries requires a team whose members have a similar passion for reaching missing members. Look for volunteers with complimentary skill sets so you can form an effective team. If you are an extrovert who loves visiting with people but you don't organize tasks well, invite people who are task structured to join you. If you love visiting with middle-aged adults but have no idea how to engage young adults, invite others to help with those target groups. Set goals. Make a calendar of events and visitation activities. Make sure to call planning sessions, make decisions together, provide motivation, and celebrate the victories God brings your way in Reconnecting Ministries. That's good leadership.
- 7. Asking for a budget or fundraising to make this ministry viable.** Reconnecting Ministries won't last long in your congregation if you don't have money to support your efforts. You will need funds to purchase training resources and supplies. You will also want money to cover travel expenses and registration fees for Reconnecting Ministries training provided by your conference, union, or the North American Division. Work with your pastor or church treasurer to allocate some church budget funds toward this ministry. If that's not possible, ask the finance committee if they would open a designated funds account where people could specifically donate for Reconnecting Ministries. Before you make these requests, develop a reasonable estimate of expenses by category. Be ready to adjust the numbers when others give input. Work collaboratively with your colleagues in ministry.

How to be Effective in Reconnecting

- 1. Provide Effective Leadership.** The attitude of the pastor(s) and elders sets the tone of the church. A positive atmosphere of acceptance and support are necessary before missing members are invited back. Otherwise, they may be hurt again.
- 2. Notice Predictable Leaving Patterns.** Pay special attention to members' signals that they are disengaging. It is easier to keep a connection while they are still attending (even sporadically) than to reestablish one after they have left.
- 3. Teach Listening Skills.** Effective listening is not something we do naturally, but it is extremely important in Reconnecting Ministries. Members of your church need ongoing training in developing their listening skills. It will benefit all ministries!
- 4. Meet Away from Church.** For many missing members the church building holds bad memories. Meeting away from the church building reduces a potential barrier to reconnecting. You don't have to be inside the church to reconnect. Offering a variety of enjoyable activities in various locations can be attractive to non-attendees.



5. **Make Good First Impressions.** If missing members decide to attend church, the first visit back is crucial. You can't assume that greeters know how to effectively handle these situations; you need to train all official greeters. Beyond that, you must create a culture in which every member is a caring, unofficial greeter.
6. **Create Safety Zones.** When inactive members return they need a safe place to heal and reestablish relationships. Starting a special Sabbath school class or small group during the week that is a city of refuge for returning members is a great idea. They don't need criticism or pressure to change or commit to anything – just acceptance and unconditional love.
7. **Include, Include, Include.** Talk together, eat together, play together, work together. Just be friends! Feeling excluded is the number one reason people say they leave the church.
8. **Set Realistic Goals.** Some missing members will return; others won't. Some will attend churches of other denominations. When approached, some will be angry and lash out. Remember that it is the Spirit's work to soften hearts and convict of truth. It is our work to pray and to offer friendship.

Principles for Working with Missing and Former Members

When working with inactive or former members of the Adventist family it is helpful to understand these principles:

1. **Most still believe Adventist teachings.** Even if they are not practicing what the church teaches, most have deep conviction concerning the correctness of its major doctrines.
2. **They do not need lectures about standards.** By pointing out their perceived sins you focus on their problems instead of on the Problem-solver. As inactive members look to Christ, they will gain hope and courage.
3. **They have often been hurt by the church and other Adventists.** We need to listen to them and feel their hurt. We should to become their friends and also respect their boundaries.
4. **Some may believe God can't forgive them.** They worry they've gone too far, that God is not willing or able to forgive and save them. We have the opportunity to assure them of God's willingness to forgive and desire to save. If our hearts are filled with God's love, we will have an abundant supply to share with those who need to find their way back to the Father's home.
5. **They will not share their true feelings until they trust.** They may do or say things to see if we are shocked or critical. If we react poorly, they take it as a sign of our disapproval. This destroys our ability to minister to them. Share that God loves them and we do too, and we want them with us for eternity.



Ten Tips for Reconnecting

(Center for Creative Ministry)

Would you like your church to become a magnet for missing members and others who have stopped attending? Here are some suggestions to help you make it a reality.

1. Make a list of people you know who are not presently attending church. Pray specifically for each of them, asking God to bless their lives abundantly.
2. Select three friends from the list and identify things you used to do with them that you could do again to create a renewed connection.
3. Contact each person as the Spirit of God prompts you that the timing is right. Let your initial conversation revolve around how much you have enjoyed that person's friendship and that you're looking for a way to reconnect. Don't recoil if you experience initial reticence or rejection.
4. Communicate that you and the others at church are diminished because you are not together.
5. Find a way to meet on neutral ground. Go back to your list of things in common and do them together now, or find new activities that currently resonate with your friend.
6. Let friendship be enough. Ask God to calm your heart and mind about their lack of church attendance. This will happen as Providence provides. You are not responsible for the timing.
7. Be real with your friends as you reconnect. Admit your struggles with God and other Christians, if that is your experience. Presenting yourself as a perfect person will not help you reconnect.
8. Listen to what they tell you about their lives. When appropriate, ask about their family, work, or spiritual experience. Notice where they have relational pain.
9. Apologize for pain that has been caused by church people. Ask them to give a small group of authentic and inclusive friends a chance to make amends through meeting with them for fellowship.
10. Advocate for them with active members – especially when they are not around. Let the active members know that inactive members maintain an interest in spiritual matters, and how much their friendship means to you and a number of others. Ask active members to withhold unfounded judgments of people they really don't understand or regularly connect with.



Homecoming Sabbaths

A Welcome Home Sabbath provides the opportunity for local churches to create a special program ideal for former and inactive members. Congregations need to organize a team well in advance to focus on planning as well as reaching out to invitees. It takes time and energy to communicate the church's desire for inactive members to return and rebuild relationships.

The official date for Welcome Home Sabbath in the North American Division is the fourth Sabbath in November.

It's Not a Program, It's a Culture Change

Programs don't win people back to church; people do! We've all been excited about some new approach to winning back former members. But programs are only as good as the people, influenced by the Spirit, who work with them. That's why this ministry needs to be placed in the context of church members who:

- Recognize the biblical invitation to seek out God's "lost sheep" with passion.
- Feel the sense of loss that comes from missing members not attending church.
- Pray for a burning desire to prioritize winning back inactive members.
- Believe in closing the back door of the church to prevent dropouts as much as opening the front door to new members.

Relationship Concepts to Remember

- More people leave a church because of personal pain from life events and a lack of support from other members than because of theological disagreements.
- Most missing members want to share their stories about what happened and why they left.
- Most hurting people need time to heal, time to know the church wants them back, time to rebuild relationships, and time to grow again in their relationship with the church.
- Most inactive members would rather meet with another church member before visiting with the pastor.
- The longer a person has been away, the more relational care he or she needs to be ready to come back. Some have found that when working with inactive members, there is a correlation of one visit for every year they have been out of the church before they will come back. There is no scientific data to support this, but it is a reminder to the active member to never give up.
- Most people respond to personal care rather than someone's ideas about why they should be back in church.

The stories in Luke 15 make it clear that God seeks the lost, not the other way around. As God's representatives, we must embrace the ministry of reconciliation as detailed in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.



Creative Reconnecting Opportunities

Social activities are a draw and since we are all different, variety is important. Go beyond volleyball in the gym and try some of these ideas:

Book Clubs. Whether you meet in person once a week or month, exchange ideas by email or use a combination of methods, this is a chance to read books you otherwise might not and to gain new insight from others.

Museum Outings. Explore a small, local museum or gallery, or plan a trip to a larger one. Take a group and visit a café or share a picnic afterward.

Play, Ballet, or Symphony. Larger towns often have a wide selection of cultural events, but smaller towns have offerings as well. Check out the community playhouse, local college, or high school.

Open Mic Night. If you have poets, musicians, or comedians in your group this is a chance to showcase their talents. Many people's hidden talents will surprise you.

Classes. Would a skilled cook from your congregation or community be willing to give your group a few lessons? Your group might also be interested in classes in car care, pet obedience, or watercolor painting. Look for local experts who can help.

Film Festival. If your community has one, go as a group. If not, find the equipment and stage your own. Choose a particular actor, decade, location, or other theme to enhance discussion.

Community Service. Many volunteer organizations and charities will send someone to inform your group of opportunities or train them for specific roles— tutoring, mentoring, building, cleaning, and more.

Activities like these allow inactive members to bring other non-member friends. They also relieve the pressure for attending church.

Evaluating Reconnecting Ministries

Every ministry benefits from periodic self-evaluation. However, in Reconnecting Ministries you may be tempted to base evaluations of your success solely on how many people come back to church. Remember, you're running a marathon, not a 50-yard dash. God takes different people on different spiritual journeys. Conviction and conversion are the work of the Holy Spirit. Your job is to be spiritually aware while preparing the congregation to receive those who choose to return, and continue to befriend those who do not.

Not everyone who is disconnected will reconnect with your local church. Respect their choices. God respects our choices, so we can extend the same favor to others.

Make sure your active members don't become inactive. It's much easier to keep a connection than to try and establish it years later. Watch for the signs that people are pulling away. Instead of thinking, "Well, they need some space," see them as needing you to move toward them as you become the conduit of God's grace in their world.



There are plenty of people whose names are still on the books and for whom a little bit of listening, inclusion, and love will reactivate them in your congregation. Work with them first.

Ellen White says it best: “If we would...be kind, courteous and tenderhearted, there would be one hundred conversations [reconnections] to the truth where now there is only one” (*Testimonies for the Church Vol. 9, page 189*).

Questions for Reflection

- Do you have a group of prayer partners who consistently pray for missing or former members?
- Are you initiating interesting activities outside of the church building?
- Do you have a strong social network that embraces inactive or former members? Are you using social networking to its full potential for your ministry?
- Is your church ready to welcome returning members? Have you consciously taught listening skills to your members and trained your greeters?
- Is the congregation’s general attitude one of acceptance and inclusiveness?
- Do you have a safe Sabbath school class or other group for returning members?
- Do you know how many inactive members are on your congregation’s membership books?
- Are you trying to find former or inactive members from other churches who now live in your area? Are you attempting to connect with them?
- Have you developed a team that leads your congregation in this important initiative?

Reasons to Return

Why should missing members come back? Partly because the church needs them. They have a sphere of influence no one else has. God originally brought them to your congregation for a purpose. There’s a hole in the church because they left; an empty space only they can fill. Yet the most important reason for reconnecting is so we can share life’s journey together as we all grow closer to Jesus.

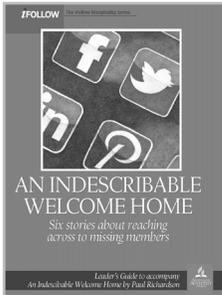
In *Ten Who Returned*, coauthor Tim Lale writes that people who return to the church have first revitalized their relationship with God. They experience their own burning bush encounters before they return to church. This is not something we can plan or schedule. We can only continue to offer friendship and prayer, encouragement and acceptance, and wait for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Welcome to Reconnecting Ministries. It may turn out to be the most important ministry you’ve ever done in your church!



Resources

The following resources are available from AdventSource. Visit AdventSource.org or call 402.486.8800 for a complete list.

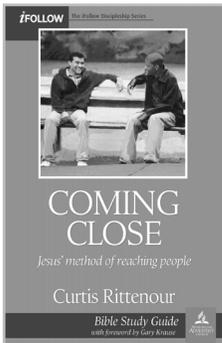


An Indescribable Welcome Home

By Paul Richardson

Renewing lost friendships is part of the good news of Jesus, and *An Indescribable Welcome Home* will help you learn where to begin. This book uses a series of stories told by Jesus to describe how He wants us to relate to the people who have quit coming to church.

Product #417835

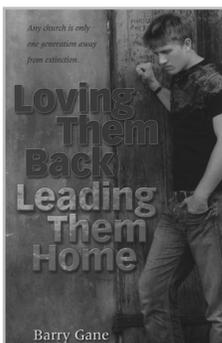


Coming Close

By Curtis Rittenour

In *Coming Close*, Curtis Rittenour gets to the heart of the issue—our urgent need to rediscover and participate in Christ's method of ministry. The components of that ministry include mingling with people, showing sympathy, ministering to needs, winning confidence, and leading people to Jesus. *Coming Close* provides a practical how-to for all of us who want to see our churches transformed and on fire for mission.

Product #417841



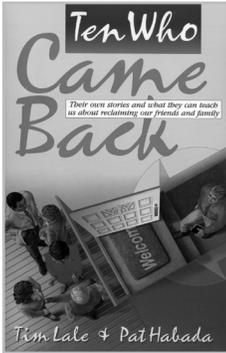
Loving Them Back Leading Them Home

By Barry Gane

You probably know people who have left the church. Maybe you know why they walked away, but more likely you don't. But you do care. Barry Gane explores the reasons so many young people decide to leave, considers the complexities of the adolescent mind, addresses the stages of faith development, and offers effective strategies for reclaiming missing youth.

Product #416795



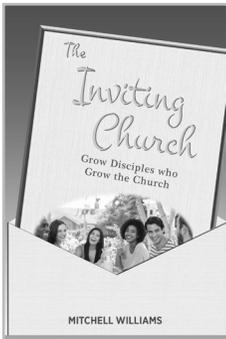


Ten Who Came Back

By Tim Lale and Pat Habana

If you've never left the church, you surely know someone who has. *Ten Who Came Back* explores the thoughts, feelings and fears of ten people who left the church but have come back with renewed dedication. A discussion and study guide follows each chapter.

Product #629510



The Inviting Church

By Mitchell L. Williams

The Inviting Church resource is a Spirit-led, church-wide campaign that equips the church to plan, invite, and host outreach events and special Sabbath services. *The Inviting Church* resource is not a recipe, but a relationship with Jesus that fuels your church with the love and courage to invite friends, neighbors, and relatives to your outreach events.

Product #419297



You Lost Me

By David Kinnaman

Is the church losing the next generation? Millions of young Christians are disconnecting from the church as they transition into adulthood. They're real people, not just statistics. And each one has a story. Discover why so many are disengaging from the faith community, renew your hope for how God is at work in the next generation – and find out how you can join in.

Product #629746



Reconnecting Ministries

This Quick Start Guide for Reconnecting Ministries is full of important information to help you start or revitalize a ministry at your local church. This guide contains a job description, instructions for getting started, tips for maintaining a successful ministry, troubleshooting suggestions, recommended resources, and more. Whether you're new to this ministry or an experienced volunteer, this Quick Start Guide will inspire you with lots of great ideas you can immediately put to use in your local church.

Other titles in the Quick Start Guide series:

- Personal Ministries
- Greeters Ministry
- Deacon and Deaconess
- Interest Coordinator

For a complete list of Quick Start Guide titles visit AdventSource.org



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