Sickness, sorrow, or sudden calamity
Dissatisfaction with themselves and their lives
Personal tragedy, financial reverses or depression
Social networks: spouse, friend, neighbors who are enthusiastic
Becoming a new parent
Social and spiritual activities program in the church.

Ellen White provides the best answer for opening the door to receptivity—a Christlike sympathy shown by loving Christians.

In Christlike sympathy we should come close to men individually, and seek to awaken their interest in the great things of eternal life. Their hearts may be as hard as the beaten highway, and apparently it may be a useless effort to present the Saviour to them; but while logic may fail to move, and argument be powerless to convince, the love of Christ, revealed in personal ministry, may soften the stony heart, so that the seed of truth can take root.

Many backsliders want to return. Once they have taken a posture of resistance, once they have established a pattern of staying away or begun living a lifestyle contrary to the Adventist way of life, it is difficult for them to change. Many want to

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2See Hunter, p. 113.

3See Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep, pp. 28, 31.

4See Perry et al., p. 402.

5Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep: "Young mothers are probably the easiest of all types to reclaim. They want to come back; they want their children in church" (pp. 41, 42). Also see p. 63; Gallup: "No fewer than nine in 10 in the latest Gallup Poll say they would like their children to have religious training" (p. 2).

6Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep, p. 49.

7White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 57.
return but they do not know how. The task of the Caring Ministry is to keep contact, communication, and a loving concern available so that as the Holy Spirit uses life circumstances to prompt receptivity, a warm, loving, human hand will be there to help them find their way back into the family.

Ellen White's counsel gives us encouragement as we work for resistant people:

When you see those who are going down to death, you will not rest in quiet indifference and ease. The greater their sin and the deeper their misery, the more earnest and tender will be your efforts for their recovery. You will discern the need of those who are suffering, who have been sinning against God, and who are oppressed with a burden of guilt. Your heart will go out in sympathy for them, and you will reach out to them a helping hand. In the arms of your faith and love you will bring them to Christ. You will watch over and encourage them, and your sympathy and confidence will make it hard for them to fall from their steadfastness.

In this work all the angels of heaven are ready to cooperate. All the resources of heaven are at the command of those who are seeking to save the lost. Angels will help you reach the most careless and the most hardened.  

The reclaiming ministry may not be easy, but it is worth the effort. Hunter believes that the church will profit from the experience even if the inactive members do not return.

If inactive members were once worth winning, they are now worth reactivating. In certain cases, inactive members may be one of our most responsive populations because, as Canon Bryan Green reminds us, "They have something to return to." But if they are inactive because the church left them as new members outside the fellowship involvement circle, they may be a quite resistant group. In any case, their renewal in the body of Christ requires the initiative of active church members. It is even worth talking to those whom we cannot reactivate—for the feedback they can give us. If we find out how we failed them, we may make the changes that will prevent us from failing others. Beside, for the sake of those who have not yet joined us, we need to love those who once joined us. If we are perceived to shower attention on prospects while forgetting

1Ibid., p. 197.
about members, then prospects understandably will be reluctant to join.\textsuperscript{1}

\textbf{Backsliding--God's Perspective}

The Ideal and Reality

It was never God's intention that men and women should stray from His love and care. God created us with the capacity to know and love Him, intending that this relationship should continue for eternity. But only three chapters into the Bible, we find the awful story of a fateful choice that led to sin and separation.

God's love, however, is greater than our sin. Long before Christ appeared, the prophet Jeremiah spoke the words of invitation: "The Lord hath appeared of old unto me saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee."\textsuperscript{2} The ultimate expression of that love is found in Jesus Christ, who opens the way to return to a close relationship with God. The past has been forgiven; we can be new creatures in Christ!

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.\textsuperscript{3}

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.\textsuperscript{4}

There can be no doubt that God's ideal is that, once effected, this transformation and restoration should be permanent. When commissioning the disciples to go and bring forth fruit, Jesus spoke of this permanence and added, "... that your fruit should

\textsuperscript{1}Hunter, pp. 136, 137. \textsuperscript{2}Jer 31:3. \textsuperscript{3}2 Cor 5:21. \textsuperscript{4}2 Cor 5:17.
remain..." 1 The Apostle Paul stressed the same ideal:
"... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in
you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ
Jesus." 2

However, in two interesting parallel passages, the Apostle
John shows us both the ideal and reality. The ideal: "I have no
greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." 3 The
reality: "It has given me great joy to find some of your children
walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us." 4

I do not want to make too great a case for that little word
"some," but the point is still there that not all of God's children
accept His gracious invitation and not all of those who do accept
it remain in that saving relationship. Thus, "some of your children
(are) walking in truth." The reality and tragedy is that many
Christians neglect or reject their salvation.

In the following passage we feel the intensity of Paul's
concern that the believers he had established in Thessalonica
remain faithful to their commitment to Christ:

My friends, when for a short spell you were lost to us—lost
to sight, not to our hearts—we were exceedingly anxious to see
you again. So we did propose to come to Thessalonica—I, Paul,
more than once—but Satan thwarted us. For after all, what hope
or joy or crown of pride is there for us, what indeed but you,
when we stand before our Lord Jesus at his coming? It is you
who are indeed our glory and our joy.

1 John 15:16.
2 Phil 1:6 (NIV).
3 John 4.
4 2 John 4 (NIV).
So when we could bear it no longer, we decided to remain alone at Athens, and sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow-worker in the service of the gospel of Christ, to encourage you to stand firm for the faith and, under all these hardships, not to be shaken; for you know that this is our appointed lot. When we were with you we warned you that we were bound to suffer hardship; and so it has turned out, as you know. And thus it was that when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter might have tempted you and my labour might be lost.

But now Timothy has just arrived from Thessalonica, bringing good news of your faith and love. He tells us that you always think kindly of us, and are as anxious to see us as we are to see you. And so in all our difficulties and hardships your faith reassures us about you. It is the breath of life to us that you stand firm in the Lord. What thanks can we return to God for you? What thanks for all the joy you have brought us, making us rejoice before our God while we pray most earnestly night and day to be allowed to see you again and to mend your faith where it falls short?\footnote{1 Thess 2:17-3:10 (NEB)}

This insight into the feelings of Paul helps us understand the heart of the loving God we serve. God wants us to be strong and faithful, filled with the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. He wants our lives to be filled with joy and assurance. He wants the church to be a place of love and unity, of healing and restoration.

Biblical Models

There are many models employed in Scripture that teach us how to understand and relate to dropouts. Each model adds to our understanding of God's plan to restore backsliders.

The soils (Matt 13:3-8, 18-23)

Four kinds of soil are represented in the story commonly called "the parable of the sower": wayside soil, stony soil, soil
overgrown with thorns, and good soil. Both the stony soil and the soil overgrown with thorns are typical of marginal church members. Seeds sown in rocky places spring up quickly. But just as quickly, the young plants wilt when temptation, problems, and discouragement come along. The thorns represent the cares of life and the deceitfulness of riches that crowd in, taking away time and interest for the things of God. This parable encourages us to allow God's spirit to cultivate our lives and remove any foreign matter that would prevent us from growing up to be strong and fruitful in the work of God. God expects His people to bear fruit.

The vine (John 15:1-8)

God's expectations of His people are even more graphically seen in the parable of the vine. "I am the vine and my Father is the gardner. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. . . ."

When the branches fail to bear fruit, they are cut off, taken away and burned. Savage has described this as the "graceless" model because the unfruitful branches are summarily cut off and burned. This parable shows that God expects fruit and that we must remain in contact with Christ to produce that fruit.

The fruitless tree (Luke 13:6-9)

Grace is always available through God's love. A "grace period" is given to the fruitless fig tree in the hope that with a little more time, it may become fruitful.

\[^1\] John 15:1-2 (NIV).
And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Notice the reluctance of the vinedresser to take the drastic action of cutting down the unfruitful tree. If after another year it remains unfruitful, "you can cut it down." This parable demonstrates the persistence with which the Holy Spirit continues to work in the hearts of those who are not growing Christians and the reluctance of God to give up on anyone.

Perhaps those who revised the Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual were taking this parable into consideration when they established a policy of waiting at least two years from the time a member's whereabouts become unknown before taking action to remove the name from the membership record.²

The wheat and tares (Matt 13:24-30)

The farmer sowed good seed in his field, but his enemy slipped in and sowed the seeds of a similar-looking weed. The field workers were alarmed when they saw the weeds growing among the wheat and asked if they should pull out the weeds. The farmer replied that both should grow together until the harvest and then be separated, the wheat being gathered into the barn and the weeds into piles to be burned.


Savage calls this the "full grace" model because grace extends to the unregenerate church member until the time of harvest. Some churches, such as the Catholic church, follow this model almost exclusively, so that once a person becomes a member, he or she is considered a member forever.

From this parable we see God's patience and the consideration He gives to the damage that might occur if unfaithful members were carelessly removed from the church family.

The lost coin (Luke 15:8-10)

In Luke 15 Jesus told three stories to illustrate God's response to the lost. The woman in the lost coin story had ten pieces of silver, no doubt her dowry of coins that had both monetary and sentimental value. When she lost one of the coins, she diligently searched her house, lit a candle, and swept the floor until she found it. There was great rejoicing among the neighboring women when the lost coin was recovered.

The coin was not aware of its being lost. Furthermore, it did not become lost through any fault of its own. The truth of this story is that it became lost in the house through the carelessness of the woman. It points out the painful fact that some people become inactive members through carelessness, indifference, unresolved conflicts, lack of love, or lack of assimilation and nurturing in the church. The words of Zech 13:6 apply more specifically to Christ, but may also bear sad witness to what can happen in the church: "And one shall say unto him, What
are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends."

Often, little misunderstandings are allowed to grow, words of criticism fester in sensitive hearts, and people with problems are held at a distance. "Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none."¹

The parable of the lost coin teaches that the church has some responsibility to bear when members drop out because of negligence.

What we have done over the years is to label the inactive member as the bad one, the apostate. . . . But our research shows that the congregation contributes to the dropout cycle. It's not a lone activity; it takes both sides for it to occur.²

. . . there has been among us as a people a lack of deep, earnest, soul-touching sympathy and love for the tempted and the erring. . . . The newly converted soul often has fierce conflicts with established habits or with some special form of temptation, and, being overcome by some master passion or tendency, he is guilty of indiscretion or actual wrong. It is then that energy, tact, and wisdom are required of his brethren, that he may be restored to spiritual health.³

The parable also teaches us that the primary effort in "housecleaning" should be directed toward finding and recovering the lost, rather than in removing those who stray.

The prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)

The story of the prodigal son is really three stories in one: the son who leaves home, falls to the depths of degradation,

¹Ps 69:20 (NIV).

²Savage, in Spangler, "Reactivating the Inactive Member," p. 5.

³White, Testimonies, 5:604, 605.
and then returns home very repentant; the father whose heart is broken by the loss of his son and who receives him back home with celebration; and the older brother who complains at the joyous welcome his prodigal brother receives when he returns home. The most moving part of the story is when the father's heart overflows with happiness and he says, "... this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."¹

We often think of the prodigal as representing all sinners, "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."² Yet there is a very special lesson to be learned from this story that applies to dropouts. The son, after all, begins the story in the father's home and turns his back on it. He feels that home is too confining, that the world offers more adventure. Disdaining his father's love and the benefits of home, he turns to the world. A short time later he discovers that all is not well in the world, but it is too painful to lose face and return home, so he continues on with his menial existence. When at last he becomes desperate, he turns his steps back toward home. All along the way he rehearses his speech, planning to ask for a servant's job because he fears that his father will be angry with him. However, the father graciously forgives his wayward son and stands in sharp contrast to the elder son who is so selfish that he cannot rejoice for his brother. In reflecting upon the parable, we know that the unloving brother represents those of us who are sometimes unwilling

²Rom 3:23.
to forgive and receive again with full acceptance those who turned away from our fellowship. It is important to realize this in developing a caring ministry.

In my experience with inactive and former members, I have known many who express feelings like that of the prodigal son. So many have told me that even though they have not attended church for years, have not read their Bibles or kept the Sabbath, they felt guilty for breaking God's commandments and longed to return. But many felt there was no way open for them to come back. It is our privilege in the Caring Ministry to show them that not only will God forgive and accept them back but also that the church cares for them and wants to restore them to fellowship.

The one lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7)

Of all the Biblical models used to teach us about backsliding and restoration, this story reveals as no other the extent of God's love. It is a simple story of a shepherd who has a hundred sheep, but one strays. The shepherd goes out to the wilderness to search for the lost sheep and carries it home with rejoicing when he finds it.

In his Lab I training sessions of the "Skills for Calling and Caring Ministries," Savage tells how limited is the sheep's ability to see. If by careless nibbling of grass a sheep wanders away from the fold, it is unable to find its way back. When the lost sheep calls out to the flock, their responding "baa" helps the lost sheep know how to return. Should the flock not respond, the sheep is helpless to find its way home. Savage terms this the
church's response to the "cry for help."\(^1\) Savage also points out that it is illogical for the shepherd to "leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness" while searching for the one lost sheep, but that this illustrates God's extravagant love for the lost.

The Old Testament prophets used sheep to represent the lost condition of mankind. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."\(^2\)

My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.\(^3\)

Ellen White likewise used the illustration of the lost sheep to show how great is our need and to appeal for caring empathy toward the erring.

The sheep that has strayed from the fold is the most helpless of all creatures. It must be sought for; for it cannot find its way back. So with the soul that has wandered away from God; he is as helpless as the lost sheep; and unless divine love comes to his rescue, he can never find his way to God. Then with what compassion, what sorrow, what persistence, should the under-shepherd seek for lost souls! How willingly should he endure self-denial, hardship, privation!

There is need for shepherds who, under the direction of the Chief Shepherd, will seek for the lost and straying. This means the bearing of physical discomfort and the sacrifice of ease. It means a tender solicitude for the erring, a divine compassion and forbearance. It means an ear that can listen with sympathy to heartbreaking recitals of wrong, of degradation, of despair and misery.\(^4\)

\(^1\)For further details of the cry for help, see "The Savage Model," pp. 76, 77 below.

\(^2\)Isa 53:6.

\(^3\)Jer 50:6 (NIV).

All Christians and all church members are called to be under-shepherds, following the example of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Our love for those who wander and our willingness to search for them should be modeled after the example of Jesus Himself, who said, "... I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."  

We have considered seven Biblical models. Each of these models contributes to our knowledge of reversion and restoration, and together they give us a better understanding of God's perspective on backsliding. We have seen the consequences of separation from God. It is a serious thing to turn away from God's grace and the fellowship of His people. But in each of the models, the most important lesson comes from God's efforts to find and restore the lost. We are amazed at the patience and perseverance of God's love. The extent of that love was shown when Jesus Christ left the heavenly courts and came to this world in search of lost sinners.

Grace and the Dropout

Our study of backsliding from God's perspective would not be complete without addressing the topic of grace. If grace is God's unmerited favor, loving forgiveness and acceptance of sinners who have never known Him, what do we call it when He searches for, finds, and restores again those who once knew Him but carelessly turned their backs on Him? Again we call it "grace," but in so

1Matt 15:24.
doing we realize that grace takes on an additional meaning in the
context of the restoration of backsliders.

Throughout the Old Testament we are reminded again and again
of how difficult it was for God to give up his rebellious people.

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not
have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget,
yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the
palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.1

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son
out of Egypt. . . . I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by
their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them
with cords of a man, with bands of love. . . . 2

And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they
called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him. How
shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel
. . . ? O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is
thine help.3

Why was God so patient with Israel? Why did He put up with
their rebellion and lack of faith and still take them back, knowing
that they were prone to wander again? The answer is contained in
the words "... where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."4

I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions,
and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed
thee.5

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him
while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the

1Isa 49:15, 16.
2Hos 11:1, 3, 4.
3Hos 11:7, 8; 13:9.
4Rom 5:20.
5Isa 44:22.
unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.\(^1\)

Grace is not a static principle; it is an active force for redemption and restoration. Grace reaches out. Grace finds and forgives. Grace heals and restores. "The love of God still yearns over the one who has chosen to separate from Him, and He sets in operation influences to bring him back to the Father's house."\(^2\)

In his book Ministry to Inactives, Knutson points out that the church must model grace as it relates to backsliders, rather than modeling works—"we will accept you if you do what we expect."

Two quotations explain this important concept.

A concept of central significance in Christian theology is that of justification by faith. . . . Even though we affirm and honor the doctrine of justification by faith, there has crept into Protestant practice the subtle—or not-so-subtle—idea that we are accepted for what we do rather than for who we are. The message still comes on loud and clear—the church is for "good people."\(^3\)

The gospel enables us, through grace and forgiveness, to accept people where they are and to begin genuinely to care about them. It enables us to come in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner and thus to model the gospel as well as to speak the gospel. The evangelist comes not as "good" to visit "bad" but as person to person, equal to equal, human being to human being, sinner to sinner. Such directness, equality, and genuine caring can be a marvelous vehicle for the gospel.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Isa 55:6, 7.


\(^3\) Knutsen, p. 8.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 13.
The Caring Ministry must be built on the foundation of grace. God's gracious love must permeate our every effort to restore the inactive members. Our goal is not simply to "get 'em back to church," but to minister God's grace. We cannot mouth the words of God's grace while at the same time saying, "We will love you and accept you if you stop breaking the Sabbath and come back to church." We must love the inactive and former members even if they never come back to church! This is unrequited love; this is God's grace.

As we minister to backsliders, we may need to help them understand God's grace. Perhaps all they have ever known has been works and legalism. Maybe they have never grasped that salvation is a gift from God. We have gained nothing if their return to church only means coming again to the discouraging and unsuccessful search for self-righteousness. Their stay would be short-lived, and when the pain of defeat or the sting of criticism reached them, they would leave the church again. Only this time, they would have confirmed their former negative concepts of God, the church, and their salvation, and it would be doubly hard to ever again find entrance into their homes, let alone their trust and confidence.

The Church and Backsliding

How the Church Relates to Backsliders

How the church understands backsliding and relates to its inactive or former members is crucial to the Caring Ministry. Not everyone sees dropping out as bad. David Still somewhat facetiously wrote:
Perhaps someday an ambitious researcher will discover that institutions fill up with persons just as buckets fill up with water. If he should do so, then it will be obvious that a Christian congregation which has reached its capacity must "spill out" one old member for every new member who enters.¹

Robert Hudnut believes having dropouts is a sign of a healthy and growing church.

It is a tough time for the American church. In many quarters membership is down. Attendance is down. But church growth is not the point. The point is whether the church is being true to the Gospel. And in city after city and town after town, it is. Indeed, because it is being faithful it is often losing members. . . .

People are leaving the church. It could not be a better sign. . . . In most churches, the first third are committed, the second third are peripheral, and the third third are out.²

Not many Seventh-day Adventists would look at dropouts with such a cold eye. My search of Adventist writings on the topic of backsliding shows that there is great concern over those who dropped out of the church.³ Mingled with this concern was a frustration that sometimes expressed itself in searching for a place to put the blame. A. J. Meikeljohn called upon the pastors to "... acknowledge the truth of the statement that we as ministers are largely to blame for this situation."⁴ Others


³Ministry magazine has frequently published articles on apostasy and church membership. Two series were run in 1951 and 1953. An index containing a complete list is available in most SDA college libraries. See also pp. 281-286 of Louis Nielsen's dissertation for a chronologically arranged list of articles from the Review & Herald.

called for resolutions proclaiming the church's desire for the
former members to return. To this T. E. Unruh retorted:

The missing cannot be "resolved" back into the Sabbath School
or church fellowship. They must be searched out and found by
those whose hearts are aflame with the love of God.¹

In the same article Elder Unruh voiced his concern that some
churches wanted to drop the inactive members for the benefit of the
church.

We hesitate to confess that on the local church level,
leadership often looks upon the missing as so many names to be
dropped in order that church goals may be lowered.²

Our churches have often been inconsistent in dealing with
backsliders--harsh with some, lenient with others.

Active members seem to tolerate sin in the life of less faithful
members in proportion to attendance. Sin is judged harshly when
one's attendance is poor but is viewed with less contempt as
attendance increases. On the other hand, "goodness" is seen
primarily as good attendance.³

One of the worst things a church can do is to simply ignore
dropouts.

The greatest disservice we can do to inactive Christians is
to let them drift away from Christ, unaware of the spiritual
sickness taking place in their lives. It is God's will for all
sincere Christians that they should be their brother's keeper in
matters of faith and life. Only a heartless person would sit
and watch a drowning man without trying to save him. How much
worse it is to sit idly by and watch a soul sink slowly because
of his disregard of the Saviour.⁴

¹T. E. Unruh, "Missing the 'Missing': An Appeal to

²Ibid.

³Joe F. Elam, "A Plan of Ministry Involving Active Church
Members to Encourage Reinvolve of Inactive Members," (D.Min.

⁴Werning, Vision and Strategy for Church Growth, p. 68.
Lee's survey of former Adventists showed that 60 percent had never been visited during or after the period they stopped practicing the Adventist faith.\(^1\) Nielsen reported an almost identical 61.4 percent who said that no one, including pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, friends, or relatives had called them in an effort to bring them back to the church.\(^2\) George Ault summarized the anger-punish cycle this way:

They leave because they are angry.  
We are angry because they left.  
We punish them by letting them sit in their pain.  
They punish us by not coming back.\(^3\)

The Apostle Paul called for the Corinthian church not to be indifferent to the sin in their midst.\(^4\) Today he would also appeal to us not to be apathetic toward the inactive members.\(^5\)

We must not allow ourselves to accept inactivity as the norm.

... the modern church member has been conditioned to accept the fact of inactive members as being a part of the normal church experience. To be inactive has become respectable in the minds of many.\(^6\)

\(^1\)Lee, p. 101.  
\(^2\)Nielsen, p. 143  
\(^3\)George A. Ault, "Developing a Ministry to Marginal Members of Zion United Church of Christ" (D.Min. project report, Drew University, 1982), p. 21.  
\(^4\)1 Cor 5:1-7.  
\(^5\)Gal 6:1,2.  
\(^6\)Edward Miller, "Inactive Church Member Reclamation Emphasis" (D.Min. project report, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977), p. 34.
... both active and inactive church members view inactivity too lightly. Ministry revealed that neither group realized the real damage of inactivity. It is viewed more as a neutral nuisance. Church discipline must be employed to confront both actives and inactives with the fact that inactivity damages the church.¹

God holds the church responsible for nurturing young Christians and for caring for those who drift away.

We must expect to meet and bear with great imperfections in those who are young and inexperienced. Christ has bidden us seek to restore such in the spirit of meekness, and He holds us responsible for pursuing a course which will drive them to discouragement, despair, and ruin. Unless we daily cultivate the precious plant of love we are in danger of becoming narrow, unsympathetic, bigoted, and critical, esteeming ourselves righteous when we are far from being approved of God.²

The responsibility of caring for inactive members rests on the whole church family. "So it happens that if one member suffers all other members suffer with it, and if one member is honored all the members share a common joy."³

Strong words of warning and admonition have been given to pastors and spiritual leaders in the church:

... Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?

The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost. . . .

My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them.

¹Elam, p. 90.
²White, Testimonies, 5:605.
³1 Cor 12:26 (Phillips).
Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them.

For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.

I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: ... Therefore will I save my flock.¹

The church must reexamine the way in which it relates to the inactive and former members, to fulfill the responsibility placed on it by God, and to do so in the most loving and caring way. The Caring Ministry has adopted these words of the Apostle Paul as the motto for this ministry:

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.²

The Savage Model

Dr. John Savage is a minister in the United Methodist Church. He is also a trained psychotherapist and is the founder and president of LEAD Consultants, an organization in Ohio that designs and conducts workshops in church renewal, management,

¹Ezek 34:2,4,6,10,12,15,16,22.
²Gal 6:1,2.
conflict resolution, and communication skills. The work for which Savage is best known is his research in encountering the apathetic and bored church member.

This research was the basis for his doctoral dissertation and, in turn, led to the publication of his book, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*. As interest and demand for this knowledge grew, Savage developed two seminars. Lab I is called "Skills for Calling and Caring Ministries" and is a 36-hour training program for lay leaders and pastors, teaching them the basic concepts and skills for ministry to inactive church members. Lab II is an intensive training seminar for experienced Lab I graduates who want to conduct their own labs. It includes leadership skills, lab organization, and advanced training in the concepts and communication skills needed for ministry to inactive members.

The "Caring Ministry" is the title we have given to the Stone Tower Church program for reclaiming inactive members. The purpose of this project was to test the effectiveness of Savage's model in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It would be impossible to include in this project report all the concepts, methods, and skills used in the Caring Ministry. The major contributions of the Savage model are touched on here, though they are not presented in the sequence in which they are used in the Caring Ministry seminar. Portions of the concepts and skills appear throughout this work, following the order that seems best for this presentation.
For Savage, it all began in 1973 when he was looking through a box of slides taken of his church members only a few years before. He noticed that a large number of them had already become inactive. Realizing that many of these dropouts had been church leaders only four years earlier, Savage began to wonder what had happened to these persons? What were the causes of inactivity? What could the church do to prevent dropouts? How could he minister to these inactive members?

A program was soon set up that involved four United Methodist Churches. Thirteen Methodist clergymen were invited to join Savage in interviewing a total of 101 active and inactive members. Prior to the interviews, a brief 6-hour training session explained the program and its organization and touched on some of the concepts and skills the pastors would need.

The data the pastors collected in the interviews formed the basis for understanding that persons move through a series of stages when going from active to inactive participation in the church. Savage calls this the "dropout track."

Moving away from active involvement in the life of the church usually begins through a cluster of anxiety-provoking events (which Savage calls "APE"). These events may happen in the life circumstances of the person or in his or her church relationships. Savage has categorized them according to the following arrangement:

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1A tape of John Savage's lecture on the dropout track is available from LEAD Consultants, PO Box 644, Reynoldsburg, OH 43068.
Life Events:
1. Reality anxiety--real events such as illness, accident
2. Moral anxiety--not living up to beliefs, standards
3. Neurotic anxiety--not based in reality, unrealistic expectations
4. Existential anxiety--loss of meaning, or life-threatening events.

Church Events:
1. Intra-family conflict--within the member's family
2. Conflict with the pastor--personality clash, unfulfilled expectations, etc.
3. Inter-family conflict--friction between church families, individuals
4. Overwork--too many responsibilities, lack of support or appreciation.

Anxiety can be helpful when it is an early warning system prompting change, but it can be destructive when it produces instability and causes a person's life or faith to collapse. People experiencing anxiety give off signals which sensitive persons about them may recognize as "cries for help." The cry for help may be expressed verbally ("it's no use," "no one cares anymore," "it's my fault," etc.) or non-verbally (coming late, not participating, not accepting office, etc.). It may be subtle or overt and is very often given outside the awareness.

The church needs to be more sensitive to the cries for help. Often we hear them as criticisms and we become defensive or criticize back. We take the person's words at face value and fail to hear the deeper message. We are busy or involved with our own
concerns. We do not want to hear another's problems or criticisms. We often screen out these persons, hoping that the problem will go away or that someone else will help. But Savage insists that in so doing we have missed our opportunity for caring by not responding to the cries for help.

In its initial stages, the anxiety is indicated by verbal signs such as: "it's too much," "it's no use," "I can't take it anymore," "I give up," "nobody cares anymore," etc. Such phrases indicate a person is quite anxious and moving away from the church. If these signals are not picked up and no one helps resolve the anxiety, the individual becomes angry. When the anger develops, the individual shows more agitated behavior, becoming more aggressive or withdrawn, either striking out at an individual or the institution or becoming depressed and blaming one's self for what has happened.¹

Unresolved anxiety leads to anger and withdrawal in an attempt to return to comfort and balance. Church members can then expect to hear stronger criticism and see more sporadic attendance. Richard Vangerid explains it this way:

Withdrawal from corporate worship in most cases seemed to be a coping device designed to reestablish a new balance in the family constellation. There had been some painful stress from loss and change which resulted in some personal and/or familial disequilibrium. In some cases there was adaptation-seeking withdrawal from other social contacts as well. In a few cases the withdrawal seemed to be a final cry for help. There seemed to be little understanding of these efforts. One man said, "It is a small thing but when we became inactive no one noticed us."²

At this point members who are experiencing unresolved anxiety begin to move down one of two tracks away from the church. Evidence of this process can be seen by less frequent attendance at worship, a drop in participation in activities, offices or group functions, and/or decreased giving. Savage labels as "skunks"

¹Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 57.
²Vangerid, p. 17.
those who direct blame externally, and "turtles" those who tend to blame themselves. "Turtles" tend to withdraw more quietly than "skunks," so quietly in fact that the church is often unaware of their absence. The dropouts reinvest their time, energy and money either in their family or in other organizations.

The church member's typical reaction is to assume that these persons have lost their faith and are now "backsliders." Seldom does the church or its leaders expend the effort to find out why the members have dropped out or invite them to return.

Each of the 23 persons interviewed in the non-active group indicated that no one from the church had ever come to find out why they were losing interest or had dropped out. It reinforced their belief that no one cared, and that they were not missed. One third of this group cried during the interview, indicating the intensity of unresolved feelings.¹

Eventually dropouts seal off their pain and totally reinvest their energies. Callers from the church hear statements of indifference, apathy, or denial and may conclude that nothing more can be done. At some point the inactive member's name will be presented before a church business meeting with the report of total noninterest, and the membership will be dropped. Thus it is that the church unintentionally lets this person sit in pain and isolation. We fail to offer the ministry of listening and caring and so do not restore those who might be reclaimed for Christ and the Church.

The startling discovery from Savage's research is that many dropouts still profess belief and some attempt to practice all or part of the church's teachings in their private lives.

¹Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 57.
In several of the interviews it was noted that the C groups [the inactives] reported they saw themselves as active Christians, but the locale of their operation was no longer within the institutional church. These persons still maintain a Christian perspective in their life, although much of the religious piety drops away, i.e., their religious language, the use of the Scriptures, and using their faith to help make decisions. ... Because they have been hurt and made anxious by the persons within the institution, they move away from the church but do not seem to give up the central notion of being a Christian witness to the world. Their faith orientation shifts from serving the institutional church to serving persons outside of the institution. At least 50% of them still see themselves as servants of God.1

All the available studies of former Adventists indicated the same phenomenon. To cite an example, Lee reported:

In completing this analysis, it became obvious that those individuals who the churches had designated missing and apostate might not necessarily classify themselves that way. ... Fully 37% of those who are classified by churches in the missing and apostate group claim to be practicing the Seventh-day Adventist faith.2

Having discovered that dropouts often retain belief in the teachings of Scripture and the Church, Savage further concluded that theological disagreement was seldom the basis for leaving the church.

Anxiety levels are precipitated primarily by rational problems and not theological ones. There were no significant differences between the active or inactive members regarding theological issues. This implies that persons did not leave the church because of conflict over diverse theological matters.3

1Ibid., p. 60.
2Lee, p. 70.
3Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 59.
Some Seventh-day Adventists may have difficulty accepting this conclusion because one of the first signs of apostasy from the Adventist church is often an external activity contrary to church teaching: Sabbath breaking, wearing jewelry, smoking or drinking, etc. However, these actions might be better understood as non-verbal cries for help, as a way to establish or protect one's separate identity. Very often the inactive or former member feels very guilty because there is an incompatibility between the beliefs retained deep inside and the lifestyle he or she is living.

To balance this finding by Savage that most dropouts still believe the teachings of the Church, it should be pointed out that there are a number of people who drop out of the Seventh-day Adventist Church because of conflict regarding doctrine. The issues recently raised by Walter Rea, Desmond Ford, and others have prompted some members to withdraw from the church because of theological conflict. Members of the Caring Ministry team would be advised to be sensitive to this possibility when calling on inactive or former members.

The Savage model helps the church understand that the dropout experience is not a total mystery and that there is opportunity to intervene before it becomes too late. Even after persons have dropped out of the church, there is still hope that through patience and persistence, love and understanding, many dropouts will be reclaimed.
In his Lab I and II lectures, Savage often states that 50 percent of those who return to church will do so after only one visit. The other 50 percent who eventually return will need, on average, one visit for each year they have been out of the church.¹

The only question that remains before the church then is this: Is it willing to put forth the effort to carefully and prayerfully engage in ministry to inactive members? Is it willing to take the risk of hearing pain and criticism in order that we may heal wounded hearts?

The Necessity for a Trained Laity

As the church comes to realize not only the responsibility but also the opportunity for ministry to inactive and former members, we are suddenly seized by the magnitude of the challenge before us.

Take Stone Tower Church as an example. We have already indicated that 27 percent of its membership, or 134 persons, are resident inactive members who need encouragement, caring, and involvement. But this is only the beginning. The Oregon Conference leadership has repeatedly postulated that there are as many former Seventh-day Adventists living in the Portland area as there are current members. If this is true, we could expect upwards of 7,000 former Adventists living in our neighborhoods, shopping and working in the same places as do the active members.

¹Savage, in Spangler, "Reactivating the Inactive Member," p. 27.
Ministry to dropouts is a tremendous evangelistic opportunity, but at the same time, it almost overwhelms us with the sheer numbers of people who need close contact with those who will listen to them, help them through their doubts, and reintroduce them to Christ and a vibrant and fulfilling relationship in the church.

The inevitable conclusion is this: pastors cannot do this work alone, and thank God they cannot! It was never His design that the pastors should be the only ones involved in ministry. Ministry is a function of the entire church.

Upon returning to heaven, Christ sent the Holy Spirit to His church. The Holy Spirit was to guide, teach, comfort, and fill His church with the fruits of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit gave the members power to accomplish the mission given them by Jesus Christ to fill the whole world with the good news of salvation.

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

God does not send His people out to accomplish a task for which He has not prepared them. The Holy Spirit also gave gifts to each member to be used in service.

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1There are many good books available from writers in the church-growth field dealing with the ministry of the members. For a good Seventh-day Adventist book on this topic, see Rex Edwards, A New Frontier—Every Believer a Minister (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1979).

2Acts 1:8.
And these were his gifts: some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ.¹

The Caring Ministry must be a team effort with pastors and lay members working side by side. Savage recognized this principle.

In most congregations, apathetic and bored members number about one third of their memberships. It is not feasible for the pastor to make contact with all these persons. Therefore, the role of the laity in this kind of calling is crucial to the effectiveness of a visitation evangelism program.²

The effort to recruit members to help in church visitation programs is not new. Thirty years ago, Elder J. R. Spangler suggested that the church be divided into districts and that elders and other leaders visit the backslider in each area.³ More recently, George Knowles suggested a similar plan of visitation through assignment of territories.⁴

Schaller is adamant that callers need prior training. He said, "No one should go out to call until after first being trained in effective listening or 'active listening' skills."⁵ This is

¹Eph 4:11,12 (NEB).
²Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 79.
not to say that untrained church members should not respond to the opportunities open for them to befriend and care for inactive or former members. But every church should have a group of people who are sensitive to the unique needs of inactive members. This group should be trained in communication skills so that they know how to listen and facilitate the openness and trust levels that inactive members need to resolve the anxieties, think through the doubts, and heal the wounds from their previous experiences.

Though this work is sensitive and often confidential, and though it requires a high level of spirituality and ability to empathize with people, laymen are capable of doing effective ministry. In fact, there may be times when the lay member will be more effective than the pastor, especially if the problem that caused the inactive member to drop out was conflict with the pastor.

Savage sees no difference in the ability of pastors or lay members to be effective callers; dropouts will respond to either, or to anyone from the church who shows genuine caring.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of training laity. I do not believe that the clergy-person in any congregation can sufficiently do the task needed without lay help. This not only involves the concept of effective use of laypeople in the church, but it also has direct implication that all members of the Christian Church are ministers and have certain pastoral functions to perform for each other. A distinctive element in the research was the feeling of abandonment on the part of the apathetic and bored members when no one from the church made any attempt to contact them. My experience indicates that many of them would have responded with eagerness if someone in the parish had shown concern. I remember one interviewee's saying to me, "I have not been active in my church for ten years, and no one has ever asked me why." This individual did not indicate
whether that person should have been the pastor or a layperson. The only thing she was concerned about was whether members of the church cared.¹

Schaller calls for the church to establish a system to recognize and respond to the "cries for help" from those who are dropping out.

Therefore it is very important that (a) every congregation have some system for identifying the early signals sent to the church by the potentially inactive members and (b) a system for quickly responding to these signals, such as a cadre of trained callers who regularly make listening calls.²

The Caring Ministry model is built on this concept: ministry to inactive and former members will be most effective when it is carried out by pastor-enablers and trained laity who cooperate together in the learning experience, in visitation, and in a mutual support system.

A New Vision for Ministry to Inactive Members

There is evidence that the Seventh-day Adventist church is keenly aware of the losses from its membership and the high percentage of inactive members within its family. Our concern for the inactive and former members is not negative "scapegoating"; rather it is a healthy sign of a church becoming aware of the need for a systematic and genuine ministry of loving people and listening to them.

¹Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 79.
²Schaller, Assimilating New Members, pp. 119, 120.
It is not yet too late to redeem the neglects of the past. Let there be a revival of the first love, the first ardor. Search out the ones you have driven away, bind up by confession the wounds you have made. Come close to the great Heart of pitying love, and let the current of that divine compassion flow into your heart and from you to the hearts of others. Let the tenderness and mercy that Jesus has revealed in His own precious life be an example to us of the manner in which we should treat our fellow beings, especially those who are our brethren in Christ. Many have fainted and become discouraged in the great struggle of life, whom one word of kindly cheer and courage would have strengthened to overcome. Never, never become heartless, cold, unsympathetic, and censorious. Never lose an opportunity to say a word to encourage and inspire hope. We cannot tell how far-reaching may be our tender words of kindness, our Christlike efforts to lighten some burden. The erring can be restored in no other way than in the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and tender love.\(^1\)

This ministry follows closely in the footsteps of Jesus.

Nathan C. Brooks, Jr., said,

In the ministry of visitation, the Christian most nearly approaches the exact work and method employed by Christ himself. It is in personal visitation that the Christian finds himself, loses himself, and gives himself in the most unselfish way to doing the will of God.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)White, Testimonies, 5:612, 613.

CHAPTER III

IMPLEMENTATION

Preparation

Developing a Caring Attitude in the Church

The place to begin implementing the Caring Ministry is not with visitation or even training. It starts with creating an awareness and a sense of caring in the church. "A pastor's first responsibility should be to build up a spirit of genuine concern among all members of the congregation."\(^1\) This does not mean that we approach the congregation with the blanket assumption that the whole church is cold and unfeeling. To do this would be to launch the reclaiming ministry from a negative or critical perspective and run the risk of making the church members defensive and less receptive to this special ministry or to the inactive members who return to the church.

However, many members in the church who are satisfied, fulfilled, and involved have difficulty understanding the feelings and experiences of those who drop out. Savage expressed it this way:

The "in" (active) group was not sensitive to the needs of those persons who were aching and leaving the church. That is why 100% of the C group could say, "No one ever came to visit me." The implication of that statement is that the A group did not sense the needs of those persons who were drifting away; who were, in fact, crying for help. The active member did not come to their aid. One of the major functions of this research is to sensitize the A group to the needs of the B and C groups, for each has a ministry to the other.¹

Ever so subtly, without our realizing it, a Laodicean attitude can creep into the church: "I am rich in knowledge, satisfied with my church and have need of nothing. If you have problems, well, that's too bad." But Ellen White tells us that "Angels pity these wandering ones. Angels weep, while human eyes are dry and hearts are closed to pity."²

An uncaring attitude can affect even the ministers. Pastors have plenty to do just keeping the machinery of the church running while trying to find some time for evangelism. They may be inclined to feel that there is no time for listening to the complaints of backsliders who "ought to know better," but God considers this work an essential part of their ministry.

Some ministers who profess to be called of God have the blood of souls on their garments. They are surrounded with backsliders and sinners, and yet feel no burden for their souls; they manifest an indifference in regard to their salvation. Some are so nearly asleep that they seem to have no sense of the work of a gospel minister. They do not consider that as spiritual physicians they are required to have skill in administering to souls diseased with sin. The work of warning sinners, of weeping over them and pleading with them, has been neglected until many souls are past all cure.³

¹Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 61. See page 96 below for an explanation of these groups.

²White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 192.

³White, Testimonies, 2:506.